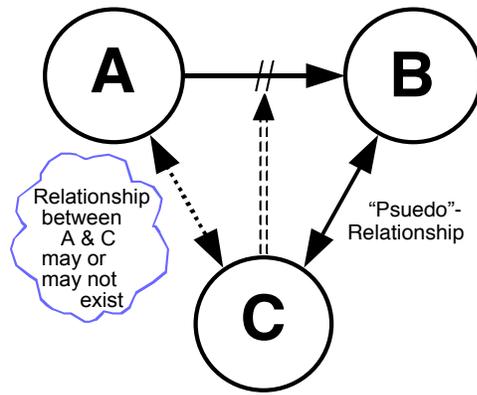


Relational Triangles

(Edwin Friedman)*



RELATIONAL TRIANGLE

A *relational triangle* is formed by any three parts of a human relational system. It is the smallest stable relationship unit and forms the basis of larger groups or organizations. All relational systems consist of a network of interlocking triangles.

Triangles usually have a long legacy and can “outlive” the people who participate in them— when one player leaves another usually takes their place. For example, the relational patterns formed in an organization during its creation and early growth phases may last the entire lifetime of that organization even though the founding members have long since moved on.

There are some universal patterns within a relational triangle. The basic nature of triangles can be summarized as follows:

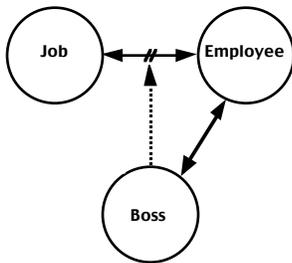
1. A stable relationship between two individuals, A & B, can be destabilized by the addition (or removal) of a third person, C.
2. Conversely, an unstable relationship between two individuals, A & B, can be stabilized by the addition (or removal) of a third person, C. The resulting “stable” triangle is actually a *dysfunctional triangle*, where the relationship between A & B is “balanced” by the 3rd person, C.
3. An individual, C, cannot change the relationship between persons A & B. A change in the relationship of A & B can only occur when C changes his or her relationship with either A or B or both.

“You can only change a relationship to which you belong.”

4. If C attempts to “take responsibility” for the relationship between A & B, then C will likely end up with the stress of their relationship (or the stress of the system).
5. If C continues to attempt to change the relationship of A & B, then the homeostatic forces will likely transform that relationship into the opposite of C’s intent.
6. Since triangles in a system interlock, homeostasis from other triangles in the system will tend to resist and “push back” change.
7. Conflict usually gets “stuck” on one of the sides of a dysfunctional triangle rather than “move around” as it would in a healthy system.
8. A thing or an idea can replace any of the persons A, B, or C in a relational triangle.

* Note: Friedman refers to Relational Triangles as “Emotional Triangles” since the binding or dynamic force in the relationship is the underlying emotional issue(s).

Examples of dysfunctional relational triangles:

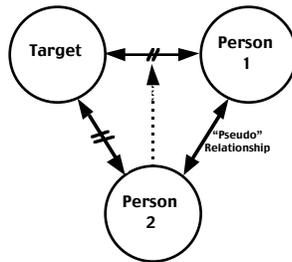


Motivational Triangle

Motivational triangle

Supervisor attempts to “make” employee behave in a certain way towards their job (i.e. work overtime). Continued attempts by the boss to convince, or even coerce, the employee tends to transform the boss’s intent. The employee, either overtly or covertly, will resist even more.

Note: This is a commonly occurring triangle in organizations since managers are typically encouraged and rewarded for this type of motivational behavior.

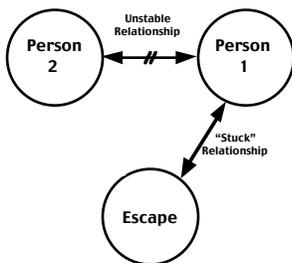


Gossip Triangle

Gossip triangle (two interlocked triangles)

Two people, in relationship with the same individual, gossip or complain about that person (the target). Since they have no intention of going to that person themselves, they are in a dysfunctional triangle. Both individuals are, in a sense, attempting to manage each other’s relationship with the 3rd person.

Note: If the intent is to simply "vent" to, get clarity with, or get coaching from someone before approaching the individual you are having an issue with, it is a healthy triangle. A counselor or clergy often fills this role.



Addictive Triangle

Addictive triangle

To avoid dealing with the troubled or unstable relationship with another individual, a person “escapes” into a “stabilizing” pseudo relationship with an activity, substance, or thing. Mass advertising encourages this type of behavior and it is a common occurrence in our culture.

Note: If the intent is a temporary escape to allow for the reduction of stress or for time to process in order to deal with the troubled relationship, it can be a healthy triangle. A signal that it is possibly an addictive process is when the escape behavior becomes a repeating pattern and the troubled relationship never actually gets resolved. It is important you do not confuse this with physical addiction, which is a different process.