

Emotional Triangles and Leverage for Change

“Leadership: It’s not for the squeamish”

A HealingLeaders Whitepaper

by

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The principle assertion of the Emotional Process Leadership Model is that leadership is essentially an emotional (non-rational) process that is governed largely by how a leader manages his or her own anxiety in any given situation. Emotional triangles explain how organizations (including families) “bind up” chronic anxiety to insulate them from an uncomfortable situation. Emotional triangles also explain how chronic anxiety is displaced and diverted, toward the same end in families and organizations.

What is an emotional triangle?

Primarily a term used in family therapy, “emotional triangle” refers to three individuals, groups of individuals, ideas or entities or any combination of these who/which are in relationship to each other. An emotional triangle exists

when three people relate to each other in some way. Groups can also be a part of emotional triangles. The executive leadership team, the stock holders and the employees also form emotional triangles. One or more members of an emotional triangle can also be an idea or an entity. The president of the company, the CIO and a depressed sales market can make up (you guessed it) an emotional triangle. (see Illustration A)

Emotional triangles are the basic unit of all relationships.

We tend to think about relationships as a “dyad,” happening in twos - one person in relationship with another. The perspective behind emotional triangles asserts however, that there is almost always too much anxiety between two people in order to form a stable relationship. It observes that in order to

stabilize the relationship (keep it from conflict and possible dissolution) most dyadic relationships seek a third person, group or entity to pull into relationship with them and divert the building anxiety to the new party. This human behavior is so pervasive so as to be virtually universal. I can safely say that there is no such thing as a stable relationship with just two people. Stable relationships are always done in threes. The basic unit of all relationships, the “atom,” if you will, of relationships is the emotional triangle.

Emotional triangles bind and divert anxiety in relationships.

This can be observed on any elementary school yard during recess. Susie and Jenny are best friends. They do everything together. They like the same clothes, the same music and even the same boys. They don't talk about their differences. However, on many levels Susie and Jenny are very different. This difference surfaces occasionally and threatens to cause tension between them. (Not only do our differences threaten close relationships but they are also threatened by our own ambivalence over

the loss of freedom and individuality in being close.) Because neither of them wants to be alone without their friend, they look for ways to distract them from their differences and divert this anxiety elsewhere. Susie and Jenny decide they don't like Darcy. The more they dislike Darcy and show conflict toward her the more secure Susie and Jenny feel in their relationship. The two girls pull in a third and use her as a kind of “scapegoat” in order to stabilize and maintain their close friendship. As long as they are focused on how much they dislike Darcy, they do not have to address the profound ways they differ from each other.

This can be seen not only on the school yard, but on a national scale as well. A common folk saying in the Middle East is, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Global alliances are often formed, not out of cultural similarities or shared values, but for the sake of opposing a common enemy.

Emotional triangles always involve two “insiders” and one “outsider.”

Let's add Darcy to the relationship. Susie and Jenny are the “insiders” of the

emotional triangle. Darcy is the “outsider.” Being on the inside position of an emotional triangle feels close and safe. Occupying the outside position of an emotional triangle feels distant and alone. Most people and most groups seek to occupy one of the inside positions of an emotional triangle and try to avoid being caught in the outside position. Often people in the outside position try to influence the relationship between two insiders by trying to get on the “inside” with one or both of them and make the other one an outsider. (Darcy tells Jenny a secret about something bad Susie once said about Jenny.) This usually backfires and the outsider gathers even more anxiety from the two insiders. The two insiders often become closer than ever as a result of such efforts of the outsider. This relationship is highly stable. With regard to leading through change, it also means that this relationship is highly resistant to change.

In healthy families and groups, the role of outsider “rotates” equally among all members – each member taking his or her turn. In stable intimate relationships the two insiders guard and protect their relationship, disallowing anyone to get

between them. In unstable and unhealthy relationships communication is seldom direct but involves “venting” or diverting anxiety to a third party in order to feel better without directly addressing the person with whom there is growing tension. A dissatisfied spouse who talks to a co-worker instead of directly to the spouse is pulling someone else to the inside and inadvertently moving their spouse to the outside position. Strangely, the conversation makes the dissatisfied spouse feel better.

Emotional triangles provide a “lever” for change.

If emotional “triangling” is how we stabilize relationships, how can understanding this behavior be used as a lever for change? I have already observed that an outsider trying to change the relationship between two insiders is most likely to fail and the opposite effect will occur. If the insiders are happy with the way things are and the outsider is powerless to change the structure, what can possibly be done to destabilize the situation and invite change? It would seem that the “outsider” is in the position of no power.

Paradoxically, the opposite is true. If the outsider can, in a non-reactive way (without blaming, punishment or anger) intentionally take the outside position of an emotional triangle then the anxiety between the two insiders will be “returned” to the two insiders. If the anxiety funneled off to the outsider is not maintained by the outsider, the outside position ceases to function to stabilize the relationship between the two insiders. This means that they must eventually address the anxiety between them that they have been masking. Often, this anxiety will reach a critical mass and either cause the relationship to end or change in some way. Intentionally taking the outside position in an emotional triangle turns out to be an effective way (perhaps the only way) of inviting real change in a situation. Change happens indirectly, therefore, as a result of self-definition and self-soothing of one’s own anxiety rather than directly as a result of some intervention that is focused on changing someone else.

The role of maturity in facilitating change

Intentionally and non-anxiously taking the outside position in a relationship is difficult to do. Most people, unless they are hermits or contrary personalities, find this position most uncomfortable. Choosing this position requires not only the awareness of what is happening but intentionally taking a course that will not directly change the situation.

It is also true that unless one has learned how to intentionally and non-anxiously take the outside position in one’s own family, it is unlikely that that person will be able to accomplish this in the leadership situation. If you can’t accomplish this at home, you can’t accomplish this at work. Accomplishing this successfully requires one to learn how to tolerate the discomfort of being on the outside position with people of significance and learn ways of self-soothing in order to build greater tolerance for this way of being. Blaming others while feeling powerless (an anxious or reactive stance) is counterproductive and only serves to reinforce the “stuckness” of a situation.

This “non-anxious” stance of intentionally taking the outside position requires the utmost in awareness, skills and maturity. Working with a coach or a support system is often helpful. This is the main purpose of HealingLeaders.

Putting emotional triangles to use

How can the “theory” of emotional triangles be put into practical application in your situation as a leader? You might consider the following steps:

1. Identify and list all of the emotional triangles operative that are supporting the status quo. Which ones involve you? Are you an insider or an outsider?

2. Identify all the emotional triangles in which you are an outsider. List the ways you have been trying to change the relationship between the insiders of that triangle. Then stop doing those things. “Find out what sucks, then don’t do that!”

3. Find ways to intentionally remain in the outside position in each of the triangles where you are already an outsider. Let go of blaming, scheming, manipulating and jockeying for an inside position in the triangle.

4. Do what you need to do to “self-soothe” and manage your own anxiety about letting go of your need for direct attempts at intervention. Take responsibility for your own “okay-ness” without depending on the choices of others. Get a support system to give you accountability and challenge you to stay on track.

5. Be prepared for things to get worse. You will be sabotaged! Learn to expect it. Learn to interpret the chaos that comes from the change in your presence as a sign that what you are doing is working. (A famous movie producer was once interviewed and asked how he survived so many years in such a cut-throat business. He responded, “After a while you develop a taste for venom.”) Anxiety has to reach a critical mass before change in a system can occur and this is often not pretty.

6. Self define. Be open and honest about who you are and what you care about. Telegraph openly in a non-reactive way (appropriate humor can be useful here) your intentions, your plans, your contingencies and most of all, your bottom line. Stay focused on yourself and do not focus on what others are doing or not doing. Respond to contingencies without reacting to them.

7. Stay the course. This does not mean refusing to listen, being stubborn and inflexible. It does mean being consistent and courageous in holding your vision as a leader in the face of pressure by those who are too anxious to control themselves and cannot self-regulate. It means setting clear limits regarding their invasiveness and being willing to follow your intentions with actions.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated how awareness and choices around emotional triangles can be useful in facilitating change. (I do not use “creating change” because that approach is too direct and too anxious to be effective for more than about a week.) I want to caution the reader, however, against seeing this as a new “technique” that can help you get what you want as a leader. This would amount to an anxious way of using this information and by re-introducing this anxiety back into the emotional triangle would only serve to keep it stuck. Rather than a technique, this perspective represents an invitation. It is an invitation to a different way of being – a way of maturity and personal power. This way of being, this presence, is more powerful than any mere strategy or technique. Indeed, it not only has the power to transform the world, but ourselves as well.

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Illustration A:

Structure of an Emotional Triangle

Strategy for Self Awareness

