



Dave Galloway
Business Consultant and Coach

Oct. 2 & 3 Conference Leadership, Emotional Systems and Triangling

This conference is for anyone who wants to understand how emotional process in an organization can work for or against the mission of that organization whether it is for profit or nonprofit.

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Triangles in the Workplace

BY DAVE GALLOWAY, BUSINESS CONSULTANT AND COACH

Emotional systems and triangles are not just in families. People don't stop being people when they leave home and go to work. Triangles are just as active in the workplace.

Have you ever had someone at work complain about how so-and-so was getting on his or her nerves? If so, you have been in a triangle. This type of behavior appears to be automatic and universal. Bowen proposed that the triangle was a natural mechanism that allows individuals in a relationship to lower their anxiety while transmitting it to others. From an evolutionary perspective, it makes sense that threats—events that make one anxious or fearful—get communicated across the group. And humans are quite adept at sensing anxiety in another person.

Here's how triangles can occur in the workplace. In a recent meeting, Al's boss, Betty, was critical about his performance on a project. Al sensed quickly that he and Betty were not in agreement and, feeling threatened, Al left the meeting feeling hurt, confused and frustrated. Al was neither thinking clearly nor inquisitive about Betty's perspective because his emotions kicked in and overwhelmed his ability to pay attention. Betty sensed the difference and became frustrated since she thought her requests were reasonable. Then, Al visited Chuck and complained about how hard he worked and how unfair it all was. Chuck, trying to be supportive, took Al's side and agreed that Betty was off base. Al began to feel better and was more convinced that Betty had it wrong. Chuck, however, became anxious because he thought Betty was better than that and his performance review was coming up. Chuck decided to talk to his wife when he got home. Meanwhile, Betty spoke to her friend Tom in HR about her anxiety and confusion regarding the situation with Al.

Sound familiar? What happened?

From a systems perspective, Al quickly sensed the change in Betty's attitude towards him. This activated his emotional system, which energized the emotional circuits in his brain. His thinking automatically became more reactive and subjective, thereby losing the ability to think objectively. After talking to a third party, Al may have felt less anxious, but he hadn't learned anything useful nor had he resolved the situation. Now that Chuck and Al are "together," they may distance themselves from Betty (i.e., avoid her), and emotionally stay closer to each other. Of course this insures that Al doesn't resolve the issue or learn more about Betty's perspective. It also insures that Chuck's perspective on Betty stays tainted by Al's complaints.

However, Tom in HR did not get caught up in Betty's emotions and was able to help Betty act in a more differentiated manner. A more differentiated person knows what they stand for and isn't unduly influenced by what others think. They can act in a more thoughtful and objective manner while staying connected to others. As Tom coached Betty, she became clearer about what was important to her: that they do what was good for customers and the company, while being respectful to the employees. It wasn't that her ideas were "right," it was simply that this is what she stood for. She understood that others wouldn't always agree and she could accept that; it meant that she didn't have to defend her position. But, as the manager, there were certain guidelines that needed to be followed and there were consequences for not following them. Tom was able to help Betty be more thoughtful about the role she played in the situation and what she could do to maintain positive contact with Al, so both could better understand, but not have to agree with, each others' position. Betty was going to work at staying with the facts with a focus on what's good for the company vs. who is right or wrong.

I have seen entire departments triangled with other departments, where non-factual "stories" create distance that result in far less co-operation, which hurts the business. I've seen customers' "problems" lead to many people being caught in triangles because the customer and employee can't work things out due to their reactivity, again, hurting the business. At the heart of every triangle is some lack of differentiation. If an individual perceives a threat, which may be just a difference of opinion, he or she may become reactive and may triangle with another individual. Unfortunately, triangling is not an effective way to deal with the situation. The triangle may lessen an individual's anxiety but it doesn't resolve the original situation. However, by working to understand how triangles function and by working on one's own level of differentiation, we can begin to make a positive difference where we work.

If you would like to know more about the application of systems in the workplace, you might want to attend this fall's conference on "Leadership, Emotional Systems and Triangling", October 2 & 3, 2009 with Dr. Daniel Papero, Ph.D. at Douglas College, New Westminster. Visit www.livingsystems.ca for more information.

see page 2 for society updates.



Society Update:

Living Systems now has a blog site and twitter page which is part of our social media. We invite you to comment on our fall newsletter article, "Triangles in the Workplace" at <http://blog.livingsystems.ca/post/178205035/triangles-in-the-work-place>.

Volunteers are a big reason we are able to keep our administrative costs to a minimum. Our contractors volunteer their time in many ways, such as intake calls, conferences and clinical meetings. Sheri, Angela, Jaclyn, Sheryl and Golnar help out in the business office and Shelley (design) and Tanya (editor) are our newsletter volunteers. Thank you to all of them for their generous time and support.

From January to June 2009 our counselling program subsidized 82 clients for a total of 606 sessions.

Our fall conference is titled "Leadership, Emotional Systems and Triangling", Oct. 2 & 3, 2009 with Dr. Papero at Douglas College. The spring 2010 conference is March 26 & 27 at SFU Harbour Centre, downtown Vancouver with speakers, Dr. Michael Kerr and Dr. Bruce McEwen on "Stress and the Family".

We held a free public presentation on Wed. June 24th at Capilano Library on "Couples and Communication Breakdown", with Margaret Anne Speak. About 25 people attended and the presentation was warmly received. If you are interested in having a similar presentation at your workplace please contact Leila Howard at 604 926 5496 ext. 300.

Applications are being accepted for the 2009-2010 Clinical Training Program in Family Systems Theory and Therapy. If you know of anyone interested in the program please have them contact Randy Frost, 604 926 5496 ext.304 or randy.frost@livingsystems.ca.

For more information visit www.livingsystems.ca.

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