



Open talk

Communication can be challenging, yet it's essential if people are to enjoy healthy and respectful relationships. So, what's going on when exchanges are regularly being conducted via a third party?

All relationships – be they with family, partners, friends or colleagues – are built on good communication. But what exactly does this mean? And how do you recognise it? In general, it's when interactions, whether on a one-to-one basis or within a group, are direct and allow space for each person to communicate openly. It's also characterised by tolerance, honesty, empathy and the ability to listen to and respect others' views and thoughts, while being confident and open enough to share your own. Many people struggle with various aspects of this – it could be that they're not great at listening, are reluctant to share or find it impossible to disagree respectfully. Some people can find it challenging on all three fronts.

Pattern of triangulation

When thinking of communication patterns, passive, aggressive, and passive-aggressive styles often come to mind. While these are the best-known, there are several others, some of which can become habitual. Another aspect that is perhaps less well understood is that good communication also involves the ability to recognise styles that are less constructive and end up discouraging discourse, either because one party chooses to end their contribution or their behaviour prompts the other

person to stop talking. In both scenarios, the potential for conflict is increased.

One of these patterns is called triangulation. This occurs when two people are in conflict and either one or both attempt to involve a third party in the conversation. This is different from planned and structured mediation, where a trained objective arbiter is brought in to support the conflict-resolution process and aid communication between the parties.

With triangulation, the introduction of the third person is specifically to communicate on one person's behalf or to intervene in the problem and fix it. A form of indirect and passive communication, it happens in many relationships. Examples include estranged parents choosing to relay information to each other via their children, or quarrelling friends asking a third friend to arbitrate on a disagreement. It can also happen without the third person being directly present. Think of how a beleaguered parent might, for example, use an implicit threat – 'Wait 'til your mother sees what you've done' – rather than directly communicating their own emotions to their child.

It's good to remember that triangulation is rarely intentional and there is no desire to cause hurt. Often it's a long-standing

habit reflecting communication patterns observed during childhood, perhaps within the family, or because of discomfort with expressing views clearly. There are several reasons why people might triangulate. Some struggle with disagreement, so find it easier when an ally validates their stance. At other times, it's to avoid conflict altogether. In this case, the third person is asked to intervene, effectively making them 'the bad guy'.

Negative impact

Whatever the motive, it's an indirect pattern of communication that can be problematic, both for the person being asked to enter the conflict and the family member, friend or colleague on the receiving end of a triangulation attempt. On top of this, it means disputes are rarely discussed openly or fully resolved, and it can create antagonism and conflict in bigger groups. Think of occasions when friends are forced to pick sides between a warring couple, or colleagues are drawn into a conflict between two people at work. In both cases, there might be a feeling of unwelcome control, as the friends and colleagues come under pressure to align themselves with a party. But this can mean that underlying issues go unresolved and people feel compromised.

Resolving the problem

To manage triangulation, the first step is for all parties in a relationship to be aware of the pattern and notice when it happens. Common signs involve requests to relay information to another person – for example, a colleague remarking 'I'm really upset about Caroline's performance, but don't want to say anything. Could you tell her I'm disappointed and angry?' There might also be repeated entreaties to take sides – 'Don't

you think I'm right?' – or requests to intervene in others' private conversations.

When trying to manage triangulation, it's often helpful to talk about it openly while also employing clear and respectful communication yourself. You could, for example, say: 'I notice you often ask me to tell John how you feel about things. I feel uncomfortable being involved in your friendship in this way. Would it be possible for you to share these feelings with him yourself?' It's important, however, to note that the direct route isn't always the most effective option. If, for example, a person is defensive and you suspect they'll find it challenging to hear what you're saying, it might be necessary to try another tack. In this case, start to reduce your entanglement in the dynamic with phrases such as 'I'm not sure that I want to weigh in on this' or 'He might feel like we're ganging up on him, maybe it would be better if you talked to him about this privately'.

As with everything, communication is nuanced and complicated. Circumstances and environment will play their part in how disagreements are addressed. But with care and kindness, it's possible to set boundaries that encourage open and safe communication and make it that bit easier to build healthier relationships.

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