

Triangles: Understanding Their Use in Executive Coaching

by Patricia Ruzich

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One aspect of executive coaching is helping talented, powerful people who find themselves involved in seemingly unresolvable emotional or interpersonal problems. This article describes a conceptual framework and uses a case study for uncovering and altering the structure, composed of triangles, of dysfunctional emotional and interpersonal systems at the executive level.

Powerful people in the business world often find themselves involved in difficult and seemingly unresolvable emotional or interpersonal problems and conflicts with other colleagues in the organization. They feel stuck and immobilized and are not sure what to do to disengage themselves from the problem or to improve the other person’s behavior. Mostly, they just want the problem to go away so they can get on with and take care of their “real” work. But these kinds of problems rarely just go away. They fester and grow until they become huge difficulties with negative impacts on productivity, morale, and costs to the business.

Frequently in these situations, I am asked to help change the way a talented, high-performing executive relates to others in the organization. The “problem” is usually identified in terms of this individual’s behavior patterns, and what the client organization wants is for me to help this individual change his or her behavior—to fix it. What I almost

always find is that the indicated individual’s behavior may need to shift, but that this behavior is being sustained by a structural system in which other people in the organization are entangled.

Understanding the structure (the triangles) of the emotional system you are stuck in can provide many clues about how to modify the situation. “Triangling” is both a diagnostic tool and an intervention technique that can be used with extremely beneficial results. I use it as an executive coach to help resolve many of these conflicts quickly and efficiently. It is, however, only one of many useful tools I use in coaching. Other tools will be addressed in future articles.

For example, consider the following situation. (While the situation presented here represents a real case with a successful conclusion, the names and some of the circumstances have been changed to protect the guilty.)

Case Situation: Real Good Car Parts, Inc.

Mike is the long-term and successful CEO of Real Good Car Parts, Inc., a major manufacturer of parts for the automotive aftermarket industry. While he has at times been viewed as somewhat difficult to communicate with, his authority as CEO is heeded,

and he has gained a measure of respect for bringing his company into the ’90s and spearheading a culture change to becoming a service-oriented company rather than a manufacturing dinosaur. In that regard, things have been going well.

Lately, however, Mike has been experiencing growing frustration with Susan, the head of Sales and Marketing. Mike had hired Susan away from a competitor in the industry and was pleased to get her. Susan has been a valuable and contributing member of the executive team. Her numbers have gone up consistently every year, and she is seen as leading the culture changes. Mike has been dropping hints to Susan about her future with the company and the possibilities for her as heir-apparent to Mike as CEO. But now, Mike is beginning to be less sure. He has been hearing grumbling from the ranks and from Susan’s peers about Susan’s management style and grasp for more power. Mike’s confidence in Susan is eroding.

As Mike’s concerns with Susan have grown, he has begun consulting with John, a senior HR officer in the firm. John has relayed some of Mike’s concerns to Susan, as well as carried information back to Mike about Susan’s viewpoint. John finds himself pulled in awkward and uncomfortable directions, as well as

seeing little improvement in the situation. He has become the third point in a triangle, and lately he's been made aware that other people in the organization are experiencing the same thing. Susan has been talking to Harvey, Mike has been talking to Chris, and Chris has also been discussing the situation with John.

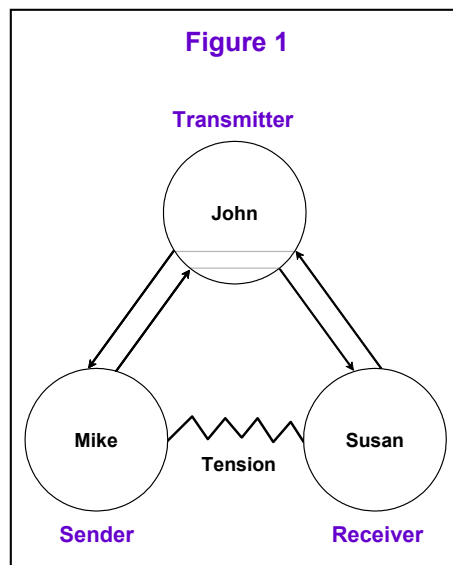
Meanwhile the conflict is growing. More and more people are becoming aware of it, and the tension in meetings with Mike and Susan is palpable. This has had a negative impact on morale, commitment, and energy. Everyone is aware that something needs to change.

Around this time, John heard about a consultant who does high-performance coaching and conflict management with executives, and John has persuaded Mike to give the consultant a chance. Mike is well aware that the conflict is costing the company a great deal of time, energy, and morale, and he is very willing to make an investment in fixing the problem.

The Problem: Stuck in a Triangle

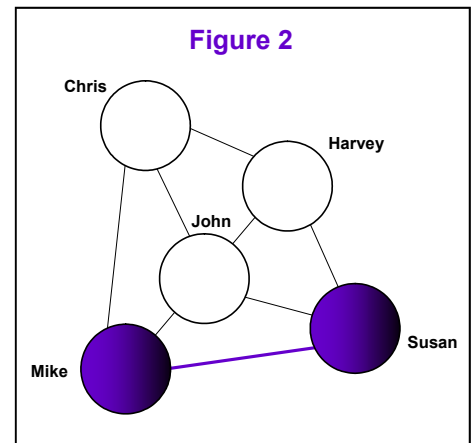
Simply put, a triangle occurs whenever one person brings in a third party, rather than solves the problem directly with the other person. In our case, rather than communicate directly with Susan about the problems Mike is aware of, he is going to John with the hidden agenda that John will take the information to Susan, and thus solve the problem for him without any uncomfortable face-to-face discussion. In the short run, Mike feels relief and John feels the CEO trusts him with important information. But over time, this has created

an unhealthy and unproductive situation (see Figure 1). Mike is the sender of the information, Susan is the receiver, and John becomes the transmitter.



John is participating in the problem by intervening with Susan on Mike's behalf and then reporting back to Mike. John has taken on the role of transmitter, and though he finds it awkward and stressful, he hasn't found a way to break the unhealthy triangle and bring about a resolution of the problem. Other people in the organization are being triangled in as well, such as Harvey and Chris. When triangles occur, it is frequently the case that there are several interlocking triangles as well as the primary problem triangle at play (see Figure 2). The situation just gets messier and messier, and due to all the vested interests of the people involved, very little is done to confront the situation directly and resolve it.

There are a variety of reasons why this is so. Confronting issues directly can be painful in the short run, and there are always risks associated with doing so. A person may feel that their job is at risk, particularly if there is bad news to bring to the boss



about his or her behavior. Many people are conflict averse and prefer to just go on about their jobs and hope the problem goes away. And often, people feel they just don't know what to do or say that will help resolve the problem anyway. This is where an experienced executive coach who is familiar with the theory and structure of triangles and organizational systems can provide the insight and observation skills needed to get the situation unstuck.

The Intervention: Triangling and Detriangling

Understanding the theory of triangling (originated by Murray Bowen in Bowen Family Systems Theory) and knowing how to use triangles as an intervention tool can turn a struggle into a success and help all players know how to better deal with future difficulties. The process is simple, but appropriate use of the technique takes some courage in the high tension of the difficult situation. There are two aspects to a successful intervention such as the one needed here. The first is to have a strong grounding in the use of the tool or technique of triangling, and the second is to use this tool within the framework of a clear and well-defined process for problem solving and conflict resolution. Also, it is useful to keep the following

principles in mind as you observe the triangles in your dilemma:

- ◆ Look at the problem as a systems/ triangle problem, not a personal problem.
- ◆ Resist the desire to change a person, and look for ways to change the flow of communications.
- ◆ Keep the issues and their tension between the people who can do something about them.

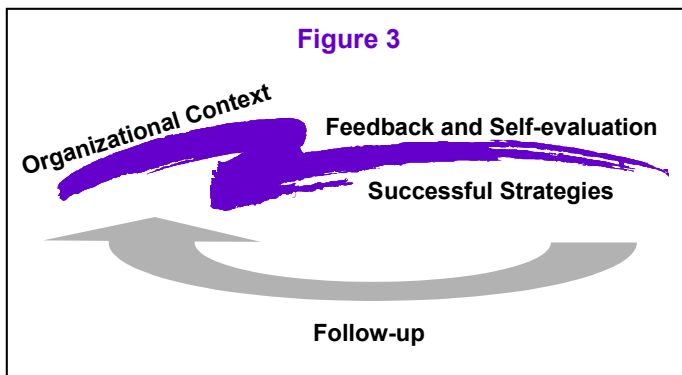
The process I use for these kinds of interventions includes four main stages as shown in Figure 3.

We can look at each of these stages by looking at how I joined a triangle and coached individuals to detriangle at Real Good Car Parts, Inc.

desired outcomes for the situation. I want clearly stated goals about what it would look like to him or her if the situation were fixed. And finally, I want to set the stage for the coaching intervention to follow. As part of this task, I asked Mike to sit down with Susan and clearly define the outcomes he would like to see and invite her to work with an executive coach. This starts the process of breaking down the unhealthy triangle by getting Mike to talk directly to Susan. Having them focus on outcomes to be achieved rather than problems makes this conversation less loaded and is more helpful to the process. At this stage, I also encourage the sponsor (Mike) to really look for and encourage the new behaviors he is hoping to see in the “problem” executive (Susan).

directly instead of serving as their transmitters. I also encouraged them to look for changes in Susan’s behavior—to expect improvement.

In meeting with Susan, I wanted to temporarily take the role of the third leg in the triangle to make sure she was getting the full message that Mike and the others had been trying to get across to her. In this case, as is frequently true, when Mike did meet with Susan, he softened his approach significantly from when he talked to me; therefore, Susan failed to really “get” the problem. Without direct communications, she did not have a clear sense of the depth of the problem nor was she aware of the serious implications of not solving it. At this point, I temporarily stepped into a triangle with the goal of giving *verbatim* quotes to Susan, rather than the diluted version she got from Mike. It is important when you participate in a triangle in this way that the language be *verbatim*. You do not want to make things worse by carrying translated messages back and forth; simply quote the other person until the parties are able to more clearly and directly express themselves in these situations. By informing Susan that I am quoting *verbatim*, I lessen the chance of a “shoot the messenger syndrome.” As is usually the case, Susan was shocked to find out how seriously this was all being viewed. After getting over her initial anger, she saw that she was going to have to change some things about the way she was working and communicating with Mike. Now the focus was on the communication flow between Susan and Mike, not on Susan the person. This also helped her become ready to move into Stage 3.



In our situation, Mike agreed to talk with Susan about his desired outcomes, and the process moved on to Stage 2.

Stage 2: Feedback and Self-evaluation

Stage 1: Organizational Context

The first thing I want to do as a coach in any intervention is to assess the organizational context and the patterns of relating. In this stage, I meet with the sponsor of the intervention (in this case, Mike) for one or two hours to gain an understanding of the organizational context. Who are the players? What purpose does their behavior serve? Are there triangles, and who is involved in them? Are there other subordinate players involved in other triangles? I also want the sponsor to identify

The purpose of Stage 2 is to try to find out how the problem executive and other people involved see the situation. I am looking for the communications triangles that support the “problem.” In this case, with Susan’s okay, I met with Susan, John, Harvey, and Chris individually. In the meetings with John, Harvey, and Chris, I wanted not only to find out how they saw the situation, but also to help them see how they are participating in the triangles and coach them to encourage Susan and Mike to talk

Stage 3: Successful Strategies

Once the executive is motivated to change the situation, I am ready to help him or her develop custom strategies. I do this in a series of six two-hour coaching sessions. The goal of these sessions is to

- ◆ Add clarity and substance to the issues that need to be addressed.
- ◆ Jointly set the desired outcomes based on the perspective of the executive-in-coaching and others.
- ◆ Better understand and apply successful strategies in new areas.
- ◆ Get commitment to try out the new behaviors in order to detriangle.
- ◆ Help the executive to build on his or her successes and strengths.

Susan's most important desired outcome was to learn to talk directly to Mike and to get Mike to talk directly to other subordinates—to reroute the triangles. It became clear in the process of setting strategies that Mike would give Susan assignments and Susan would set about implementing them. But Mike had turned Susan into the transmitter, and the rest of the troops didn't follow along because they didn't realize that the mandate had come from Mike. One of Susan's challenges was to get Mike to publicly give her the mandate to carry out his ideas. (This was yet another unhealthy triangle situation.) Some of the strategies included having Susan ask Mike for clarity in group meetings or to quote him when he wasn't there. When Susan was able to get Mike to say these things directly to the troops, much of the grumbling stopped. My role in the triangle with Mike and Susan was to get them sending and receiving directly to each other and to other people with whom they

needed to communicate. Once this was achieved, the unhealthy communication flow was rerouted, and my role was finished. I could then pull out and dissolve the triangle I had deliberately built with myself as a temporary transmitter between Mike and Susan.

It is important to realize that triangles are a fact of life in any system of human relationships. We all experience these triangling situations in our families, in business organizations, in churches, and in every part of our lives where we are a part of some group of three or more people. Some of these triangles become permanent features of the group dynamics. For example, children complaining to Dad about each other. Or Mom protecting Dad from facing stressful situations with other family members. Since triangles are building blocks of any system of people—families and organizations—the goal is not to get out of them but rather how to manage oneself in and through them.

Theory of Triangles

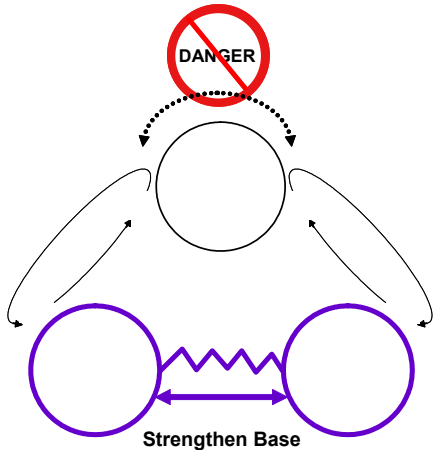
Murray Bowen, MD, a founder of Bowen Family Systems Theory says, "The emotional forces within a triangle operate as predictably as an emotional reflex." It is automatic that when the tension mounts between two people, they turn to a third to temporarily relieve some of the tension and temporarily stabilize the relationship. Because the third person who has been triangled-in absorbs some of the tension, it is less likely that the issues causing the tension will be worked out. Peter Senge describes this as shifting the burden in his book *The Fifth Discipline*. He says, "Shifting the burden to the intervener leaves the

system weaker than before and more in need of help. Any long-term solution must strengthen the ability of the system to shoulder its own burdens."

Once triangles are identified, it is possible to step outside the tension and observe the communication flow in the three-person structure. By defining the problem as the way communications flow in triangles, it becomes easier to observe the movement of the tension communicated between people. Then instead of attempting to change the people, reroute the direction of the flow of communication. The goal is to change the structure by strengthening the base of the triangle, which is the "hot leg" since it has most of the tension. Keeping the issues where they can get resolved, on the base of the triangle, is uncomfortable on the "hot leg" in the short run. But in the long run, this makes resolution of tough issues possible and in some cases even easy. Basic systems theory tells us that structure produces behavior and changing the structure can produce different patterns of behavior. Identifying the triangles in a system is a way to narrow down a part of the structure to observe and modify (see Figure 4).

Coaching focuses on helping people leverage their position in the system of triangles they are a part of, not on fixing their personal problem. Bowen writes about coaching people to detriangle, which simply means finding a way to deflect the strong emotional pull into a triangle enough to avoid taking on the tension of others while still communicating with both sides of the triangle. Detriangling will help keep the tension where it belongs and keep the focus on finding constructive

Figure 4



ways to resolve the issues.

The goal is to create the most open and healthy situation possible. You have a variety of options for how to participate in the situation (see Figure 5).

Level 1—reroute—is the most desirable option, even if only one member of the triangle is willing and

able to participate in this way. As stated before, there are many reasons why people feel unable to do this kind of direct communication, and many people simply do not feel equipped to handle it. If people can't do this for whatever reason, then try for level 2—facilitate or level 3—transmit. Remember, it is important to keep any messages you carry verbatim. And if you have permission to carry the source name with you, it is always better to do so. Levels 4, 5, or 6 may or may not improve the situation, and levels 7 and 8 will lead to more triangles and should be avoided.

It can take significant work to help people see that functioning in an unhealthy triangle is much more costly in the long run than taking the risk of detriangling. But, in the end, the goal simply is to work with whichever participants in the triangle you have access to by rerouting the

flow of the communication so you do not carry (transmit) messages.

Instead, you should support and coach the sender and/or receiver on constructive ways to address the issues directly, even though it is very stressful (see Figure 5). The goal is for the stress of the situation to be a little greater than the discomfort of direct communication.

You also have to be very careful, especially if you are an internal player. It is easy to get pulled into the triangle and take on some of the tension yourself and relieve others. But then you may be unable to keep from becoming part of the problem, due to your own

vested interests and relationships with the players involved. In these cases, an outside coach can observe more dispassionately, bring practiced techniques to the situation, and model ways to deal with future triangles.

When you do find yourself caught up in such a situation, some guidelines can be helpful.

- ◆ Avoid carrying messages for others.
- ◆ The direct message makes all the difference.
- ◆ Don't set up opportunities for indirect messaging channels.
- ◆ Turn the flow around and send the message back through the appropriate, more direct channel.
- ◆ Instead of attempting to change a person, change the flow of communication.
- ◆ Define the problem as a system problem, not a personal problem.
- ◆ Change the structure—reroute the communication flow to strengthen the base.

When working with triangles, it is not necessary to get all the players to change. In fact, if you can coach one player to change how he or she participates in the triangle, things will improve. Bowen writes about how change in any part of a system will necessitate change and adjustment in the rest of the system.

And that, in fact, is what happened with Mike and Susan. Once she had the information, Susan was able to see how she was participating in a triangle with Mike and John (and Harvey and Chris) in ways that were unhealthy. Instead of continuing to

Figure 5

Most Open/Detriangling

1. **Reroute** the complaint by coaching the sender to find ways to bring up the matter constructively with the receiver. Do not carry the message for them.
2. **Facilitate** a meeting with the sender and receiver to coach them to speak directly and constructively to one another.
3. **Transmit** verbatim messages with sender's name included, and coach receiver on constructive ways to discuss with sender.
4. Carry the message verbatim, but protect the sender's name.
5. Soften the message and protect the sender.
6. Add your spin to the message and protect the sender.
7. Do nothing. *They will triangle-in someone else.*
8. Do nothing and spread the gossip. *You will triangle-in others.*

Least Open/More Triangling

talk to John and others about what Mike said, Susan spoke directly to Mike and got Mike to communicate his message directly to others and not just through her. This has made all the difference. Which brings us to Stage 4.

Stage 4: Follow-up and Celebrating Results

In this stage, I go back and check in with the executive (Susan) and with the sponsor (Mike) to follow up on performance improvement, celebrate success, and anticipate future challenges. Because the methodology and technique are so powerful, the rewards at this point are many. Some of the benefits clients have reported from this kind of intervention are

- ◆ Reduced tension
- ◆ Resolved conflict
- ◆ Increased trust
- ◆ Improved morale

Mike, Susan, and John report great strides and improvements and feel their investment in the process was

well worth it. The key was simply to get someone from outside the triangle to step in, help them see what was really happening, and help them change the structure of their communications.

Conclusion

In summary, when people in organizations find themselves caught up in a downward spiraling tangle of triangles, start by looking for triangles to observe instead of people to blame.

1. Step out of the emotional pull of a triangle enough to observe the three-person structure.
2. Keep the issues and their tension where they belong at the base of the triangle between the people who can do something about them.
3. Coach to reroute complaints in constructive ways.
4. Celebrate the changes.

When the emotional pull is very strong or the situation politically risky, you may want the temporary

help of an outside consultant to help detriangle and build more healthy, direct communications.

About the Author

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