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PEAK OF SUCCESS

NEWSLETTER

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“Triangulation” by Amy Remmele

Healthy work environments are critical to the success of a company and yet during times of crisis or threat, they can become toxic very quickly. People tend to revert back to their more “animal” natures when times are difficult. So now more than ever, in our current threatening economic environment, it is important for business owners and managers to check out the danger levels of their company environments. It can be crucial to stop the action when the little red flags go up so that the “toxicity barometers” are kept at safe levels.

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gossip, two sisters talking degradingly about their brother, or school children excluding another child from their game. But the office gossip can easily become fuel for office politics, the sibling talk can sew the seeds of a family rift, and the school kids create a lonely and potentially angry outsider sitting on the sidelines. It causes hurt feelings, fear and threat to the ones excluded, and anger, resentment, and sometimes rage and mob mentality on both sides. Triangulation serves some basic functions to people looking for easy, quick fixes of belonging and to those who do not want to put the extra work into good, healthy communication habits. First, when a person is feeling lonely, in need of connection with others, or “one down,” a quick way to get connected and feel “better than” is to talk negatively about another person. The two who are triangulating make a quick connection and feel a little higher in the social hierarchy by excluding and downgrading another person. Like a drug, this fix only lasts a short time, and then these people need to triangulate again. Rather than finding out what is missing in their lives and finding real connections, these people take the easy way out. A second function of triangulation occurs when a person feels wronged by another person or group. The victim of the wrong turns to triangulation for safety. The wronged party seeks out a third person to “tell the story to.” Once they have an ally, they feel righteous. Rather than going to the person who they feel wronged them,

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Peak Of Success

331 Alberta Drive

Amherst, New York 14226

There are many factors that can play into a toxic environment, but I would like to focus here on one that can seem benign at times, but can do the most damage in any venue. It is called *Triangulation*. Triangulation occurs when two or more people get together and talk negatively about or plot against a third person or group. Do not confuse triangulation with asking for help with a people problem, or asking for mediation between you and another person with whom you are in conflict. Triangulation is complaining, plotting or viciously gossiping, without any solution orientation. While some people think of triangulation as harmless, it is never harmless to the person or people being excluded. In its most basic form, it is office

these people avoid conflict and soothe their feelings, rather than truly solving a problem. A final way in which triangulation occurs is by people being drawn into it just because everyone else around them is doing it. Afraid to speak out against the behavior, they go along with the crowd. The function served appears simply to be ease, floating downstream with the pollution instead of trying to swim to a higher level.

Triangulation can become insidious and pervasive. When enough people “gang up” on someone, a victim of triangulation in an organization or a school can become mistrusted or disliked by people who do not even know them. Think about a time when you were influenced in your opinion of someone by what others said about that person, without “checking it out” and forming your own judgment by communicating directly with the target of others’ opinions.

Belonging is such a basic human need that the exclusion triangulation causes threatens the very core of some people. Therefore, sometimes when people feel “on the outside” due to triangulation, they become fearful of loneliness and loss. At a primitive level, they are afraid of not having a place around the tribal campfire. This fear may just cause the excluded victim of triangulation to withdraw, but it also may cause them to become angry and “fight back.” In its most extreme forms, it is a school shooting, a lynching, a blood feud, a war. Interestingly, in almost one hundred percent of school shooting cases, the perpetrators are rejected, scoffed-at kids who have been pushed outside the inner circles. And while most organizations never experience the extreme explosive effects of triangulation, many do lose good employees or suffer absenteeism and reduced production due to the pain and suffering that exclusion can cause.

The image of an organization can be adversely affected when outsiders hear people triangulating. The outsiders may believe the gossip, almost always negatively toned, that they are hearing. Perhaps even worse, since the

outsiders are seeing the organization insiders engaging in poisonous behavior, the outsiders may conclude (perhaps correctly!) that the organization as a whole is poisonous and toxic. And finally, stay aware that if and when you triangulate, the person doing it *with* you is almost surely doing it *to* you with someone else at another time.

The good news is that much triangulation can be reversed with some intervention. Even some of the worst triangulators become converts to openness when companies adopt and enforce a strict Code of Conduct. The best Codes of Conduct not only prohibit triangulation, but also prescribe direct, honest confrontation and problem-solving to replace it.

Amy Remmele is a personal and professional consultant, working with people who want to overcome the roadblocks to success. She has her formal education and degree in Psychology. Amy authored the book, Chief Life Officer: Your Life Is The Most Important Business You'll Ever Own and co-authored Re-Phrase It: Adding Empathy and Emotional Intelligence to Your Everyday Life, and the relationship workbook, Empathy, Communication and Conflict Resolution Home Study Program with her husband and business partner, Dr. Kent Bath. Amy provides assessments, seminars, counseling and consultation to individuals and businesses. Amy can be reached at 716-626-5977 or by visiting her website at www.peakofsuccess.com.

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