

You can't rely on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.

—Mark Twain

Chapter Seven

❖ EMOTIONAL TRIANGLES

For ten days, the Simpsons' adolescent, eldest daughter lay in a hospital bed with a mysterious infection, her body unresponsive to intravenous antibiotics. During this period her parents were having the worst fight of their life over the amount of time Mr. Simpson was spending with a female colleague at work. Throughout, he had steadfastly claimed that he was not romantically involved with her. Finally, he admitted that he was having an affair, and during a visit to the hospital told his daughter the truth. Within forty-eight hours her mysterious infection had mysteriously disappeared.



Mrs. Smith went to see a therapist, troubled over an affair that she had been carrying on since the first year of her five-year-old marriage but that she now wanted to break off. Why, all of a sudden? She could give no clear reason other than that it was becoming increasingly difficult for her to continue it. A history of the marriage revealed that six months after their wedding, the husband entered a four-times-a-week psychoanalysis. Her affair had started

shortly after that. Two months before Mrs. Smith came in, troubled about her dalliance, her husband had terminated his relationship with his analyst.



Mr. Brown had worked his way up to the top of a major corporation through his uncommon industry, creativity, and ability to make friends. He was known as someone you could always go to, someone who was always available in time of need, a good mediator, someone who seemed to make a specialty of resolving conflict. As a reward for his long-term loyalty, he was promoted to CEO. Soon after taking over this corporation, which had been like his extended family, he was given explicit orders by the board of trustees to downsize the company by 30 percent within six months. He began to drink heavily, lost his nerve and creative edge, eventually became seriously depressed, at times considered suicide, and began to display psychotic symptoms.

Emotional Triangles

What these stories have in common is the manifestation of an emotional triangle: the manner in which the relationship between any two people, or a given individual and his or her symptoms, can be a function of an often unseen third person, relationship, or issue between them. (Actually, there may be no such thing as a two-person relationship.)

Emotional triangles are the building blocks of any relationship system. They are its molecules. They follow their own universal laws, totally transcending the social science construction of reality, and they seem to be rooted in the nature of protoplasm itself. Triangles function predictably, irrespective of the gender, class, race, culture, background, or psychological profile of the people involved, and also irrespective of the relational context: family or business, the kind of business, or the nature or severity of

There may be no such thing as a two-person relationship.

the problem. They require a different level of inquiry, and they provide different criteria for what information is important. As will be elaborated below, no matter who the people are or what the context, emotional triangles adhere to the following rules:

- ◆ They form out of the discomfort of people with one another.
- ◆ They function to preserve themselves and, perversely, oppose all intentions to change them.
- ◆ They interlock in a reciprocally self-reinforcing manner.
- ◆ They make it difficult for people to modify their thinking and behavior.
- ◆ They transmit a system's stress to its most responsible or most focused member.

Observing how emotional triangles function is a way of objectifying relationship processes. Triangles make emotional processes directly observable. They concretize the field and demonstrate how relationship systems are self-organizing. And they support the major principle of systems thinking that it is position rather than nature that is the key to understanding our functioning in any family or work system.

For leaders, the capacity to understand and think in terms of emotional triangles can be the key to their stress, their health, their effectiveness, and their relational binds. Almost every issue of leadership and the difficulties that accompany it can be framed in terms of emotional triangles, including motivation, clarity, decision-making, resistance to change, imaginative gridlock, and a failure of nerve.

Emotional triangles thus have both negative and positive effects on leaders. Their negative aspect is that they perpetuate deadmills, reduce clarity, distort perceptions, inhibit decisiveness, and transmit stress. But their positive aspect is that when a leader can begin to think in terms of emotional triangles and map out in his or her mind (or even better, on paper) diagrams of the family or organization, such analysis can help explain alliances and the difficulties being encountered in motivation or learning. This in turn can help the leader get unstuck by changing emotional processes

Triangles make emotional process directly observable.

Changing emotional processes

discuss

2 Cor 10:5

and becoming more objective about what is happening. Identifying triangles is also useful in evaluating the maturity of family members or coworkers. Indeed, the concept of an emotional triangle is so basic to understanding relationship process and the process of a leader's self-differentiation that this entire book could have been cast in its terms. Triangles are the stuff of emotional process.

That is why the concept of an emotional triangle provides a way out of gridlock; whether one is a parent or a president, and offers a concrete alternative to the substance abuse of data. It also provides a way to regulate our sensitivity so that we do not fall into the trap of empathy. Most important, perhaps, the concept of an emotional triangle describes clearly how self-differentiation can be a more powerful influence on others than any one technique or method for moving them forward.

❖ TYPES OF EMOTIONAL TRIANGLES

As mentioned, an emotional triangle is any three members of any relationship system or any two members plus an issue or symptom. The most common emotional triangles are the following:

1. Family Triangles

Spouse/ spouse/ any third person	child (natural or adopted), in-law, relative, boss, friend, paramour, therapist, minister, mentor, doctor, etc.
Spouse/ spouse/ any issue or symptom	either partner's drinking, eating, smoking, distasteful habit, health, job, hobby, credit card, inheritance, etc.
Parent/ child/ parent	any difference between the parents over leniency, discipline, protectiveness, freedom, individuality, etc.
Parent/ child/ any third person	sibling, grandparent, other relative, healer, mentor, piano teacher, soccer coach, friend(s), scoutmaster, etc.
Parent/ child/ habit	laziness, sloppiness, tardiness, cleanliness, carelessness, irresponsibility, lying, cheating, stealing, etc., and the issue that encompasses them all: homework

2. Workplace Triangles

Issues at Stake

seniority, fairness, allotment of resources, space, employee slots, benefits, working conditions, productivity, hiring and firing policies, profit-sharing, snafus and goof-ups, and management practices

Emotional Triangles

CEO/ vice president/ vice president
CEO/ union/ board of trustees
CEO/ profits/ his or her health
CEO/ corporate culture/ change
Manager (supervisor)/ CEO/ another manager
Manager/ subordinate/ superior
Manager/ subordinate/ subordinate
Worker/ manager/ manager
Worker/ manager/ worker
CEO, manager, or worker/ job/ family
CEO, manager, or worker/ orders from above/ maintaining one's integrity

3. Healing and Mentoring Triangles

Issues at Stake

payment, quality of care, expectations, boundary violations, advice, expertise

Emotional Triangles

Healer/ patient (client)/ symptom
Healer/ patient/ patient's recalcitrance
Healer/ patient/ another healer
Healer/ patient/ another patient
Healer/ patient/ patient's relative or friend
Healer/ patient/ healer's relative or friend
Healer/ patient/ healer's income
Healer/ patient/ insurance
Healer/ patient/ another way they are connected
Healer/ patient/ healer's reputation
Patient/ healer's expertise/ patient's own intuition
Patient/ his or her body/ his or her self

❖ THE "LAWS" OF EMOTIONAL TRIANGLES

No matter what the issues (the content) over which two persons differ and no matter who the people are, emotional triangles are regulated by the same "laws." Here is a description of each, with illustrations from family and work systems.

How Emotional Triangles Form

Emotional triangles form because of the inherent instability of two-person relationships. This instability increases because of a lack of differentiation of the partners, the degree of chronic anxiety in the surrounding emotional atmosphere, and the absence of well-defined leadership. They create the illusion of intimacy. How long can any two people talk together without focusing on a third person? It may even be that to the extent the conversations of any two people focus on a third party, there is a flaw in the pseudo-intimacy that has formed. The process involves more than scapegoating or finding a common enemy, however. Triangling a third person (A) into a relationship with B and C by agreeing to dislike (or even help) A, or triangling that third person out by keeping A in the dark about a secret she or he has every right to know (a mother's suicide, a person's terminal condition, a job transfer, the closing down of a plant) provides stability to B and C, who then organize themselves around the framework of the triangle. The relationship then evolves in a way that makes A, the third party (often unseen), an inherent part of the connection of the other two.

In family life, the most obvious triangle involves an adultery, but the functioning of that triangle has more to do with how the need for secrecy creates an intense emotional bond by triangling out the other partner, A, than with the sex that is the usual focus. And even when A knows, it is the triangled-out position and the way he or she responds to the relationship of the other two (B and C) that stabilizes or destabilizes the extramarital relationship. The relationship of B and C will take on a different tone if A mischievously encourages the affair than if A adopts a pouting, hurt, and suspicious attitude. Indeed, there may be no better proof that triangles are essentially an

emotional process than the way in which the intensity of B and C's extramarital relationship is governed by the way A responds to it.

The more common family emotional triangle is two parents (B and C) and a child (A). That triangle does not end with a divorce, nor often even with the death of one of the parents. The child so triangled will be chosen by the emotional processes in the family in a way often determined by timing. An only child is always in a triangled position. Yet the triangled child could also be any child born at a critical time in the parents' marriage when it needs rebalancing—for example, after the loss of a previously triangled child or parent or other relative or therapist who was part of the marriage relationship from the beginning. And of course this is absolutely true when the mother is already pregnant before her marriage. The process is even more blatant in second marriages where the child to be triangled comes along with the mother (or in some cases the father) and was an integral part of the engagement process. I once did a wedding for a couple where the mother's only child stood right behind the bride and groom during the ceremony. After the final pronouncement, the groom turned to the little girl and gave her a ring also. He knew what he was doing; he married "them."

The child who is part of a marital triangle will tend to go to extremes—be it super achievement or dysfunction (emotionally, or physically). When it is the latter, efforts to help the child improve (tutors, Outward Bound programs, therapists, private school) will generally be limited in their success. And if the symptom that develops in the child is physical (allergies, headaches, recurrent fevers and colds, or more pernicious diseases), then the triangle will contribute to perpetuating its chronic state. Whether emotional or physical, the child's symptom will only abate if the marital triangle itself is changed by the parents paying attention to unresolved issues in their own relationship. This always requires that one parent become the leader against the resistance of the other.

The best evidence for the power of such emotional triangles is the extent to which one or both parents seeking help for a troubled child will quit the counselor when they are advised to differentiate more from the child, and this begins to change the marriage itself.

I cannot count the number of times that, in an effort to ward this off, I have turned to one partner (usually the husband) and said, "I want to warn you that if your wife succeeds in getting less hooked into your child's shenanigans, it will carry over to your marriage. One cannot differentiate selectively, even if the differentiating efforts are focused on one person. And you will find her a much more independent partner." The husband would say, "Don't worry about me," or, "That would be wonderful," and then, as his wife does begin to succeed in developing more self-regulation, the husband begins to say things like, "Don't you think you've gone to the counselor enough? We could really use the money for other purposes," or, "Guess what, honey, I've been transferred to Australia."

The concept of an emotional triangle can provide an important variable, a missing link, in understanding why different children growing up in the same family turn out so differently. It helps explain the conundrum well known to educators: Why do difficult or unmotivated or rebellious children often come out of homes where the parents are so nice? The focus on alcoholism, abuse, and divorce completely misses how, even in the most stable and loving families, children can sometimes suddenly quit school, get recurring illnesses, reject the family's most treasured values, or go over to the railroad tracks after school one day and let a train slash their body in two.

Stepfamilies or blended families, where two partners bring children in from previous marriages, display the triangle more blatantly. They create discomfort to the extent that one partner tries to rearrange the relationships of the other partner and his or her children. The children are not so innocent either, despite the Cinderella fantasy. Many "wicked stepmothers" are simply overly responsible women who are trying to fix an irresponsible child. Cinderella's stepmother might have been an overly responsible woman who had raised her daughters to be orderly, and Cindy might have been a flake. Nothing will break up a second marriage faster than one partner trying to rearrange the relationship of the other partner and his or her child.

Emotional triangles can also form in society itself. There is an extraordinary similarity between the difficulty of helping children caught in a triangle with their parents and America's race problem.

Rae

One way to understand this would be that from the beginning the black population of America has served as a displacement focus for the problems of whites with one another, particularly the normal differences between classes. While these differences obviously exist and have political ramifications, they have never taken on the intensity of class struggle that occurs in other nations without a pariah group to focus on. As with families, this is not a conscious process but a self-organizing evolution that results from mutual adaptation patterns.

On the international scene, triangles are cleverly used by smaller nations to create alliances based on enmity between larger nations. The Cold War and much of the Vietnam struggle illustrate this. Triangles were at the heart of the beginnings of World War I, the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, and the continued difficulties between Israel and the Arabs. Triangles can exist within the military of one country as well as between the militaries of various countries. When the surface fleets of the United States Navy (battleships, cruisers, destroyers) wanted to arm themselves with cruise missiles, which would make their defense less dependent on submarines and aircraft carriers, the other two arms of the Navy put up such a struggle that a compromise assuring them of their rightful hegemony had to be worked out before they would agree to stop fighting the change.

One example of the way emotional triangles form is the following domestic situation, which also shows the interlocking nature of triangles. A couple who were divorcing decided to split up their property at a mutually agreeable time. The wife, however, who was distrustful of her husband, asked the local police to provide some protection. When the husband found out about this, he asked for the same. As they began to divvy up their furniture, at one point the wife objected to something the moving men were taking, and her policeman interfered with the moving men, whereupon the other policeman began to interfere with the first policeman's interference. Within the next half-hour the two policemen were almost at the point of fisticuffs, and both husband and wife turned into a mediation team in order to keep things calm. One would like to end the story by saying this brought them back together, but that did not happen.

Another type of shift, this one involving a physical symptom, happened to a divorcing couple who had been married for six years and were separating on good terms. They had no children, although they had never used contraceptive devices. The night before they separated, they decided to have sex one more time "just for the hell of it," and she conceived. Similarly, in a two-sister family, if one of the women is having trouble conceiving and the other is having trouble not conceiving, the odds are very high that the one having trouble conceiving is in an emotional triangle of responsibility for their parents.

How Emotional Triangles Operate

Once formed, emotional triangles (1) are self-organizing; (2) are perpetuated by distance; and (3) tend to be perverse.

The self-organizing character of emotional triangles is brought out by the second story at the beginning of this chapter, where a marriage (B and C) stabilized when the wife had an affair (B and A), and destabilized when the husband terminated his analysis (C and A). Another aspect of triangles' capacity for self-organization is the management of conflict. In most emotional triangles, one side tends to be more conflictual than the other two sides, and if one can succeed in calming that side the conflict will generally surface in one of the other relationships. Conversely, if conflict begins to erupt in one of the previously calm relationships, the previously disruptive relationship will often calm down.

An example of the former involved a woman having terrific fights with her mother-in-law. The older woman was constantly critical and interfering, and no appeals to her son (the woman's husband) to say something to his mother had any effect. The wife had become so reactive to her mother-in-law's behavior that she could hardly bear to be in the house with her at the same time. After achieving some distance from her mother-in-law by reframing her as a clownish buffoon rather than an interfering bitch, however, the woman reached a point where she could be amused by her antics. On her mother-in-law's next visit she prepared herself for the usual barbs, innuendoes, and criticism by responding ironically, saying, "How did your son have

such poor taste as to marry me?" In front of her husband: "Have you thought of moving in with us so you can protect your grandchildren from me?" Within an hour, the mother-in-law had ceased giving any attention to her daughter-in-law and desisted for the rest of the visit; instead she became embroiled in a fight with her son, criticizing him for not getting a better job. By the end of the trip, the two women were exchanging recipes.

Generally speaking, in-law struggles are always false issues, with the mother-in-law displacing problems from her marriage and the daughter-in-law from her relationship with her own mother. In fact, I do not think I have ever seen a daughter-in-law having problems with her mother-in-law who had a playful, open relationship with her own mother. And it is extraordinary to watch the immediate, almost magical effects on a daughter-in-law/mother-in-law relationship that can occur if the daughter will work on her relationship with her own mother instead. The same magical effects hold true if the daughter works on her relationship with her own daughter.

In the second place, distance also perpetuates an emotional triangle. Thus secrets and gossip that keep a person in the dark will have an avalanche effect on any community, polarizing those in and out of the secret and inhibiting communication between them. In addition, criticism in the form of "you statements" rather than "I statements" will push people away. And if the person accepts the criticism and becomes defensive, they will become emotionally triangled into the other person's problems. The distance has the effect of creating pseudo-intimacy or alliances and always goes in the opposite direction from openness, directness, and intimacy.

One example is a major Ivy League university that fired its nice but rather ineffectual president and hired a no-fills go-getter to help the school work out its financial problems. He succeeded, but within two years was forced to leave because of extraordinary enmity from the faculty. While the issue at stake was changes in the faculty's benefits and rights, the differences might have been less polarizing if the new president could have eliminated the distance between them. His predecessor, a hail-fellow-well-met sort of guy, could be seen every Sunday, pipe in hand, walking his dog across the main quadrangle. But

the distance
the successor kept his apartment in Manhattan and retreated there on weekends. If the new president could have closed the distance between himself and the community, he would have had a better chance of shifting the triangle or at least making it more fluid.

In this sense, it was the introduction of the hotline during the Cold War that kept the United States and Russia in direct contact and prevented the triangle-forming alliances of other countries and vested interests within each group from creating a triangle that could have had catastrophic consequences.

3 The third characteristic of triangle functioning is its pervasiveness. The harder A works at changing the relationship of B and C, the more likely it is that their relationship will move in the opposite direction. Thus it is not possible for A to change the B-C relationship for longer than a week. And this will hold true no matter what position A occupies in any relationship system and no matter who or what B and C represent in the examples above. This perverse characteristic of emotional triangles is important in understanding some key concepts: the uselessness of willing others to change; how conflicts of will arise and destroy relationships; and why a leader's presence is more powerful than efforts at coercion or therapy.

The general rule is this: One can only change a relationship of which one is directly a part. For example, if a child gets in trouble with teachers or friends because of particular behavior patterns, a parent will not be successful in trying to modify those patterns. The very act of making the attempt creates a stabilizing triangle that makes change impossible. On the other hand, the parent who works on defining self when the "problem" child misbehaves will have greater success at shifting the triangle, hence modifying the pattern.

I have almost never seen one parent respond well to another parent's criticism or advice on child-rearing. Nor are they any more successful in separating their children from their "horrible" fiancées. Worse, such pressure simply makes kids more likely to fall blindly in love with someone about whom they might otherwise have been more objective. The triangle inverts when the aged parents become "the child" and the child tries to get them to

is directly a part.

sell their apartment, now in the middle of a dangerous ghetto, in order to move to Florida or go into a nursing home.

The counterproductivity of trying to change emotional triangles head-on is one of the most frustrating endeavors for leaders. Most leadership training that suggests techniques for this purpose flounders, because this emotional variable is not a part of the social science construction of reality. Leaders are taught how to motivate, and their leaders constantly try to motivate them to be better motivators.

An ironic example of the perverse power of triangles is the following antitherapeutic "cure." A woman found out that her son was the legal father of an illegitimate child when the child's mother sued for support. Being well-meaning and comfortable financially, she decided to help despite the fact that her husband, her son, and her other children told her to stay out of things. She, however, befriended the mother of her biological grandson, fell in love with the child, and proceeded to plan to put money away for his education. She also tried to help the mother, a ne'er-do-well sort, find a job and move to a better neighborhood. No amount of effort on the part of her family or her minister helped the well-meaning grandmother let go, even though on some level she knew she shouldn't be interfering. She was the oldest of several children and had suffered the brunt of her parents' conflictual marriage. As a youngster she would hide under the dining room table and listen to their fights. When she was older, she became each parent's confidante and to their dying day kept trying to patch up their differences.

Then the young woman's therapist called the grandmother and asked if she and her husband and son would come in to see him. They were surprised, but agreed on the condition that the young woman would be there also. She never showed. At the session, her therapist told a long sob-story of how unfortunate his patient was. He tried to pressure the family into giving her financial support, appealing to their fortunate circumstances and good will, and adding a little guilt for good measure. By the time the grandmother came out of that session, she was so furious that even if her husband and family had changed their minds there was no way she was going to be involved any longer.

❖ THE INTERLOCKING NATURE OF EMOTIONAL TRIANGLES

The emotional triangles of any relationship system interlock, and in any family or work system they extend out into far-reaching super-molecules like hydrocarbon. They can extend within the same family or work system or join both; they can involve only relationships in the present; or they can be the key to how the past becomes the present. The side that is shared by two triangles is the key to the transmission of emotional processes from one triangle to another. It is the network of interlocking triangles that accounts for the compensatory homeostatic forces that provide stability, determine communication pathways, and keeps things stuck when a leader tries to bring change.

One of the most remarkable interlocking triangles in family life is that between a mother, any habit of the daughter which the mother is trying to change, and the mother's unresolved issues with her own mother. When she is willing to work on this prior relationship, the daughter will often start to improve on her own. (This is true also with fathers; to some extent, although not nearly as automatically or with as much intensity.)

A triangle can also be with the past and can form over several generations. A mother might be too seriously involved with a daughter's incipient blooming individuality and take too seriously the child's cursing. Perhaps the mother needs to learn to be less serious and, if possible, to start acting a little outrageously. But suppose her own mother had been out-and-out crazy, making it impossible for her to behave "like her mother" for fear of going over the edge. The same might be true about a father who is failing to discipline his son because his harsh father beat him. The father also is reacting to an old triangle and is unable to distinguish physical abuse and responsible discipline.

It is the network of interlocking triangles that keeps things stuck when a leader tries to bring change.

It is my guess that the functioning of baseball managers and football and other sports coaches is often affected by the triangle with the general manager and the owner. I know of

only a mother to relationship

past present

Team

one case in which the functioning of the quarterback—his slumps, interceptions, and failures—were all a function of an interlocking triangle in the team. One middle linebacker, who had been on three different Super Bowl teams, when asked if the teams had anything in common, answered without hesitation, "The owners. They showed great interest and support, but never interfered."

One of the most interesting sets of interlocking emotional triangles I ever came across involved a nun who had become prioress of her order only to become enmeshed in a sisterly squabble over relationships. Her leadership suffered because of an underground triangle she had never addressed: the woman who had been the head of her own parochial school when she was young had sexually molested her over a period of several years.

In a three-physician obstetric practice, one of the physicians caught up in a severe triangle between his wife and their irresponsible son began to drink heavily and find excuses for being unable to take his turn on call. The senior physician kept compensating for his junior partner by taking the calls and making the deliveries. This of course left him tired and worn out and unable to serve his own family. Then his own son began to act irresponsibly, but when his wife put pressure on him to spend more time at home, he said that his patients' needs came first, and his poor partner needed help to work through his problems.

One day I had a conversation with Arthur Goldberg, who had been our ambassador to the United Nations after years as a very successful labor arbitrator and member of the Supreme Court. I said, "I imagine all that experience with labor arbitration and constitutional issues stood you in good stead when you had to deal with similar problems at the UN?" He glanced at me in an "Are you crazy?" manner and said, "There's no comparison with the layers of vested interest in an international problem. They are way beyond anything you could imagine when dealing with the relatively simplistic problems of a union and management."

It is in a family business, however, that the concept of interlocking triangles may be both most enlightening and most helpful. They show up clearly, help explain struggle, and stress the role of the

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family's leader. In corporate life, the interlocking nature of emotional triangles can cross into family life. In family businesses, all the tensions, alliances, and unresolved feelings that characterize the family leap over into the business and complicate decision-making processes as well as clarity. Consulting firms generally appreciate this and often give advice that will dilute the triangles, such as not having family members report directly to one another or making sure that the board of trustees includes a significant number of non-family members. This is again an administrative solution to an emotional problem and will be limited in its effects.

One of the most important interlocking emotional triangles in the world of business is that between an entrepreneur and his company's problems, on the one hand, and his position as "standard bearer" in his family of origin, on the other. This is true in any business but exponentially so in a family business. A standard bearer (often male, but not necessarily so) is someone who has been almost catapulted out of his family with a mandate to achieve. He is usually an eldest or at least a first-born son, with uncommon drive and energy. Any woman married to such a man should not expect him to have much time for his marriage and family, though he will be a good provider. I believe that when such men experience stress in their business it is exponentially increased because of the importance of their succeeding for past generations. Moreover, when men commit suicide after business failure, it is not only themselves or their immediate family and friends they feel they have failed, but also their ancestors who have been riding along since birth (if not before) on their shoulders.

STRESS IN EMOTIONAL TRIANGLES

A leader's stress and his or her effectiveness are opposite sides of the same coin. This is so not because failure to be effective creates stress, but because the type of leadership that creates the least stress also happens to be the type of leadership that is most effective. The conventional view of stress is that it has to do with overwork. Once

again, the thinking processes involved in the social science construction of reality move toward a quantitative formula and solution. For if stress is simply the result of hard work or too much work, then obviously the answer to stress is not to work too hard. This is a totally unrealistic concept given the type of person who tends to wind up in leadership positions. Trying to be creative and imaginative is stressful, being responsible is stressful, maintaining vision is stressful, being on the lookout for and trying to deal with sabotage is stressful. Yet all leaders move in that direction, and not all leaders experience burnout. If the problem is simply quantitative, how do we ever know when too much is enough?

Similarly, if the problem of stress is simply a matter of overwork, then the answer is to get away for a while, relax, do favorite things, and when you come back do not work so hard. The concept here, as with sabbaticals, is to recharge one's batteries so one can go back in and run down again.

The concept of emotional triangles, however, suggests a systems view of stress. To the extent that you (A) become enmeshed in the relationship of B and C (either because you have taken on the responsibility for their relationship or because they have focused on you—that is, triangled you out—as a way of achieving togetherness), you will wind up with the stress for their relationship.

Obviously, everyone has limits in how much work they can handle, but the concept of an emotional triangle suggests that the same amount of hard work will be more or less stressful depending on the position from which one approaches or becomes involved with work. It is like lifting a heavy object: the weight alone may not be the problem but the position from which one tries to lift it. Again, there are limits to everyone's strength, but it takes less weight to strain your body if you attempt to lift the object from certain positions.

The stress on leaders (parents, healers, mentors, managers) primarily has to do with the extent to which the leader has been caught in a responsible position for the relationship of two others. They could be two persons (members of the family, any

The type of leadership that creates the least stress also happens to be the type of leadership that is most effective.

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Staying in a triangle without getting triangled oneself gives one far more power than never entering the triangle in the first place.

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two sides to an argument) or any person or system plus a problem or goal. The way out is to make the two persons responsible for their own relationship, for the other person responsible for his or her problem, while all still remain connected. It is that last phrase which differentiates de-triangling from simply quitting, resigning, or abdicating. Staying in a triangle without getting triangled oneself gives one far more power than never entering the triangle in the first place. Many slick and charming leaders never get stressed because they intuitively stay out of triangles, but that makes them less effective.

The relational view of stress also sheds new light on the emotional and physical sides of illness. The term *psychosomatic* is a false dichotomy, because it suggests that two different realms somehow touch each other. Everyone is in a triangle between his or her body and his or her mind; the trick is to put them together through the integrating effects of self-differentiation.

An emotional process view of burnout would work like this: Every individual reacts to stress in his or her own idiosyncratic way. Some of us are more likely to express physical symptoms and others emotional (that is, mental) symptoms, depending on a variety of factors that include our genes, how our upbringing has "tuned" us, our family's heritage and style, and so on. Thus one person might be more likely to express her stress in her cardiovascular system, another in his endocrine system (gout, cancer), and a third in her muscular-skeletal system (chronic bad back). But the fact that we have a "weakness" in a particular direction or have been tuned by our family of origin to dysfunction, either mental or physical, in that part of our body does not determine when we will develop those symptoms. This is similar to the fact that the time when genes express themselves is not a genetic phenomenon but a relational phenomenon—if not of the genes, then of the cells that contain them.

Leaders who are most likely to function poorly physically or emotionally are those who have failed to maintain a well-differentiated position. Either they have accepted the blame owing to the irrespon-

sibility and constant criticism of others, or they have gotten themselves into an overfunctioning position (that is, they tried too hard) and rushed in where angels and fools both fear to tread.

◆ THE TOGETHERNESS POSITION

The position that is most dangerous to a leader's health is what I call the "togetherness position," in which the leader feels responsible for keeping a system together. Such leaders are most likely to suffer burnout, function badly, or suddenly die when forces pulling in opposite directions have stretched their capacity to hold things together to its breaking point. This can be observed in families, in work systems, and especially in the combination of the two, family businesses.

A study dubbed the *Executive Monkey Experiment* serves as a metaphor. It has generally not been considered scientifically valid because it was not repeated, but it is a poignant metaphor. An effort was made to give monkeys ulcers or to promote some other kind of somatic disturbance through frustration. The monkey was taught how to get food and then was frustrated when it finally learned. But no amount of frustration seemed to create the desired somatic dysfunction. Then someone got the bright idea to make the monkey responsible for getting food for other monkeys; this, they claimed, did produce a somatic disturbance. Whether or not the experiment was scientifically valid, it captures an existential reality.

This is precisely what was described in the third introductory story, in which a CEO who had grown up with the company is now put in the position of downsizing it. Similarly, a woman whose headaches go away after she becomes less responsible for her children's homework exemplifies the dangers of the togetherness position.

The togetherness position is one of the subtlest effects of emotional triangles—and one of the most subversive. On more than one occasion, I have seen the stress of togetherness transmitted to secretaries and subordinates who had become too emotionally involved in their bosses' problems. On one dramatic occasion, the staff of a clinic spent a whole day processing their relationships. There was an

togetherness
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underlying split due to the fact that a married couple who worked at the clinic had divorced, and one of the partners was now having an affair with another member of the staff. Depression and tension had produced a split community. The effort was made, therefore, to open dialogue among everybody. The clinic was also staffed by a very efficient woman who took care of the administrative details. She was so much a part of the system that they let her come to the all-day marathon. Toward the end of the day, when the consultant asked if the intensity of the situation had driven anyone to suicidal thoughts, it was the secretary who raised her hand.

Another example is a professional person whose wife had committed suicide. She had been having an affair after struggling her whole life to separate from her family but never succeeding. Two years later, the father, who had found the suicide note but never told his children about it, decided to show it to them. Coincidentally, his coronary arteries had occluded during that period and he was about to undergo a bypass. After revealing their dead mother's secret, he became relaxed and positive about his operation and soon returned to his work with renewed energy and vision.

I am not trained as a physician and would never try to treat my clients' physical symptoms. But whenever a client of mine has developed physical symptoms of any kind while they were working on relational issues, I have always suspected triangles. I have taught them to think in threes and note where they are located, and I have helped them to de-triangle. In such cases, the symptoms have almost invariably vanished if not disappeared altogether. And whenever I develop symptoms, I know I've been lying to myself.

There is a positive side to all this for leaders, who can use their symptoms (headaches, angina, rashes, increased drinking, sexual acting-out, accidents) as early-warning signals that they are in an emotional triangle that is pulling, if not tearing, them apart. Too often the tendency of most aggressive leaders when they do begin to develop symptoms is to ignore them, deny them, or try to override them until they get the job done. But somatic disturbances in a leader not only are warning signals but also feedback

Don't lie to yourself

from the environment. In other words, leaders can use their bodies to help them be more effective leaders. Instead of treating their symptoms as impediments, they can see them as messengers—again, not simply messengers about their own health or rattles about their functioning and their position in the relationship system they are leading, but messengers about what is going on in that relationship system.

What's going on.

❖ A CROSS-CULTURAL PHENOMENON

The notion that these principles about emotional triangles are white, male, and Western—that Japanese or Kenyan families are different in the way they discipline their children or in their concern for consensus in business matters—is, I believe, one of the great myths of our age. While from time to time someone in an audience may rise to say that this does not apply to families in, say, Eastern Europe or western India or among born-again Christians, I have never had someone from one of those cultures—or for that matter from any other culture—rise and say, "That's not true about my family." In other words, people are always saying it is not true about other families.

I have had people from Africa, after hearing a presentation, rise and say, "You have described the African family perfectly" or, "Are you sure you've never been to . . . ?" Perhaps my most outstanding experience along this line was with someone who was the son of a king of a small Polynesian kingdom that included several islands. He said, "I never understood all the problems my father has had over the years with his relatives, his subjects, and the different island cultures until your presentation of family process and triangles."

Focusing on cultural differences inhibits a leader's capacity to be decisive. A nurse or social worker in a hospital must deal with a patient's family and help them deal with loss, failure, and the side effects of the procedure. "I have to know about their background. How do I know who the family leader is in that culture? Maybe they don't like to get together, etc." These family process factors are

Messengers

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Lambert

attributed to cultural differences, but within any culture, one rarely finds more than two-thirds of the people following all those traditions. In any system, the norm produces opposites. Now how is the nurse to know in advance whether this is a Japanese family that does this or that, an Irish family, Catholic, Jewish? All this burden is eliminated when the nurse is mature enough to say, "I am going to get into the anxiety of this family, and its resilience, and keep the problem in them. I'm not going to try to be a savior."

If you are a leader, how are you going to know in advance which segment you are dealing with? Focusing on self obviates the need to do all that research and clutter the mind. This focus on cultural differences is a major way in which the emotional processes of American civilization have been co-opted by forces opposed to differentiated leadership.

❖ A SUMMARY STORY

The following case history encapsulates almost every aspect of emotional triangles discussed so far. They interlocking nature, their tendency to preserve themselves, their tendency to prevent change, their distortion of perceptions, the creation of polarization and false alliances, their capacity to funnel stress toward one person. While the names have been changed, the nature of the triangles and the position of the various family and work systems are true. This vignette serves as a summary of this entire chapter.

Joe Smith was an agricultural specialist working for USAID in Central America. He was good at his job and had worked his way up to a significant position of responsibility, but he had a few personal problems. He was an alcoholic, took drugs, and was engaged in constant homosexual activity, unknown to his wife and family but suspected by his superiors. Then he was caught trying to smuggle some illicit substances from one country to another. The State Department immediately recalled him and took away his security clearance.

Joe went into detox to address his substance abuse. He then took menial jobs with the State Department while they could decide what

to do with him. He and his wife engaged in two years of therapy, during which both dealt with aspects of their own relationship they had never discussed. His wife, because of this therapy, became emboldened to pursue her own development—no longer denying his problems, their longstanding difficulties with all four of their children, and important unresolved issues with their respective families of origin.

After showing that he was able to be quite competent at the office, Joe applied for the return of his security clearance. While the application was being processed, the president issued an executive order announcing that homosexuality could no longer be used as a basis for denying security clearance. On the basis of his hard work and his obvious efforts at rehabilitation, his clearance was returned, and Joe began to look for another foreign assignment.

During this period, the State Department went through a huge downsizing and many of his colleagues were "riffed." Joe, however (for reasons that never became clear), was retained. Just as he thought he had finally made a triumphant return, however, a snafu came out of "left field": he had trouble getting a medical clearance. The term "medical" was a euphemism for psychiatric. The psychiatrist he was asked to see said that his own superiors thought he was not ready for a foreign posting. They worried that the stress of living as a married homosexual would be more difficult to handle than the external stress of the job.

The psychiatrist turned out to be a consultant to the State Department, not someone in a position to make decisions. When the psychiatrist was asked, however, how he would decide if Joe was ready, he could give no objective standards or results toward which Joe should work. Joe therefore asked if he could deal directly with the psychiatrist's superiors, but he was discouraged from doing that. In addition, the psychiatrist ~~thought~~ that maybe Joe would get his clearance back if he divorced his wife. He gave Joe a paper written by another psychiatrist discussing the problems of married homosexual men. The doctor suggested that Joe show the article to his regular counselor (not to his wife). The article, written by a homosexual psychiatrist, stated that married homosexual men could only reduce their

conflicts by coming out openly. It seemed to encourage married men with homosexual feelings or desire to move in that direction rather than work to resolve their conflicts over their feelings. So far, then, we have these triangles:

- ◆ Joe, the psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist's superiors;
- ◆ Joe, his family, and his homosexuality;
- ◆ Joe, his homosexual desire, and the born-again values of his Christian upbringing (an internal emotional triangle);
- ◆ Joe, his homosexual conflict, and the political forces in the homosexual community;

◆ Joe, the bureaucracy, and the president's position.

Before the executive order, homosexuality had been an easy open-or-shut situation for denying clearance; now the bureaucracy, in an effort to circumvent the executive order, was focusing on potential emotional conflict and using that as an excuse to retain their power to deny clearance.

But there's more. It turns out that during this period, a longstanding conflict between USAID and the State Department had become exacerbated by the efforts of the State Department to eliminate USAID, or at least to have it incorporated into the department and no longer exist as a separate organization. There had been fights in Congress and even among the staff, including an actual physical fight between one of the directors of USAID and a high-ranking employee of the State Department. In addition, the State Department was always suspicious of USAID employees because the CIA often used USAID as a cover, either having their own people infiltrate or by recruiting agents from the regular USAID staff. Finally, one area where USAID and the State Department were not separate was their physicians: the doctors who were seeing Joe, as well as those who were charged with deciding about his clearance, were basically State Department employees (or consultants) rather than members of his own agency.

So we now have the following additional administrative emotional triangles:

◆ the president, the State Department, and those in the government who want to eliminate USAID;

◆ the State Department, USAID, and the CIA;

◆ the State Department, USAID, and Joe;

◆ the physicians, the State Department, and USAID.

When asked what he would do if he could have the situation work out according to his wildest dreams, Joe said that while he would like a divorce, he also wanted to remain in a close relationship with his wife, whom he loved. An alternative was suggested: that he talk openly with his wife about his homosexuality (which he had never admitted but of which she was quite aware) and say to her: "I am gay. I am more comfortable with intimacy with men, but I love you and my children and want to stay married. Are you willing to accept this of me?" He at first demurred, saying how scared he was of being that honest with her. When he decided to tell her, he was warned that the great danger of being so open with his wife was that it might encourage intimacy.

In keeping with the principles of de-triangling, Joe was taught first about how triangles operate. Second, he was told to distinguish between seeing therapists for help and seeing therapists who were operating in a power structure. It was suggested that he not be open with the government's therapists about his difficulties but continue to work on the emotional side with his therapist and convey to the government that he was in charge of himself and not likely to violate laws again. He was shown how the anxiety in the system was filtering down and funneling toward him and that therefore he could not expect any physician in the anxious system to be objective about his needs. Finally, he was encouraged to have his wife join him in therapy sessions, and to tell his children.