Conflict Triangles

1. What is a conflict triangle?

In a conflict between 2 people, one of the people often talks to a 3rd person in an attempt to manage the conflict or fix it rather than the person with whom there is conflict.

Why? Feels safer. Looks more logical and promising than it is.

2. What is the triangler looking for/seeking?

Emotional support to (a) help hold anxiety in check and (b) feel better after talking about the problem. Third party is trying to be supportive and feels like being a friend by listening sympathetically. Actually, process hinders resolving conflict. Third party lacks full knowledge. By giving emotional support, lessens likelihood that the relationship will get worked out between 2 people in conflict.

3. Lets go back to why triangles occur. Paper says they are a substitute for working out the relationship problems. How and why does the paper say they usually develop? (2nd paragraph on page 2)

- Anxiety develops between 2 people in disagreement.
- The person who is most uncomfortable about it talks to 3rd party.
- Reaching out to 3rd person offers (a) emotional support for in the midst of anxiety and/or (b) appears to offer help to modify the other person’s behavior or fix the problem in the relationship, i.e. reduce tension.

4. What are the warning signs that tip us that a triangle may be developing?

- Someone talks to you negatively about another person & you do not need to know the information.
- Confusion: something seems missing from the story you are given or the situation does not make sense.
- Congregation going through period of significant change or conflict. Several people will get anxious and likely look to a 3rd person to ease their distress.
5. What are some possible goals of 3rd person in a triangle?
   - Help resolve the conflict. Be the savior.
   - Further his/her agenda.
   - Gain leverage in a relationship.
   - Gain visibility and/or power.
   - Increase his/her feelings of self-esteem.

   Good motives can be deceptive and become invalid.

6. Is there ever a time when talking to a 3rd person is appropriate? If yes, when/under what conditions?
   - Person involved in conflict needs help sorting through situation & feelings; needs help develop a course of action to resolve.
   - Must exercise extreme care if using 3rd person for this purpose. Exposes the 3rd person to liabilities, and can be mishandled by the person in conflict.

7. What is a strategy for handling triangles effectively/constructively?
   - Be in agreement that triangles retard rather than improve the changes of resolving conflict. Short-term - they are attractive but long term especially destructive.
     Principle: 3rd party cannot fix or resolve conflict between 2 people by merely listening.
   - Recognize that triangulation attempts are normal reactions when anxiety is present.
   - Recognize your own attempts to do this. This includes not going to a 3rd person when there is conflict and not being one that parties in conflict use this technique with. Can people speak to you without fear of you being defensive, explosive or act like an attack dog? When we are defensive and not receptive to criticism, we invite triangulation.
   - Don't try to be the savior for other conflict situations.
   - Encourage people in conflict to work it out between the two of them. If they can’t get someone involved who can help them resolve it.
   - When people approach you and are critical of someone, encourage them to talk to the person rather than talk about the person. Don’t be party to anonymous criticisms or be a sympathetic listener to criticism.
   - When you realize you are playing the role of 3rd part in a triangle, exit the triangle immediately. Triangulation takes 3.