



CBF Peer Learning Groups

Understanding systems: triangles

Many of us think of relationships in terms of two people. Systems theory, however, asserts that the basic (and most stable) relational pattern is a system of three. The three relational parts might be three people or two people and some other connection, such as a group of people or key issue. Triangles exist to absorb energy and cover differences or conflicts within the relationship. Relational triangles in and of themselves are not negative, but can easily become unbalanced and unhealthy. Therefore, recognizing emotional triangles and promoting health within them is a key aspect of leadership.

Triangles are 2 + 1 people, with 2 on the inside and 1 on the outside. The 1 is always pushing to change the triangle. Anxiety moves around the triangle, causing positions to shift.

The goal in these triangles is connected differentiation, in which individuals have the ability to be together while respecting diversity and difference. Without a loss of self, they recognize where self ends and other begins. They have an understanding of their uniqueness and their place within the community or group.

Leaders can promote this connected differentiation by:

- Managing their own anxiety, including knowing who they are, what they believe, and what their limits are
- Talking to both angles of a triangle, using “I” language
- Communicating confidence in the participants’ abilities to relate to one another and to solve their own issue
- Keeping confidences, being up front about situations when confidences cannot be held *before* information is shared
- Making calming contact – which might not necessarily be about the issue or the rumor – with the people in the triangle
- Staying appropriately involved, neither taking on problems that are not theirs nor ignoring the situation

Questions for discussion:

- What are some of the triangles in your ministry setting? Which of these are you a part of?
- How do you typically respond when you are with people who are very anxious?
- What are strategies you do or could use to calm yourself in the midst of anxious people and situations?

- Think of a triangle that is currently causing you concern (or has done so in the past). Who are the participants? Using the bullet points above, what would it look like to promote connected differentiation among the players?
- How can your PLG support and challenge you as you navigate triangles in your setting?
- How might you utilize this information about triangles with leaders in your congregation?