

# Respect The Triangle

*Understand this aspect of emotional systems to better manage your operation.*

**Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist who practiced** between the 1940s and 1980s, was a keen observer of families and, especially, families in crisis. He developed what is known as family systems theory, which holds that in a family, the family itself—not the individual—is the primary emotional unit. What one family member experiences or how that member behaves has an impact on the whole family, causing a ripple effect on relationships throughout the family structure.

For example, someone experiencing a high level of stress will affect the rest of the family business participants. The whole family may become more anxious with the sense of an impending blowup, or, they might become more quiet and distant toward one another. Certain family members may become stronger allies in a tense situation or family crisis, while other family members might exhibit negative or self-destructive behaviors. It may be difficult to predict exactly what a family will do in a crisis, but, to understand why they do it, it helps to look at what is happening in the context of the broader family system. How the family system functions, then, impacts how the family business performs daily.

## TRIANGLES IN THE FAMILY SYSTEM

One of the foundational elements of Bowen's theory, as explained by Roberta Gilbert in "The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory," is the concept of the triangle, a "three-



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person emotional configuration ... the basic building block of any emotional system." When you look around the family business, you often see the triangle at work when two people in conflict pull in a third person—often Mom or Dad, or another sibling—to help resolve or stabilize the tension between them.

For example, someone will "complain" to Mom, and, she will either remain neutral, or, she might side with one of the parties. But, the act of complaining to Mom is an attempt to triangulate her in, to deal with the tension between two people by drawing in a third person. In sibling partnerships, I often find that three is the hardest number to work with because of the tendency of two siblings to gang up on the third. (Who does the ganging up can change over time.) Another frequent triangle is two parents and a son or daughter, or a triangle consisting of two siblings and one of the parents. And, though complaining often leads to triangles, gossiping and spreading rumors are also used to triangulate someone.

## DRAMA OR EFFECTIVENESS

Triangles are important to understand because they can either help, or hinder, the family's effectiveness. If the third person in the triangle sides with one of the parties, the two-against-one phenomenon can create a level of drama that distracts the family from the primary work of the business.

On the other hand, someone who recognizes that a triangle is forming can often redirect the conversation from complaint or gossip to constructive resolution. Gilbert says that "calm is catching too," and, the third person can help assess the situation and consider actions that help move toward resolution.

I've often encouraged the third person in the triangle to help the two people in conflict communicate better instead of sniping at each other from a distance. In our example and in many farm and ranch family businesses, Mom can often encourage family members to try to resolve their differences or help the conflicted parties "hear" one another.

When you run into tough family business situations, look more deeply at the relationships between people, and, be careful about being drawn into an unhealthy triangle. By understanding family systems theory in general, and triangles in particular, you begin to help the whole system function better. ///



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