

INVITATION to *triangulation*

“DON’T TELL ME. TELL HER!”

That’s what I said to Amy when she complained that Amanda did not invite her to the luncheon meeting.

My advice was met with a series of buts ... “but she wouldn’t listen – but she would be offended – but she would blow it out of proportion – but she would just make excuses.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “She may do all of those things or none of them. However, if you don’t tell her, she will never know how you feel or that you wanted to go to the luncheon.”

Instead of expressing herself directly to Amanda, Amy chose to vent her frustrations to me. Unfortunately, discussing a concern or problem with a third party instead of talking to the person involved is toxic, for everyone. The technical term is triangulation, a looser term would be gossip. No matter what you call it, the end result is a poison that spreads throughout the workplace.

It starts out simple enough. We stifle our feelings instead of expressing our point of view. We convince ourselves that it’s a petty, minor thing, not worthy of a conversation. But we can’t stop thinking about it. It’s funny how the little things can fester and grow.

Eventually this minor, harmless resentment turns into a major animosity and we can’t hold it in any longer. Typically, when we decide to unload or express our frustrations, we are very strategic in our decision of who to tell. We look for someone who will be supportive and “take our side.” “Can you believe her?” “She always does that.”

The poisoning has begun and will continue to seep through the office, the house, the neighborhood damaging our relationships in ways we never intended.

Meanwhile, productivity has taken a nosedive. “Did you hear what she said?” “You’re not going to believe this!”

We’ve involved our co-workers in the drama. More and more time and energy is being devoted to discussing the situation, and we are watching and waiting for the next offense.

Meanwhile, paranoia has reared its ugly head (because people ARE talking about one another behind their backs) and the triangulation monster has taken on a life of its own.

It has damaged our relationships and productivity, but it has also dug its tentacles into our self-confidence.

We are starting to believe the little voice that says we can’t handle a direct conversation. However, it’s the only way to resolve the conflict. And, amazingly enough, once we take control of the situation – and discover our arms and legs did not fall off – we regain our confidence and our freedom.

One of my favorite authors, Alan Cohen, says “Read between the whines.” And that is how I handled Amy – obviously she hadn’t been too strategic when she chose me. I wasn’t going to side with her or let her off the hook. Instead I made her tell Amanda that she had wanted to be invited to the luncheon meeting. It wasn’t pretty, but it was worth it and we all survived the conversation.

And then the best “but” of all: “I didn’t want to go to the luncheon, I just wanted to be invited.”

How to deal with an Invitation to Triangulate

When someone comes to you with a complaint about someone else,

whether it’s a co-worker, sibling or nagging neighbor, heed the alarm that should go off in your head and immediately interrupt them. Acknowledge that they are upset but ask the following question:

“What did they say when you told them how they made you feel?”

There are only two possible responses to this question.

1. **“I didn’t tell them.”** If this is the case, the 24 hour rule goes into effect. The complainer has 24 hours to talk to the person in question and report back to you, knowing that when the 24 hours are up you will speak to the person yourself and tell them what is being said.
2. **An account of the conversation that took place.** If a conversation did take place you may have to move into problem solving and/or offer to facilitate a meeting between the two.

The intention here is to support direct, open communication. You are training people to resolve their issues before they fester into major life-altering dramas. 🚫

~GINA CROWLEY

