

# Understanding Relationship Triangles



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# What I will talk about

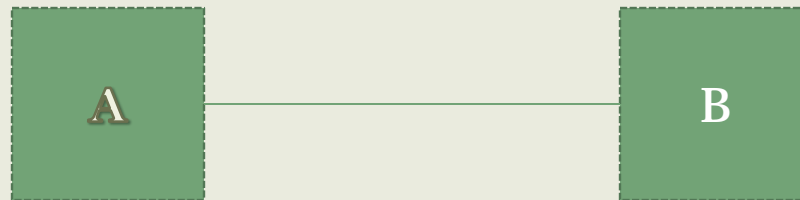


- What relationship triangles are and how they function
- How to know when a relationship triangle is activated
- How to effectively manage relationship triangles
- Why this is important for deans

# Human Interaction + Anxiety = Relationship Triangles



Two-person systems are stable  
*only* when they are calm



# Human Interaction + Anxiety = Relationship Triangles



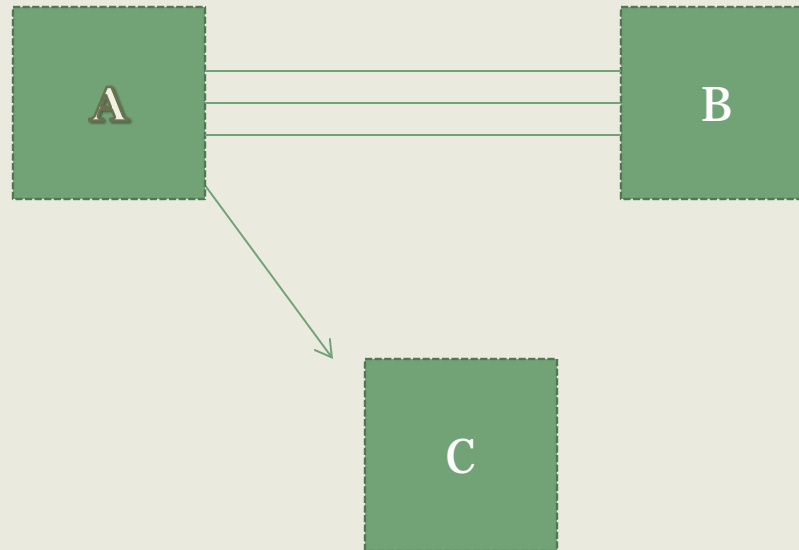
When anxiety increases, it becomes difficult to manage within the dyad



# Human Interaction + Anxiety = Relationship Triangles



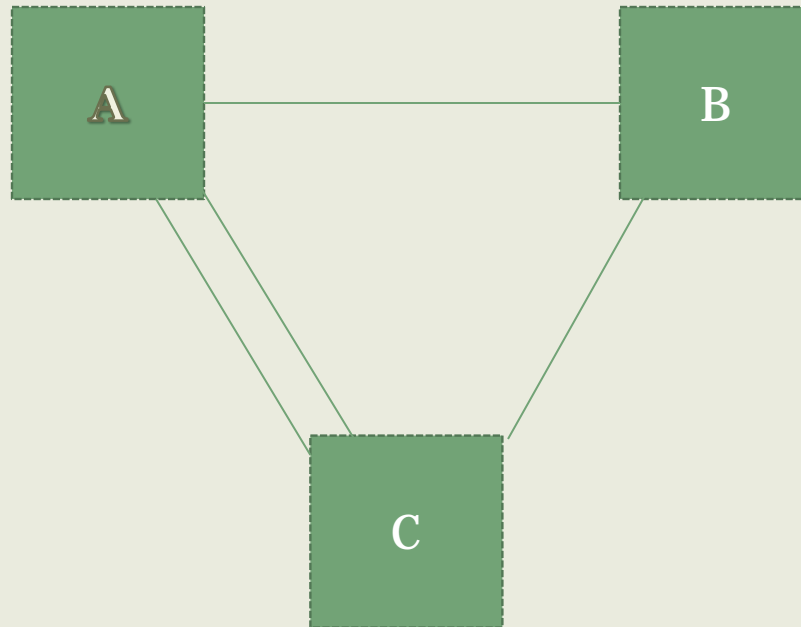
A 3<sup>rd</sup> party gets involved



# Human Interaction + Anxiety = Relationship Triangles



The anxiety in the dyad decreases because it gets spread among all relationships



# Basic nature of triangles



- A stable dyad can be destabilized by the addition of a 3<sup>rd</sup> party
- A stable dyad can be destabilized by the removal of a 3<sup>rd</sup> party
- An unstable dyad can be stabilized by the addition of a 3<sup>rd</sup> party
- An unstable dyad can be stabilized by the removal of a 3<sup>rd</sup> party

# Other properties of triangles



- Flexible triangles can be good
- Inflexible triangles are very problematic
- Distance can temporarily alleviate conflict
- Triangles function over time
  - when one member leaves they can incorporate new members who don't even know they are part of the triangle



# How to recognize a problematic triangle



- Quickly taking one person's side in a dispute
- Defending someone against another's' complaints
- Perceiving one person to be the victim and the other the victimizer
- Feeling sympathy with one person and angry/frustrated with the other
- Believing that two people will never get along and should be kept apart

# Tips to managing relationship triangles

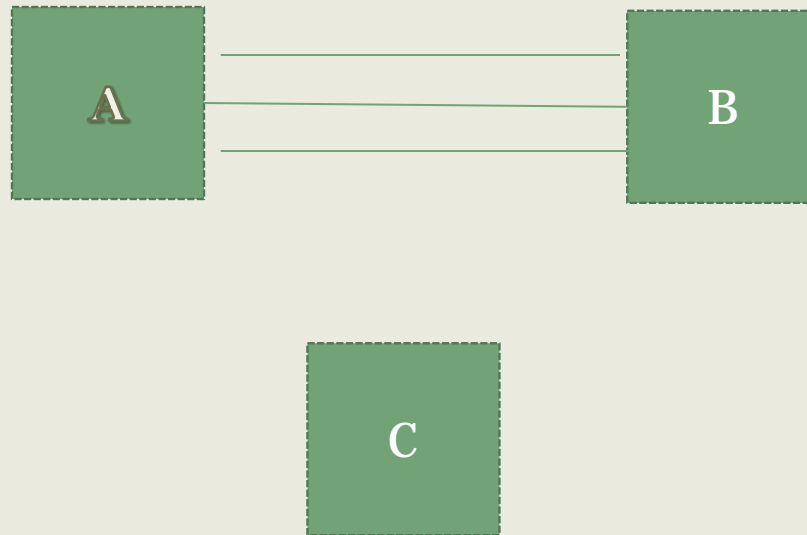


- Recognize that you are in a triangle
- Stay neutral
- Focus on the facts
- Consult with others (yes, that's another triangle, but a good one)

# Managing relationship triangles



When C can remain neutral, the conflict remains where it belongs and can be addressed



# Can We Agree to Disagree?

Deans and Department Chairs partnering to  
Manage Faculty Conflict

Anne E. Zayaitz, Ph.D.

Dean, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

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“Once upon a time there were two countries, at war with each other. In order to make peace after many years of conflict, they decided to build a bridge across the ocean. But because they never learned each other’s language properly, they could never agree on the details, so the two halves of the bridge they started to build never met. To this day the bridge extends far into the ocean from both sides, and simply ends half way, miles in the wrong direction from the meeting point. And the two countries are still at war.”

—Vera Nazarian, *The Perpetual Calendar of Inspiration*

# Manage conflict before it occurs

- Know your chairs, potential chairs, and faculty
- Maintain a healthy work environment
- Be clear in communicating goals and expectations for the department and faculty
- Anticipate conflict and be ready to intervene when needed
- Diffuse a conflict—know the problem and know the players

# But, Conflict Happens . . .

- Conflict management is directed toward reducing destructive conflict but allows for the existence of constructive conflict
- Conflict is inevitable
- Conflict can be positive
- Deans and chairs know that--conflict can erupt even in instances when there is (or should be) no real disagreement!
- Resolving vs. managing conflict

# Issues of Conflict—in no particular or predictive order:

- Limited budgets and resources
- Course assignments, times, and rooms
- Summer contracts and salary increases
- Evaluations and recommendations for tenure and promotion
- Hiring
- Use of secretarial and student worker support
- Travel support
- Reassigned time
- Advisement
- Committee work
- Student complaints
- Peer complaints
- Administration
- *Et al.*



# Navigating Difficult People

In 2010, David D. Perlmutter wrote two articles in The Chronicle of Higher Education (9/19 and 11/7): “Pick Your Battles...but How?” and “Spotting Your Enemies” where he described departmental conflict.

Perlmutter’s Species:

- Turfmaster
- Prickly pear
- Big bully
- Dr. Chaos
- The Deal Maker
- The Smiler

# When Conflict Happens (and it will)

- Ground rules for discussion—no abusive language, no derogatory comments or personal attacks
- Listen well; paraphrase for clarification (I heard you say...)
- Question
- Know that everyone wants to be heard and wants to believe their perspective is understood
- Encourage each to articulate what they wish had occurred
- Point out the positives and the common interests/perspectives
- Summarize the agreements and negotiate the resolutions/outcomes—and, keep good notes
- No one wants to go to arbitration, grievance proceedings, or court—but it happens—particularly in cases of discriminatory behavior and sexual harassment

# When Intervention Is Needed— Stop, Look, Record, Listen, Respond

- Survey the situation
- Get the facts
- Awareness of past history, connections, resources, and attitudes
- Allies versus enemies
- Depersonalize the issue
- Time and consequences of the conflict
- Timing of the response
- Keep good notes during fact finding and meetings; reflectively summarize

# Influencing the Culture

Deans working with chairpersons  
influence the culture of departments  
and  
set the standard for teamwork and  
cooperation among faculty members

“We don't get harmony when everybody sings the same note. Only notes that are different can harmonize. The same is true with people.”

— Steve Goodier