



Two Tools When Creating an Environment of Grace

From Shut Tight

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A church's relational vitality helps it respond to change and conflict in healthy, life-giving ways.[1] Two practical tools that aid in maintaining relational vitality are avoiding triangles and recognizing conflict styles. They are particularly useful in understanding and nurturing strength and grace amidst the complicated relationships in a church. Triangles are the natural place two people go when a calm relationship grows anxious. A positive example of triangles is the part they play in the recourse in conflict resolution between two parties going to a third person, as expressed in Matthew 18:16. Knowing how to use triangles appropriately can help to reduce that anxiety.

Additionally, a conflict style is the normal behavior one exhibits in a situation that contains discord or tension. All people have a conflict style. Understanding and being able to identify one's style is helpful for enhancing self-awareness. This, coupled with understanding the conflict style of others with whom one has relationship, also can help to decrease anxiety when conflict occurs. Knowing and using the two tools of triangles and conflict styles throughout a church overall can contribute to congregational vitality and how it reacts amidst change and disagreement.

Avoiding Triangles

In relationships, a triangle is two people plus a third. Family systems theorist Murray Bowen states: "The triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable other person to become a triangle." [2] A triangle is the normal human relationship group, not the one-on-one relationship that people often assume is the basic human grouping. Roberta M. Gilbert builds upon this concept and says that triangles are an extremely important concept, appearing five times in Bowen theory. [3] She describes triangles as being neither bad nor good; rather, they just exist. They are always there, because all relationships have some anxiety and need some outlet to release it.

People are frequently in triangles, although though they do not tend to notice them when things are calm. Anytime anxiety increases, a triangle appears. A biblical example would be Jonathan, Saul, and David. In this triangle, Jonathan in 1 Samuel 19:1-7 is able to reduce Saul's anxiety about David. That triangle is seen very clearly in a conversation between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 20:3-4, where Jonathan is torn between loyalty to his friend and father. A modern example of a triangle is a husband and wife in relationship with their pastor. During calm times, all three carry on conversations. However, when anxiety between the couple increases, they also might spend their time talking about the pastor and his problems rather than address their anxiety. They may talk through the pastor—for instance, if the husband is upset and sees the pastor at church, he may say to the pastor, "The next time you see my wife you could encourage her to be more understanding." The pastor—without ever responding or, in some cases, even knowing—has become part of a triangle created when the anxiety of the couple becomes too much for them to remain only one on one. People siphon off their one-to-one anxiety towards the third person or object in the triangle. [4]

There is a difference between being part of a triangle and being triangulated. Triangulation occurs when people in anxious situations draw another to their side, over and against the person causing anxiety or to serve as a “go between.” The pastor in the earlier scenario has been triangulated. Friends, people in leadership, and others who know about anxious situations can anticipate “being triangulated” and seek to avoid it. In such situations, pastors can find themselves punished for choosing sides when warring factions in a family exist. At the same time, they may be punished for not choosing sides.[5] A person who has been triangulated as a “go between” does not help lower anxiety. That triangle maintains the anxiety and causes the third person to be caught in the tension.

Reducing anxiety in apprehensive relationships through the knowledgeable and positive use of triangles can increase the vitality of the relationship. In the example above, the pastor can offer to be in the triangle without being triangulated. The pastor could say to the husband at church, “It sounds like you have some difficult things you would like to discuss with your wife. I’ll come sit in the room with the two of you if you want to talk to her.” Pastors, counselors, facilitators, and others can provide such a service to anxious groups by remaining non-anxious, neutral third parties. In this way, rather than trying to change either person, pastors can see the anxiety-producing cycle they have created and contribute to reducing frustration.[6] In essence, the pastor offers a third point on a triangle without getting caught in the anxiety.

Knowing that people use triangles to defuse anxiety allows groups to actively use them, drawing in third parties in socially acceptable ways. The concept of triangles in relationships explains so much of what happens in any kind of relationship and is therefore easily recognizable when pointed out. Once incorporated into a church’s common vocabulary, triangles can be seen for the kind of help or hurt they cause among members on a regular basis. The appropriate use of triangles can mitigate some of the leadership dysfunctions discussed in this chapter.

Recognizing Conflict Styles

Managing conflict styles provides people with tools to choose different reactions that can be more helpful in resolving their conflicts. Knowing how people react when they are in conflict, and recognizing that they react differently when in conflict with different people, can provide insight as to how to manage conflict styles. When individuals simply respond to a conflict without evaluation, they act as though triggered—essentially, having no choice in the matter. Their contribution, whether helpful or not, is all they bring to the situation. By recognizing their reaction and being aware that other reactions are possible, it is possible choose to respond differently. Work done with leaders to help them deal well with conflict in their organization offers a practical application. Knowing their conflict style can help them avoid being thrown off balance when conflicts arise. Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan say that when people understand how someone else’s behavior becomes irritating, they can calm themselves down before engaging and doing something they might regret later.[7]

Training in conflict styles offers resources to church members, staff, elders, and committees. Simply being aware that there are constructive and destructive behaviors when it comes to conflict can prompt people to behave differently. Using a conflict style resource normalizes conflict, lets people recognize that it is natural, and can contribute to a creative process if addressed properly. Simply knowing this is the first step toward becoming better at resolving conflict.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) measures how people act when they are in conflict.[8] Ralph H. Kilmann, assisting Ken Thomas at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1971, developed the tool. Kilmann refined it and for forty years has been using it in researching, teaching, and consulting in conflict management.[9]The instrument measures people's assertiveness, meaning how much they work to take care of themselves in a conflict, as well as cooperativeness, which refers to how much they work to take care of the other person. The combination of a person's assertiveness and cooperativeness determines their conflict style, and the combination can change depending on with whom they experience conflict.

The TKI categorizes five conflict style combinations with varying amounts of assertiveness and cooperativeness. People who are assertive and do not want to cooperate with the other person will enter into competing to win the conflict at the cost of the other person losing. Someone who is both assertive and cooperative will tend to collaborate with the other person, so that both interests are met. When people have a restrained or temperate amount of both assertiveness and cooperation, they will compromise both people's goals. They do not give up nor do they give in. People who are both unassertive and uncooperative tend to avoid conflict and accomplish nothing in way of a solution. Their goal is to avoid the conflict altogether. The last style is that of unassertive, cooperative individuals who will accommodate the other person and meet their needs at the cost of their own. These five styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating are the conflict styles measured by the TKI.[10]

The TKI is used by organizations to help individuals recognize their own style as well as that of others. It is a method of beginning dialogue and helping members of groups handle conflict in effective ways. The actual instrument is a brief, fifteen-minute, self-scoring exercise. It does not require specially trained administrators and is designed to make sense to the average employee.

People can use all five styles and move among them. Rarely does an individual use only one style all the time; however, people tend to rely on one style more than others. People also may use different styles in different settings. This is where the TKI becomes quite revealing and freeing. For instance, a person who avoids conflict with a spouse at home may discover a tendency to collaborate with coworkers in the office. Using the TKI can lead that person to reflect on why the difference exists. Church members can realize why they deal with possible conflict with a pastor the same way they did with their father and come to realize that they deal with conflict with the chair of a church committee differently. It is freeing to recognize that one has multiple modes that are familiar and need not be locked into or required to use an unhelpful style. Change is possible.

The TKI is considered non-evaluative, with a sense that each mode may be appropriate in different situations and helps people learn to be more comfortable with each mode.[11] While people are able to move among response modes, they learn from the TKI that collaboration is generally the most successful in the long run.[12] TKI helps group members understand how each of them responds to conflict and why it is important to move towards collaboration. The kind of personal insight the instrument gives can open people to new ways of behaving and new appreciation for others and their styles. All of these reactions are helpful in times of change and conflict.