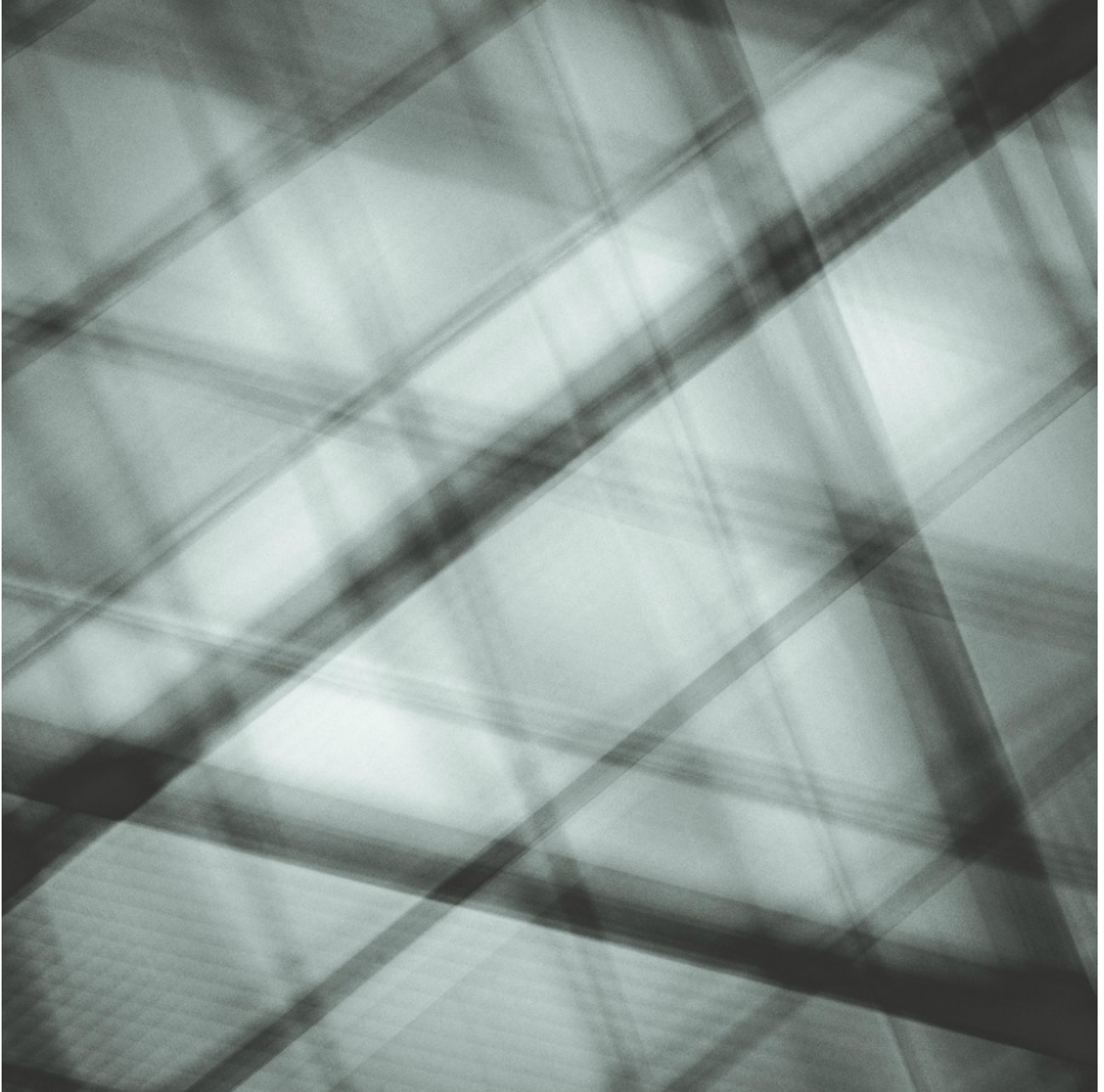


Pastor in the middle: Dont avoid conflict, avoid triangles

It's up to pastors to remind each other to talk to people instead of about them.

by [Doug Bixby](#) in the [June 22, 2016](#) issue



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When my brother was a regional manager for a large corporation, a top-level executive came to visit him at his office. During the visit, my brother shared some of his ideas about the business. The executive responded, “Bixby, we do not pay you to think. We pay you to execute.”

The executive didn’t want to hear my brother’s ideas. He had given my brother responsibility without giving him any authority. When leaders do this—give people responsibility without authority—they’re saying that they don’t trust those people, and it keeps them from feeling that they’re part of a team.

My brother knew that he couldn’t change this dynamic, but he would have liked to be able to express an idea or a reaction. He was on the front lines of the business and was trying to share practical insights, not some global vision. Sharing authority does not mean letting go of the steering wheel. Yes, executive leaders need to be the captain of the ship, but they do not always need to have the last word, or in some cases, every word.

In his position as executive minister of the Develop Leaders program in the Evangelical Covenant Church, Mark Novak deals with clergy and the issues pastors face. I recently heard him speak about developing “high trust culture” in churches. A staff needs trust, he said. Without it, staff members tend to reach for control.

I’m convinced that we can best forge and maintain healthy ministry teams by figuring out how to share authority and responsibility more effectively. Clarifying roles helps individuals understand expectations and helps staff discern whether to collaborate, working together on one shared goal, or cooperate, supporting each other in taking on separate goals. Learning how to share authority and responsibility by cooperating and collaborating protects and strengthens staff relationships.

A church I served in Connecticut hired its first youth minister, a young man just out of seminary who happened to be six feet eight inches tall. It was his first youth ministry position. On his candidating weekend he was interacting with church members near the entrance to the church while I was talking with an eighth grade student. She looked up at this tall young man, then turned to me and said, “Pastor Bixby, you’re going to have to share your authority with him.” I looked back at her and said, “You’re right.” She nodded, as if making a simple observation, but her comment was one of the most profound things I’ve ever heard someone say about leadership. I’ve seen plenty of staff teams fail to function or even fall apart because

they didn't share authority and responsibility in appropriate ways.

Senior clergy get into trouble when they share responsibility without sharing authority. This often happens because the senior clergyperson feels threatened by other staff. Fear keeps them from sharing authority and responsibility—fear that if another staff person shines, the glow around their own ministry will diminish. The truth is the opposite: an associate or assistant clergyperson functioning at a high level in the church usually makes the senior clergyperson look good.

Someone else's success should not be seen as a threat. Problems arise, however, when egos get in the way and power struggles develop. When this happens, leaders stop trusting that God can bring out the best in all of us. This points to a need to nurture our spiritual relationship with God. Before we can have trust-filled relationships with each other, we need a trust-filled relationship with God. Only then can we pursue clear and open communication with others. Once we have these ingredients in place, we can build relationships and do work that will have a dramatic impact on our congregations.

I've discovered that some of the best things that happen in the church under my leadership have very little to do with me. Sometimes we need to stay out of God's way and the way of God's people.

Another thing I've learned is that creativity often leads to change, and change tends to lead to conflict. If churches are creative in their ministries, they will experience some conflict. But if there's no conflict, there may not be enough creativity. We must regularly remind ourselves and other staff that conflict is a natural part of all human relationships and organizations; it contributes to the health and vitality of churches.

Churches begin to have problems, however, when conflict takes a dominant role. Too much conflict leads congregations into stagnation and into a downward spiral. This is why we need to know how to navigate the challenges that come with conflict.

The most important way to navigate is not to make sure that we avoid conflict—this is futile—but to make sure that we are trying to avoid triangulation. Sometimes the conflict is about the color of carpeting, the size of a refrigerator, the type of stove needed in the church kitchen, the closing hymn for Sunday morning, or what the children's choir members should wear. Whatever the conflict (and often it seems like nonsense), the best way to keep the anxiety level low is to avoid triangles—talking

about a third person without that person present. This effort is a required spiritual practice for clergy and church leaders.

Pastors stand in the gap between the way things are and the way things ought to be in congregations. It's up to us to teach and remind each other to talk to people instead of about them. Practicing this discipline helps us maximize missional productivity. When we're alert to the dangers of relating to each other in triangles, we can lead congregations toward higher levels of communication and productivity.

Jesus was a direct communicator. He consistently made his way out of the emotional triangles that other people tried to draw him into. He did this with his disciples and the people bringing children to him, and with the crowd wanting to stone a woman caught in adultery. He also avoided a serious emotional triangle in Luke 10:38-42:

Now as they went on their way, he [Jesus] entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Martha was complaining to Jesus about Mary's behavior, and invited Jesus into triangle: to move into the middle of the issues she had with Mary. Jesus said no to this by not responding to her question. (But he didn't hesitate to use the situation to reveal something significant about the difference between what the world values and what he values.)

Jesus did not want to be used by Martha as a pawn in her relationship with Mary. He did not want Martha to drag him into the conflict. The issues between the two women were something they would have to figure out on their own—he was not going to join them and worsen the conflict.

Until I read this and other passages, I had thought of direct communication and trying to avoid triangles as a practical strategy, but not as a biblical model. Then I started noticing how Jesus avoided walking into triangles. He spoke directly to people and had a knack for stepping away when others dragged him into their conflicts.

When I arrived in Massachusetts after 15 years in a previous congregation, I knew that I needed to adjust to new ways of doing things. And I knew that too much change would traumatize my congregation and even generate unhelpful backlash. A friend of mine likes to quote his grandmother: “No one likes change except a wet baby.”

I know this, and yet I couldn’t resist changing many things right away. Sure enough—it was too much change. People were uncomfortable, and soon a member went to see the associate pastor to complain. Ironically, this member had an adventurous spirit and a high level of energy—she was the last person I would have expected to be uncomfortable with change.

The associate pastor, Jay, and I had talked about avoiding triangles in staff meetings, and he was excited and ready to encourage direct communication instead of talking about a person not present. Jay saw the meeting with this person as an opportunity to encourage her to see me and share her feelings directly with me, and this is what he did. He took himself out of the middle.

So far, so good. But then he did something he shouldn’t have done; he came to me and shared the story. He told me what she said to him in his office. He was trying to protect me—he was worried about the conflict and wanted to warn me about the conversation this person might initiate with me. But when he did this—no matter his good intentions—he connected the dots and completed the triangle.

This created a significant amount of anxiety in me. I did not sleep well the next several nights, as I worried about what I would say to the woman. My anxiety was for nothing—she never came to see me. Apparently she just needed to let off some steam. After she talked with Jay, she was ready to move on.

When triangles pile up, so do the consequences. Without Jay’s alert, the worst would have been that I would have had a difficult conversation with this woman. But I didn’t need protection from a difficult conversation. As church leaders, we expect these conversations and we’re trained for them. We know that we need to allow space for people to share feelings of frustration, anger, and fear about issues in the church or about changes taking place.

It’s good for people to express these emotions, and sometimes this is all they need to do. Sometimes leaders help simply by listening. My colleague and I saw this experience of triangulating as a case study, and we learned from it. Our relationship

became stronger as we continued talking about how to manage information and encourage direct communication, and we agreed that we would continue to resist the temptation to form emotional triangles.

We resonated with the words of family systems therapist Edwin Friedman, in *A Failure of Nerve*:

For leaders, the capacity to understand and think in terms of emotional triangles can be the key to their stress, their health, their effectiveness, and their relational binds. Almost every issue of leadership and the difficulties that accompany it can be framed in terms of emotional triangles, including motivation, clarity, decision making, resistance to change, imaginative gridlock, and a failure of nerve.

Jay stayed at our church for five more years, and his ministry produced many positive results. The chemistry between us was good, and our trust level was high. Avoiding triangles helped both of us develop relationally and vocationally.

The church always needs strong leaders who will help the church fulfill its mission in the community, the society, and the world. Those who've learned to share authority gracefully will see this happen, as will leaders who work to avoid creating or reinforcing triangles that isolate and antagonize others. Effective leadership requires a steady, love-filled watchfulness. We can build trust-filled relationships if we base them on the example Jesus set for us and nurture the foundation of trust that we've established with God.

This article is adapted from Doug Bixby's book Navigating the Nonsense: Church Conflict and Triangulation, just published by Cascade. Used with permission of the publisher.