



Book The Triangle of Truth

The Surprisingly Simple Secret to Resolving Conflicts Large and Small

Lisa Earle McLeod
Perigee, 2010
[Listen now](#)

- [play](#)
- [pause](#)

00:00
00:00

Recommendation

Here’s a book for anyone who has ever argued with a colleague, bickered with a boss or tried to negotiate a business deal with an important client. Lisa Earle McLeod takes readers on a journey through her life and into the lives of prominent figures to introduce the seemingly simple concept of “The Triangle of Truth,” a problem-solving technique based on seven basic principles. The Triangle solution seems both intuitive and potentially transformative, if not always easy to achieve. While a straightforward read, the book is a bit repetitive and often too touchy-feely for the business world. Still, it is optimistic, straightforward, illuminating and full of useful tips, including references to related websites. *BooksInShort* suggests this book to any open-minded business leader or manager interested in solving problems and making peace.

Take-Aways

- “The Triangle of Truth,” a method for handling conflict, dates back to ancient times.
- The Triangle integrates the contrasting sides of an argument into one “holistic” solution.
- To make the Triangle work, you must reject “either/or thinking” so you can reach a conclusion that is greater than the sum of its parts.
- Seven principles underlie the Triangle: First, “embrace ‘and’,” the duality inherent in all things; for instance, your boss might be both crazy and working hard for the company.
- Second, accept ambiguity, but maintain your faith in an eventually positive outcome.
- Third, keep an open mind; considering others’ needs doesn’t mean yours won’t be met.
- Fourth, rise above compromise by seeking a “higher ground.” The US Founding Fathers synthesized their differences into the ideals of the Declaration of Independence.
- Fifth, uncover the “real truth” in people’s motivations to shape greater alternatives.
- Sixth, encourage others to reach new perspectives by asking “how and why” questions.
- Seventh, realize that you’ll never totally eliminate conflict, but the way you manage conflict lets you become a peacemaker.

Summary

A Concept That’s Better than Compromise

Count Buddha, Albert Einstein, Elvis Presley and Barack Obama among the many people who have tapped into the power of “the Triangle of Truth.” Buddha considered it the “key to enlightenment,” and Einstein employed it to reconcile conflicting ideas in science and religion. Elvis created a whole new sound out of it and

Obama became president of the United States with it. This ancient way of thinking shows you how to integrate two conflicting points of view into one new and better outlook that is “greater than the sum of [its] parts.”

“The Triangle of Truth is an elegantly simple model that applies to everything from business and relationships to politics and religion. It elevates your thinking to a higher level.”

The Triangle technique allows you to stop fighting about who’s right and who’s wrong, and to find a solution that recognizes the truth on both sides. If “my truth” and “your truth” make up the bottom two corners of the Triangle, then the “higher-level solution” sits at the top. Reaching that apex isn’t easy. “Holistic” resolutions aren’t always obvious, and when it comes to settling hot controversies, some people get stuck in their own perspectives, making reconciliation difficult to accomplish. But even partially perfecting the Triangle can pay dividends by transforming your view of the world and everyone in it. Mastering this tool will allow you to manage conflict more easily, making you happier and more successful. Consider the seven principles of the Triangle of Truth:

Principle 1: “Embrace ‘And’”

Most people live in the world of “either/or,” where they judge everything and everyone as either good or bad, right or wrong, smart or dumb, kind or manipulative. But the Triangle encourages you to consider “the possibility of *And*,” and to embrace the duality inherent in people and in situations.

“Our minds prefer the simplicity of either/or. But until we’re willing to embrace the possibility of ‘And’, we’re doomed to keep repeating the same conflicts over and over and over again.”

When you label another person’s behavior as “bad,” that creates a permanent, negative perception that will color every subsequent interaction you have with that person. This tendency stymies any potential for getting along with each other. And even though you accept your own, often contradictory, complexity, you can’t understand how your boss can be both a megalomaniac at work and a loyal father at home. The Triangle of Truth combats such negative thinking by moving you out of conflict and into positive communications.

“Compromise isn’t sustainable over the long haul because it requires us to water down our truths when in reality we should be bringing them together.”

Getting beyond “either/or labeling” helps. Being stuck in this mentality prevents you from seeing “the big picture” that will move you beyond the problem into a solution. To let go of your black-and-white thinking, start by realizing that “the world is filled with dichotomies.” Rather than trying to eliminate those differences, focus on “learning to leverage them.” Charles Darwin tightened up his research and the arguments for his book, *The Origin of Species*, based on his “devoutly religious” wife’s challenges. An industrial company was able to institute high safety standards while increasing productivity by incorporating contrasting views into new solutions – achieving a combination neither its employees nor its competitors believed possible.

“When we acknowledge that both sides of the Triangle...exist within each of us, we no longer have anything to prove, to ourselves or anyone else.”

Intellectually, banishing either/or thinking makes sense; emotionally, it gets trickier. Holding two radically different thoughts, or synthesizing two opposite arguments, creates psychological discomfort, because the human mind is rigged to sort, judge and “categorize.” If you challenge that brain wiring, you can expand your limits to arrive at new answers to old problems.

Principle 2: “Make Peace with Ambiguity”

What if you embrace the Triangle, but your bosses, co-workers or clients don’t? The Triangle works anyway, but most people fear using it alone, thinking they’ll be giving up what they need or ceding their side of the story. This fear is a primitive, powerful instinct that can put you into “brain-lock”; you lock onto a truth and defend it so vigorously you can’t hear anything else. Fear leads to either/or thinking. Get to “and” thinking with the opposite of fear: love. The courage to rise above your own anxieties and feel love toward others allows room for creativity in problem solving. A little love won’t, of course, work out the world’s problems. But love gives you the ability to understand other viewpoints without fear.

“When you try to bend the world to your will, people and circumstances tend to resist.”

If you enter a meeting with your mind made up on how to solve a problem, you’ll probably jump to defensive either/or thinking as soon as someone threatens your plan. But if you enter that meeting focused on love and acceptance toward those involved, you’ll probably be more willing to listen and consider other ideas.

“Love is what enables people to put aside their own ego on behalf of something bigger than themselves.”

Love doesn’t weaken, it strengthens. Admiral James Stockdale applied that lesson as a captive in the “Hanoi Hilton” prisoner of war camp during the Vietnam War. The Admiral was a hero for leading with love and helping his fellow prisoners survive, and his story of how he endured torture and atrocities mirrors the Triangle of Truth. According to Jim Collins’s book, *Good to Great*, Stockdale held onto hope that he and his men would survive, though he also accepted the horror of their situation. He showed love when he refused to lie to his men about when they might be released. He managed to keep two contrary ideas in his mind: his miserable reality and his faith in the future. He chose to embrace ambiguity in order to live.

“People can feel the difference when someone truly cares about their side of the Triangle.”

Starting from love instead of fear lets you integrate two “fundamental dualities”: 1) the belief that “everyone is flawed” and simultaneously that “everyone is fabulous,” plus, 2) an “unflinching assessment of facts and unwavering faith.” Or, put another way: “I don’t have all the answers, but I’m willing to see the other side of people,” and “I don’t know the end of the story, but I’m willing to face the facts because I have faith that everything will eventually be OK.”

Principle 3: “Hold Space for Other Perspectives”

To reach the heights of the Triangle, make room for other people, ideas and thoughts by keeping an open mind. That's easier to say than do, because pressures to achieve may keep your agenda always at the top of your mind, placing your needs ahead of other people's concerns. But don't get stuck in either/or thinking. In fact, the Triangle lets you consider both your agenda and others' without losing the details and objectives of either.

“Superstars go for the top of the Triangle. To them, success isn't just about achieving their goals, it's about coming together with other people to achieve something much more meaningful.”

Consider a number-one-ranked pharmaceuticals sales rep: She goes to work every day thinking about how the medicines she sells helped heal a sick grandmother she once encountered in a doctor's office. The rep doesn't focus on making her commissions or quotas; she thinks about the people she's helping. And that makes all the difference to those who respond to her, because she's approaching them with an honest desire to improve their lives. Researchers say that attitude, more than words, affects your body language, facial expressions and tone of voice, sending a clear message that you're working to connect with people, whether they buy your product or not.

“We don't have to choose between holding ground or the middle ground; we can decide to co-create a path to the high ground.”

Of course, whenever you're trying to change someone's mind, you're selling something. To get average results, focus on your goals; but to rise above average, focus on the other person's goals. Superstars in any area believe strongly enough in their ability to help that they can set aside their own needs to concentrate on someone else for a time. With faith in a positive outcome, but no steely dedication to their own plan, they improve their chances of success.

Principle 4: “Seek Higher Ground”

You make a “false choice” when you opt for one outcome over another, often compromising your needs to achieve an objective, rather than coming up with a third way. Whether it's working parents shifting career ambitions to care for their children, or governments allowing freedom while insisting on responsibility, a tolerance for ambiguity can open up new possibilities. Consider how Thomas Jefferson, a liberal, and John Adams, a conservative, synthesized the former's desire for personal liberty with the latter's requirement for the rule of law to establish the founding ideals in the Declaration of Independence.

“Whether it's the fear that things might not work out the way we planned or that other people will take advantage or simply that we'll look foolish, fear is the unseen barrier that separates us from each other.”

Forcing others to see the wisdom and truth of your ideas above all others drops you into the “therefore' trap”: “This is my truth; therefore, this is what we should do about it.” The therefore trap stunts creativity and keeps opposing sides firmly planted. For example, Best Buy, the electronics retail chain, sought to make electronics shopping more hospitable to women. Some of Best Buy's male executives immediately took an either/or position, presuming that welcoming women meant repelling men; they envisioned stores painted all in pink. Yet “improving the stores for women also improved the stores for men.” Five years later, the company had increased revenues by \$4.4 billion and raised its female market share from 14.7% to 17.1%, all without having to redecorate the stores.

“When we make judgments about someone's suggested solutions, we lose the ability to influence their thinking.”

You don't always want to end up in the middle ground; tepid compromise and tough negotiation may work sometimes, but often they lock both sides into either/or thinking. Instead of choosing, build greatness by finding a better path that serves everyone. The process isn't easy or tidy, but it is valuable.

Principle 5: “Discern Intent”

Figuring out a person or organization's underlying motivations is crucial to making the Triangle work. Finding the “real truth” leads to greater understanding and clears the way to move forward. For example, medical workers who want to treat patients regardless of their ability to pay often clash with hospital executives who insist on billing patients to earn the income required to keep their facility operating. Yet when each side takes on the other's concerns, the real truth behind both their agendas – extending quality care to the community – becomes evident.

“It's amazing how much less bickering you get when people have to live in another person's shoes for a while.”

Using discernment without judgment makes it easier to integrate seemingly disparate ideas. Once your counterparts know you understand their perspective, they'll probably consider alternatives more readily.

Finding good intentions behind behavior you dislike – or even despise – isn't easy. Rising above a colleague's interruptions and takeover of your important meeting doesn't come naturally, but you can avoid divisive debates with well-intended questions that draw out your co-worker's issues. Taking a deep breath, pausing and thinking a kind thought – not necessarily about the issue or person at hand – should help.

Principle 6: “Elevate Others”

To break the either/or stranglehold in a conflict and get everyone to a higher plane of decision making, ask them to explain the “how and why” of their issues, rather than the “what and when.” The former creates insights among all the participants, while the latter fixes people into their positions. “Big questions” encourage people to consider broader information about an issue. Probes like “How is this problem affecting you?” will generate more “core truth” responses than “What is the problem?” Avoid “locked and loaded questions” that already presume the answer, usually your wise, self-serving solution.

“It's not our truths that cause the problems, it's our belief in their exclusivity.”

One way to apply a Triangle tactic in a corporate setting might be to make one department perform another department's job or solve another group's problem. This achieves two goals: 1) unearthing novel solutions because of the fresh perspective the new people bring, and 2) encouraging both sides to look at issues and problems from multiple viewpoints.

Principle 7: “Be the Peace”

Galileo Galilei had the temerity to prove the Earth revolved around the sun and, in 1663, church authorities thanked him by convicting him of heresy and condemning him to lifelong house arrest. Galileo complained that his accusers declined even to peer through his telescope to see the truth. Refusing to accept reality, even when it’s plain as day, because it doesn’t sync with your own view can lead to serious mistakes, though perhaps not as earth-moving as those of medieval clergymen.

Admitting that you don’t know everything is the first step away from either/or thinking and toward inclusiveness. Problems – whether at work, at home or in the world – aren’t about conflicts. Differences always will exist; what matters is how you manage those differences. The Triangle and its seven techniques can help, but first understand that all people have just as much right to exist and to hold their own beliefs as you do. Learning that lesson and living in love can lead to a new and better truth.

About the Author

Business consultant and motivational speaker **Lisa Earle McLeod** also writes a nationally syndicated newspaper column.
