

Dealing with High Conflict People

by Nadine Ryan Bannerman

nadine@ryanbannerman.com

Occasionally you will run across a “difficult person” who seems to be frequently involved in conflict. Your paths may cross in various interpersonal situations: informally at work, as part of a structured team, and perhaps as well formally in legal disputes. This summary will introduce you to the common behaviours and characteristics of high conflict people; as well, it will help you understand the triggers for their behaviours, and provide strategies – both personal and organizational – that can be used to deal with them as productively as possible.

Suggestions contained here are offered from the perspective of an organizational facilitator. These practical, useful, time-tested strategies are based in part on Bill Eddy’s work in *High Conflict People and It’s All Your Fault!* and in part are grounded in my experience dealing with interpersonal conflict in many large and small organizations.

Because the behaviour and people are complex and there is a lot to be learned on this topic, you may wish to follow up with more in-depth reading from the references provided at the end.

Recognizing High Conflict Behaviours

While we can all exhibit high conflict behaviours from time to time – especially under stress – certain individuals display these behaviours more often than others. They argue, personally attack colleagues, frequently display high emotion (anger or tears), “freeze” people out and ignore them for weeks at time, and overall seem drawn to conflicts. They are often considered “high maintenance.” You

may also notice that they have a low tolerance of stress or distress – even to the point of not being able to tolerate any disagreement with their opinions.

On the plus side, some people who exhibit high conflict behaviours are paradoxically high performers. They may display a high level of productive energy, act as catalysts for change, be extremely smart, and demonstrate great output of high quality deliverables. Often they can be very engaging, even charming. Constantly on the run, they demonstrate the “sense of urgency” much beloved by change experts and CEOs. They set high standards for themselves and others.

Impact of High Conflict Behaviours

Unfortunately, their larger-than-life personalities can sometimes leave distressed colleagues, suppliers, direct reports and others in their wake. Dealing with them requires an inordinate amount of energy.

This can be observed in the “meeting after the meeting” phenomenon, where people gather to debrief and try to understand “what just happened?” In one high-conflict situation, a survey of six team members revealed that on average, each team member spent three hours a day “trying to de-stress” after meetings and/or strategizing on how to handle the next meeting with a high conflict co-worker.

This use of time is reflected in delays on projects, higher absenteeism, and higher turnover. The impact is greater if the high conflict behaviours come

from a leader.

Understanding the Behaviour

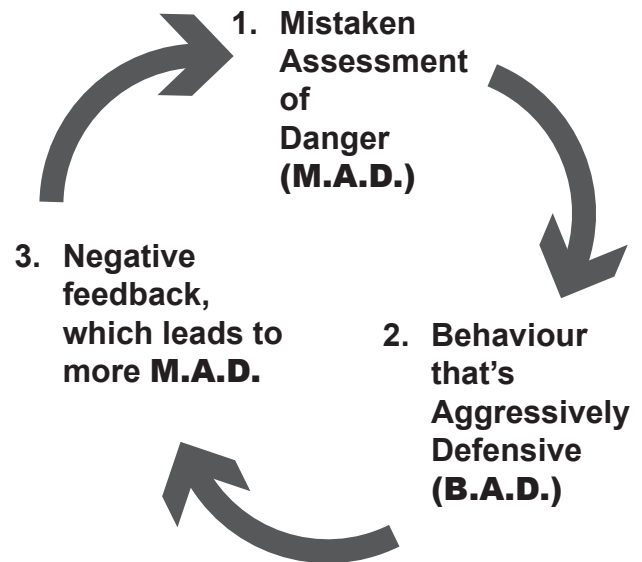
Most of us first try to handle the behaviour logically. We try to dissect the situation and understand why someone reacted in a particular way. When we can't explain why a person reacted so strongly in a situation, we can find ourselves at a loss. This leads us to feel even more uncertain and anxious around the person and we may find ourselves "walking on eggshells" to try to avoid triggering the behaviour again.

Here are some of the common triggers for high-conflict behaviour:

- Stressful, fast-paced situations with a deadline, especially where it looks like we may not make the deadline;
- Open public disagreement with a person's espoused position or opinion;
- A deliverable or task that doesn't meet the high-conflict person's standards – regardless of whether those standards have been clearly articulated or are even realizable.
- Anything that threatens the person's identity or public image, including how those around them may reflect on this identity or image.

What happens, according to Bill Eddy, is that a high conflict person immediately perceives a very personal threat and reacts with what Eddy calls a Mistaken Assessment of Danger (M.A.D.). The high conflict person then acts out with high-intensity Behaviour that's Aggressively Defensive (B.A.D.). This then provokes Negative Feedback from colleagues, which unfortunately serves to validate the mistaken

assessment of danger or lead to another cycle, as illustrated below.



Strategies for Individuals

The recommended steps for dealing with high conflict behaviours may seem counter-intuitive, and may not be what you feel like doing, but they can be very effective. Here are the key steps:

Empathy

- Try to genuinely empathize with the person as a person and the danger that they perceive they are in. This is not easy and must be done genuinely. It does not mean that you agree with them or that you condone their behaviour. It means putting those judgements aside – delaying your instinct to provide immediate feedback – and trying to understand what the high conflict person is struggling with.
- It may help to find something about them you

can agree with; for example, they may have a very combative style that you find difficult but at the same time demonstrate good intentions or a willingness to work toward common goals.

Attention

- Give the person and their concerns your undivided attention. This is a validation of the person and shows that you care about the person and the issues they are bringing up. This may take longer than you expect; alternatively, it can sometimes take only minutes of focused attention to help lower the emotional tone and re-focus on the issues to be addressed.
- If you are struggling with this – as in “this person’s behaviour doesn’t merit attention” or “this person needs WAY more attention than everyone else seems to”, try to view this as an investment of time in an alternative approach. You can decide after you’ve tried it if you find it worthwhile.

Respect

- Be respectful in your dealings – that includes tone, body language, and choice of words. Again you may struggle with this since this may not be what you are receiving in turn.
- One way to look at this is that being respectful is a value or principle that you hold, and you treat people respectfully regardless of their behaviour. Research shows that respectful interactions lower the emotional intensity of interactions while disrespectful actions lead to an escalation of conflict. Think of it as role modelling for the other person of how people should treat each other. Over time, their behaviour may improve in return.

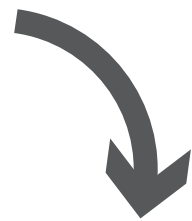
Setting Limits

- Once the emotional intensity has been lowered, you may now be in a position to set a limit. This is not simple and varies with different situations, particularly if the high-conflict person is your leader. Be careful that the limits you set are ones you can enforce, and that you will do so the first time you are challenged, regardless of the circumstances in which you are challenged. If you say: “I will collaborate with you on this, as I appreciate the skills and perspective that you bring. I must say as well that if I see shouting, swearing or personal attacks I will have to stop collaborating,” you should be prepared to call the behaviour the next time that it happens.
 - Because behaviours are entrenched and difficult to change, it’s likely that you will have to reiterate your limits more than once. Be ready with your strategy to maintain the limits you have set; have a stock phrase worked out, something neutral like “I will work with you again when things have calmed down,” then leave the room.
 - At first, an escalation of high conflict behaviours may come your way to try to get you to change back to tolerating the way things have been. Maintain your own personal stand, ensure you have some support from others if you can, and be prepared to be on your “A” game until the situation is resolved. Another struggle you may have is that the relationship is not “fair” to you – you are putting in what appears to be all the effort. This may in fact be true, and is unfortunate; however,

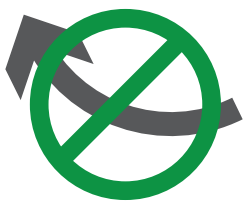
it's best not to ruminate on this too much as it will only increase the cost to you. These usually are not balanced or fair relationships, since the high conflict person may be in so much internal distress it is very difficult for them to consider others.

- Be sure you notice and offer positive feedback on even small improvements. The person may never openly say anything to acknowledge that they have heard your feedback but may instead moderate their behaviour next time, so be on the alert for those step-by-step improvements. Here is an illustration of how Empathy, Attention, Respect and Setting Limits (EARS) stops the cycle of high conflict behaviours.

1. Mistaken Assessment of Danger (M.A.D.)



**2. Empathy
Attention
Respect
Setting limits (E.A.R.S.)**



- Over time, some situations can and do change – after all, people learn from experience, including people who show high conflict behaviours.
- Some situations with some individuals cannot be resolved for a number of reasons and so your strategy might have to change from “live with it” to “leave it.”

A note on Violence

- If at ANY time you are concerned for your personal safety, to any degree, GET HELP. Talk to your leader, your organization’s security personnel or seek advice from the police. A professional can help you understand the risks and what to do about them.

Strategies for Organizations

In my experience within organizations, some people displaying high-conflict behaviours will respond to feedback from their leader (especially if using the strategies outlined above) or someone with authority that they respect. The leader has much more of a foundation to help them with this if there are certain organizational strategies in place.

- Clear organizational values along with documented expectations that leaders and employees demonstrate these values in their dealings with internal and external stakeholders provide a mechanism for defining, monitoring and measuring the desired behaviour. For example, a goal can be set within a yearly performance plan to “Engage other departments in collaboratively reviewing and improving business processes” – with the emphasis on collaborative as measured by feedback from the other departments. This goal can be reviewed periodically throughout the

year to keep the new behaviour on track.

- 360 Feedback, where individuals receive feedback from direct reports, peers, leaders, customers, etc. is also very useful in collecting and transmitting information about the impact of an individual's behaviour as well as the improvements in the behaviour. Having a skilled interpretation of the feedback is of great assistance. A human resources advisor can help the individual focus on the impact they are having rather than get distracted trying to argue that the feedback is not factual or not "the truth." The advisor can help them see that the perception of their behaviour and the impact felt by others is "the truth" as it is experienced by those around them.
- Respectful Workplace policies and programs for the organization as whole outline the expectations in the work environment. Organizational programs like this provide education on the organizational values and expectations of behaviour at work, the skills required to maintain a productive, respectful work environment, and enable people to spot and deal with issues earlier so that they can be resolved more easily.
- Leaders must be held accountable for dealing with inappropriate behaviour as soon as it is identified. Understandably many leaders want to gather facts and understand the impact before they give the person feedback; unfortunately due to time demands and the sensitive nature of this kind of "non-delegateable" work a lot of damage may be done by the time they are able to deal with it. A strategy that might be useful is to have their human resources advisor and/or an outside facilitator gather some information to

understand what behaviours have been demonstrated and make some recommendations for quickly and efficiently dealing with the issues.

- Having an organizational Coaching Program that is seen as an investment in good people (as opposed to remedial coaching) can help high performing high conflict people with dealing with some of their "overused strengths." The focus of this kind of program is mostly on leveraging strengths with some attention paid to barriers to success, such as getting into too many conflicts.
- Counselling through Employee Assistance Programs may help; if you can convince the person to go with an open mind (they may feel that they don't need any help, especially not from a mental health professional.)

Insights

- There is quite a bit more to be learned about high conflict behaviours. If you are dealing with this issue, please investigate the resources at the end of this article, in particular, Bill Eddy's "It's All Your Fault", which can be found at www.janispublications.com. If you are dealing with a family member's high conflict behaviour, you may find "Stop Walking on Eggshells" a useful resource.
- While it may help you to know that these behaviours may fall into a diagnosable personality disorder such as borderline personality disorder or narcissistic personality disorder, it is extremely important not to apply labels to the person or try to diagnose without the right professional qualifications. What is more helpful in practice is to focus on what you can change and influence yourself, which is your understanding of

the situation and how you handle it. The rest is up to the high conflict individual, who is after all accountable for their own behaviour and the consequences that eventually accrue.

Resources

Dimeff, L. & Linehan, M. M. (2001) Dialectical Behavior Therapy in a Nutshell. The California Psychologist, 34, 10-13.

Eddy, Bill *"It's All Your Fault!" – 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything*. Janis Publications, 2008, www.janispublications.com

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