



Responding to High Conflict Personalities – Revisited

by JUDY BERANGER

In an article which appeared in the September 2014 edition of *The Bulletin* I outlined the patterns of behaviour that are known to be typical responses exhibited by people with High Conflict Personalities (HCP) along with strategies for addressing them. In response to the positive feedback and requests for more on the subject I decided to take a deeper look at this relevant topic which struck a chord with many of our teachers and administrators.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that anyone can exhibit certain High Conflict Personality (HCP) traits at particular periods in time but for them, these behaviours are fleeting and not typical. Examples of high conflict behaviours include being rigid, being negative, uncompromising, blaming others, unable to reflect on behaviour, lacking empathy, and avoiding responsibility. Individuals with good mental health will have the ability to choose how they react and will seek strategies that are respectful and promote a win/win outcome. In any conflict we have the opportunity to become a better person by committing to constructive and respectful responses or we can choose the opposite and become stuck in a repetitive, non-productive dance. How do you choose to react when you are in conflict? The more you get to know yourself the more you will be able to develop conflict prevention and conflict resolution strategies that can work for you. The strategies used for HCP types can also be quite helpful for other types of conflict.

In *The Crossroads of Conflict*, Ken Cloke shares his beliefs about how conflict can lead us to crossroads in our lives. One path leads to anger, bitterness and a focus on unresolved past incidents. All too often this results in adversarial relationships and impasse. As you might expect, this is the default path chosen by people with High Conflict Personalities. The crossroads offers a second path which leads to empathy, honesty, respect and a focus on the future, thus promoting improved communications and collaboration. Cloke further suggests a third, often hidden path, that branches off from the second and its focus is on the here and now. It sparks the possibility for

rich growth of compassion and integrity, drawing us into a heightened awareness of the present, thereby encouraging deep learning, profound ideas and openhearted relationships. He describes this path as one of transformation of wisdom, spirit and heart.

Throughout the High Conflict literature, notably in Bill Eddy's work, we see that focusing on our part of the communication or interactions – how we choose to respond – can greatly influence how the other person reacts. That is, of course, unless an unaddressed high conflict personality (HCP) is present. Eddy has coined a name for describing the language of people with a high conflict personality. He calls it “blamespeak”. Blamespeak is defined as a disrespectful way of interacting and talking with or about others that is blaming, and primarily intended to divert attention away from the Blamespeaker. It is emotionally intense and out of proportion to the issues. The blamespeaker feels no responsibility for the problem or the solution and ignores all of the good a person has done and all the bad that s/he has done. Eddy says the HCP has no sense of shame, embarrassment or boundaries. Unfortunately, the blamespeak often sounds believable to those who are not informed about the situation. The goal of the healthy person is not to be drawn in to the blame-speak game, even though it is so easy to be caught up in the blaming. Doing so places the healthy person at risk of being labelled as a HCP type as well!

According to Bill Eddy, when people are in HCP mode it is unrealistic to expect them to be reasonable. It would be helpful to reflect on why it is that we work so hard at trying to make them see our point of view. For the most part HCPs remain quite defensive in conflict situations and unconsciously seek negative advocates to justify their misperceptions and misbehavior and to assist them in blaming others. Eddy says that HCPs are often too disorganized and emotionally distraught to maintain a high conflict dispute on their own, but can be skilled at drawing others in with their intense emotions and false claims.

Brain Research and High Conflict

There is considerable brain research reported by Doidge, Goldberg, Seigel, Schore and others that can explain our choices when addressing conflict in terms of the right and left hemispheres of our brain. The left brain is the logical, problem solving centre. For potential conflict situations it can generate flexible and collaborative thinking, moving participants toward problem solving. The right brain is the more reactionary side, fast and defensive paced, with all or nothing thinking that is more crisis oriented. People with HCP lack the ability to flow between these two hemispheres. We all have the tendency to move to the fast, defensive, reactionary mode when threatened, while people who are high conflict (HC) tend to be there most of the time. The secret is in creating a flow that is mindful of the importance of both sides of the brain.

What to do?

Napoleon Hill once said that action is the real measure of intelligence. We have to bring our thoughts forward into action and focus attention on moving toward problem solving and solution-based approaches. Throughout Bill Eddy's literature he suggests the importance of a BIFF response. BIFF is an acronym for brief, informative, friendly and firm. It is important that we respond as quickly as is reasonable and possible. We need to be:

- Brief – to ensure fewer opportunities to trigger defensiveness
- Informative – giving neutral information that is solution focused
- Friendly – though difficult it may be, it is important to be as friendly as is reasonable even if we have to act the part. This assists in calming the other person and increases the likelihood of shifting to problem solving.
- Firm – this gives closure, maintains respect and highlights that you are finished with the conversation.

If we simply stop the fighting but fail to settle the issues, most of the conflict will remain. If we settle the issues but do not resolve the underlying reasons that gave rise to them, a large portion of the conflict will disappear. Anything lying beneath the surface can reappear unexpectedly and trigger future conflicts. If BIFF responses are used consistently and often, change can happen on both sides.

Mannie and Murtha provide a good example of this. They are divorced and have a shared parenting plan. Murtha is still quite angry and possessive of the children along with the fact that it seems she has a HCP. Mannie is trying his best to disengage from con-

flict situations. Having asked Murtha to exchange a few parenting hours with her so their children could attend his staff family party the following email took place.

Murtha's email: Mannie, I can't believe you are so selfish to ask to have the children on my time, not to mention taking them to your staff party with alcohol likely present. If this is just a ploy to get at me and for you to parade the kids around like you are the best father in the world it won't work. If they only knew!

Mannie replies with a BIFF response: Murtha, thank you for responding to my request to take the children to my staff party. All the staff with children are invited to bring them along and there will be no booze present. There will be lots of activities I know our children would enjoy. However, since you don't agree I will respect your wishes and withdraw my request as I realize it is during your time with the children.

Mannie was brief, informative, friendly and firm. He chose to disengage from what could have turned out to be a very volatile situation. He did not give advice, admonish or apologize as it could be easily misinterpreted in high conflict situations. The reality is in situations like this the arguing could have gone on for quite some time with no hope of resolution.

An ongoing challenge for those living or working with high conflict personalities is the ever present fear that it is only a matter of time before something negative arises. In order to practice and be in the habit of giving BIFF responses it is important to ensure you address any ongoing fears. Talking with someone wise and trustworthy, checking in with EAP, and writing things down in a journal can be very beneficial. Name what it is you fear, describe it in detail, refocus on what is positive about it, identify a worse fear and as Ken Cloke says, "reframe it as courage."

Leo Tolstoy once said, "Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself." A person with a High Conflict Personality is not likely to change but our response to the person can change. Developing skills that reduce our fears and strengthen our resolve will increase our energy and move us towards becoming more adept at being brief, informative, friendly and firm.

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