



# Responding to High Conflict Personalities

by JUDY BERANGER

*The price of anything is the amount of life you pay for it.* ~ Henry David Thoreau

What percentage of your life have you invested in conflict to date? How much energy and attention have you lost to conflict? Unresolved conflict can come with a high price tag. It can have a significant, detrimental effect on your attitude and performance as a teacher or administrator. Such conflict spreads negative energy which in turn weakens our mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health. Recognizing “high conflict personality types” and learning ways to work within their sphere can reduce stress. Understanding high conflict personalities can be the first step towards giving you the skills to remove yourself from the dysfunctional dance.

The importance of getting along with colleagues and students and the ability to be able to effectively manage conflict in our schools is a widely accepted expectation. The occurrence of conflict is recognized as a necessary part of a dynamic, creative, and competitive working environment. In their book *Toxic Co-workers*, Cavaiola and Lavender review one study where more than 80% of employees reported that at least one person in their workplace caused them stress. In a 2006 study, J. Hudson stated that the number one work life stressor was “people problems”. As we start the school year we are surrounded by people, where interactions may bring potential for conflict.

Bill Eddy, a recognized researcher and founder of the High Conflict Institute ([www.highconflictinstitute.com](http://www.highconflictinstitute.com)) defines high-conflict people (HCP) as people who act in self-defeating ways while being unaware that their own behaviour is the cause of many of their problems. HCP would clearly benefit from changing or stopping their self-defeating behaviour, but are highly resistant to self-reflection and change. People with high conflict personalities tend to increase their relationship conflicts rather than manage or resolve them. If you are expecting an apology from a person who has a high conflict personality it is not likely to happen as that person would not compre-

hend that there is anything for which to apologize.

There are many theories on high conflict behaviours along with recommendations as to the necessary skills and techniques that can help in managing situations that arise as a result of them. Researchers studying high conflict patterns suggest that the problem is growing. Fortunately they agree that there are effective strategies for managing interactions with people who simply will not engage in collaborative, conflict resolution efforts. You can’t “fix” the person but you can find ways to manage the situation or, if need be, move away from the situation.

Bill Eddy suggests that skills to manage high conflict situations are often different from ordinary conflict resolution methods. Eddy often reiterates throughout his teaching that the intent of his work is not to label people but rather to promote a deeper understanding of how this particular person deals with conflict. His research identifies the following patterns of behaviour, of which some or all are exhibited by people with high conflict personalities:

- All-or-nothing thinking
- Preoccupation with blaming others
- Draining energy, time and resources
- Rigid and uncompromising
- Unable to accept loss or heal from a loss
- Negative emotions dominate their thinking
- Unable to reflect on their own behaviour
- Difficulty empathizing with others
- Avoids responsibility for the problem or the solution.

Any one of us is capable of engaging in some of these patterns on occasion but they are not a typical response nor are we accustomed to act on those thoughts. High conflict thinking has been likened to protecting information on a computer. Our computers have a reliable anti-virus program to protect them from malicious, destructive and unwelcomed programs or data that might compromise our security and productivity. However, even with the anti-virus and other protective services up and running we still need to be diligent about our interaction with the information presented. Of course, we are not

responsible for what might come over the internet but we are responsible for how we respond to that information. Similarly, Eddy asserts that we have little control over all the thoughts that might pop into our heads, but we are completely responsible for the behaviour we choose in response to those thoughts. HCPs do not have a working anti-virus program. They believe their distortions with conviction and act on them as if they were true.

Jean Twenge, in her 2006 research in *Generation Me*, suggests the emphasis over the past thirty years for parents and teachers is to focus on building children's self-esteem. She says this has actually spiralled into some of today's young adults being more narcissistic, anxious and depressed than ever before. Twenge says: "Two-thirds of college students score high on narcissism. The average college student in 2006 scored higher in narcissism than 65% of students in 1987." Twenge further suggests this generation is more assertive and entitled and has less empathy and less successful relationships. They are more impulsive and aggressive when they feel insulted or threatened.

Narcissistic personalities (ones who act very superior, are absorbed in themselves, take advantage of relationships, lack empathy for others) are present in a large number of high conflict cases. People with narcissistic personalities would say they have high self-esteem while in reality they are easily triggered by anything that might threaten their self-image. They cannot handle direct criticism.

### What to do about it

In Bill Eddy's book: *12 tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything*, we are challenged to be mindful of our strategies. Some of the tips include:

- Do not take attacks personally. People with high conflict personalities blame others, distort information and do not reflect on or change their own inappropriate behaviour;
- Do not give negative feedback. HCPs tend to defend themselves by going on the attack. They see all negative feedback as criticism. They believe their thoughts and act on them without checking for accuracy.
- Set limits as to how much time you give to this conflict. HCPs lack awareness of their own behaviour and the effects on others. When something goes wrong – someone else caused it. Set limits. HCPs may or may not ever be able to shift their awareness but there is a chance with the proper professional help.
- Do the opposite of what you would like to do. That means showing the person we recognize and are trying to understand what they are experiencing. We may not agree but we are also not judging.

- If you know someone is a high conflict personality Bill Eddy suggests to use an "EAR" approach (Empathy, Attention, and Respect) from the very beginning. Try not to get hooked. It is important to remember that it is a waste of time to attack or criticize.

Teaching assignment changes are common every September. Whether you are an administrator trying to impact on a teacher the importance of taking on new courses, or a teacher trying to impact on an administrator how these new courses are going to create more stress in life, there are ways to talk about it that can help. If either of the people involved have a high conflict personality it is helpful to move immediately to empathy, attention and respect (EAR) conversations.

Sometimes the change is understood, sometimes not. An example of an EAR statement: *I can understand your frustration at having to take on new courses, this is a very important decision and a difficult one to make. I will pay full attention to your concerns and any ideas you want to suggest. I have a lot of respect for your commitment to working on a solution to accommodate our needs, the schedule, our students and our school. I want to do the best we can for everyone as well.*

By practicing the use of statements similar to this we manage to avoid agreeing with content or fixing things. This allows us to be honest, to stay at arm's length from the situation and to practice the profound act of paying attention while moving from rigidity to flexibility. It is important to understand that a HCP is just reacting to the situation. Rather than criticizing or pointing out this fact, it's much more helpful to focus on talking about what might happen in the future. Choose your battles.

### Transformation

Transformation occurs when we decide to use strategies and skills that keep us arm's length from that which we cannot change. How many days in your remaining precious life are you prepared to invest in conversations over expectations that will never be met, discussions that will never go anywhere, with people you do not like or trust? Understanding high conflict personalities and the importance of responding with empathy, attention and respect followed by letting go will help us develop the habits and disciplines necessary for reflective practice.

In *The Summer Day*, Pulitzer Prize winner Mary Oliver reminds us to reflect and respond in all we do.

***Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?***

.....  
*Judy is a Wellness and Employee Assistance Coordinator with the EAP for Teachers. For confidential assistance contact Judy Beranger (ext. 265) or Gail Carroll (ext. 242).*