



3 Simple DO's and DON'Ts Managing Potentially High-Conflict People at Work

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Dealing with high-conflict people (HCPs) in the workplace presents a variety of challenges. The good news is that if you suspect that you are working with an HCP (keep that thought to yourself as your private working theory), then you can improve the situation by knowing what to do and what not to do. But even if someone is not an HCP, you can use the same approach with anyone. Here are some principles from our book [*It's All Your Fault at Work*](#):

1. THE RELATIONSHIP

DO'S: Focus on your relationship with the person, not the outcome of a particular situation. The paradox of this approach is that if you focus on the relationship you are more likely to achieve positive outcomes.

So how do you focus on the relationship? We present a method in our book we have named The CARS MethodSM. The C stands for Connect. You focus on the relationship by connecting with empathy, attention and respect. "Give them your EARSM" is a simple way to remember this approach. In the fast pace of the business world with everything moving at break neck speed you might think "I don't have time for this – I am too busy – just get the assignment done."

We have learned from hundreds of discussions that this would be a big mistake and cost you much more time and energy in the long run.

HCPs work best when they feel the stability, attention and support that is associated with connection. This does not and should not be a long process but rather a moment of clarity and reassurance that reduces chronic fear and distortions that lead HCPs to misread situations as unsafe or dangerous to them. In our book we discuss the "Cycle of High Conflict Thinking" which we call the MAD CYCLE (based on people's [Mistaken Assessments of Danger](#)) which explains this concept in greater detail.

DON'T – so don't ignore the relationship and think you will be better off just providing instruction or focusing on the assignment. That approach will stimulate the MAD CYCLE and delay your progress and the possibility of a successful outcome.

2. "FEED FORWARD" CONVERSATIONS

DO'S: Provide the employee with "FEED FORWARD" conversations. HCP employees have a very difficult time receiving feedback. Unfortunately the American workplace is designed around that approach, including the yearly employee evaluation. Nevertheless, whenever possible take the time to meet with the employee and establish goals, objectives and time frames. You will have more success in detailing what outcomes you desire BEFORE work begins, as opposed to after the fact. As part of this process, have the employee identify upcoming roadblocks or issues and brainstorm together ways to handle them.

DON'T – your tendency will be to have and desire as little contact with the HCP as possible. Don't fall into that trap. Lack of contact and direction will only increase the odds that the HCP will receive negative feedback from you at the end of the process. This creates a no win situation all around. Engage the HCP and connect with them. Provide feed forward communication and remain available to provide assistance. Our book discusses techniques in this area in greater detail. This will greatly increase the likelihood of both a successful outcome and process.

3. RESPOND TO MISINFORMATION

DO'S: Do respond to misinformation in the workplace as quickly as possible. We are often busy when we hear that a rumor is flying around. We shake our heads but decide we don't have time for such nonsense. If you have HCP employees in your environment, they foster *negative advocates*. We describe *negative advocates* in our book as ordinary employees who “get hooked in” to take the side of an HCP in a dispute or issue. They are emotionally hooked but often misinformed.

Remember HCPs often create “Targets of Blame” and their emotional intensity is contagious. Workplaces can become quickly destabilized when *negative advocates* become activated. It is important to reduce misinformation and gossip but providing clear communication that directly address any distortions that maybe circulating.

One of the easiest ways to respond to misinformation is the **BIFF Response®**, which is Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm.

Brief: this means that you write or say a paragraph, regardless of how long the angry or misinformed communication is that you received.

Informative: Just give straight accurate information, not criticizing the person or prior incorrect statement and not giving an opinion or emotional response – just straight information.

Friendly: Give a friendly greeting and closing (“Thanks for letting me know your concerns....Have a nice weekend.”)

Firm: This doesn't mean harsh. It just means that you close the conversation and don't incite further argument. If necessary, make a request with just two choices (such as Yes or No) and give a requested response date.

(See [BIFF: Quick Responses® to High-Conflict People](#))

DON'T – Don't let misinformation fester or grow. Be mindful of the intensity created by fear and distortion. Whenever possible provide clear and concise communication and address the rumors in a non-judgmental and empathic way, such as a BIFF Response. Your workplace will be the better for it.

This is, of course, just a nutshell version of ways to manage a potentially high-conflict person or situation in the workplace. However, we see that these simple Do's and Don'ts are often ignored or forgotten when dealing with HCPs who may be angry, complaining and blaming. Remind

yourself daily to use these principles. They should make your life easier and earn you more respect at work.

Bill Eddy is a lawyer, mediator, therapist and President of the High Conflict Institute, which provides speakers, training and consultation on managing high-conflict situations and personalities. L. Georgi DiStefano is a therapist, Employee Assistance Professional and workplace trainer in conflict resolution. They are the authors of [It's All Your Fault at Work!](#) [Managing Narcissists and Other High-Conflict People](#) and [New Ways for WorkSM: Personal Skills for Productive Relationships – Coaching Manual](#) and [Workbook](#). Other methods developed by Bill Eddy include: [New Ways for Families®](#), [New Ways for MediationSM](#), [New Ways for WorkSM](#), [The CARS MethodSM](#) and [BIFF Response®](#). For more information on managing a potentially high-conflict person or situation, visit us at www.HighConflictInstitute.com.