SCORCHED EARTH

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT WITH HIGH CONFLICT CLIENTS

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High Conflict Clients

- What is a “high conflict personality?”
- What is a Personality Disorder?
- What are my own reactions to the high conflict client?
- Is it possible to mediate a “fair” settlement with high conflict personalities?
High Conflict Personality Disorders

- Pathological ways of thinking and feeling about oneself and others that negatively impacts all relationships and the way conflict is addressed.
- Patterns keep repeating but person has blind spots to them. They believe that they are normal and everyone else is screwed up.
- Lack a clear and coherent sense of identity.
- High conflict clients fear exposure and losing control.
DSM 5 – Axis 2, Cluster B is called the dramatic, emotional, and erratic cluster. It includes:

- Borderline Personality Disorder.
- Narcissistic Personality Disorder.
- Histrionic Personality Disorder.
- Antisocial Personality Disorder.
Rigid Thinking

- My way or the highway
- Tenuous relationship with facts – they lie a LOT!
- Doubles down when challenged
- Black or white
- Compromise means losing
Emotions

- Intense, dramatic and emotional appeals used to manipulate others, making rational conversation and conflict resolution difficult.
- Can be immensely charming if they see in you something they want.
- Changes the topic when uncomfortable

- Compensates for feelings of worthlessness
Actions and Consequences

- Actions and consequences are not connected.
- Extreme action follows intense emotion – yelling, disrespect, lying, stalking, threatening.
- Push others away – don’t want to lose control.
- Blaming leads to feeling stronger and safe.
- Then tells you that all of this is for your own good and wants a hug!
Negative Results

- Does NOT change behavior even after negative results.
- Never forgives, always brings up the past.
- Seeks to punish anyone who hurts them.
- Wants to dictate solutions, not solve problems with others.
High Conflict People in....Conflict

- Tend to be emotionally disengaged until it is safe to explode on someone else.
- Self-defeating patterns continue in spite of continued negative results.
Diagnostic features for NPD - (American Psychiatric Association, 2013):

- Has an exaggerated sense of self-importance
- Expects to be recognized as superior even without achievements that warrant it
- Exaggerates achievements and talents
- Preoccupied with fantasies about success, power, brilliance, beauty or the perfect mate
- Believes he/she is superior and can only be understood by or associate with equally special people
- Lack of empathy for others
- Lies constantly, deflects blame
- Huge sense of entitlement
- Expects special favors and unquestioning compliance with expectations
- Manipulates others to get what is wanted
- Inability to recognize the needs and feelings of others
- Envious of others; believes others envy him/her
- Behaves in an arrogant or haughty manner

Source: Mayo Clinic
Characteristics of the Narcissist

- Takes credit for other people’s work
- Inability to reflect on own behavior
- Knows the damage he/she causes, but **does not care**: ZERO empathy
- Underlying emotions: fear of abandonment, rage, grief
- Beliefs and behaviors often make conflict resolution impossible
- Lack of sense of humor
  - Often does not understand what is humorous.
  - Will laugh at others, but will not tolerate anyone laughing at him/her.
- Never forgives, always seeks revenge
- **Covert/Shy**: Identify as caretakers who take care of everyone except themselves.
  - This cannot be farther from the truth
  - Fake humility, introverted, deeply hurt by criticism, but full of rage.
Characteristics of the Narcissist

- Name dropper
- Must be the brightest intellect in the room.
- Accepts only high status people as peers
- Condescending
- Obsesses over perceived slights or attacks
- All are designed to hide the self from others
Conflict is *Always* Personal

- Conflict is always viewed as personal assault
- Escalates conflict to make it worse, not better
- Creates drama, bullying
- Threatened by disagreement
- ALWAYS must win. ALWAYS!!
- Children exist only to make them happy. (They make *terrible* parents!)
The Covert (Shy) Narcissist
“Beneath the Radar”

Quiet smugness, superiority.

Condescending, eye-rolling, dismissive gestures, groans and sighs, high distractibility, quick boredom, yawns, and overall inattentiveness – unless you have something they want or they see you as a threat.

Self-absorbed.

“Withdrawn self-centeredness,” terrible listeners, tend to focus on only what they want and find agreeable. All else might be labeled as “boring” or “stupid”.
The Covert/Shy Narcissist

Passive-Aggressive

- Agrees to something, then does nothing, blames you or denies any agreement in the first place. When you inquire why they didn’t follow-through on an arrangement, they may shrug it off with an excuse, or say nonchalantly that their way is better.

Lack of Empathy

- “You’re sick? But what about driving me to the mall?”
- Oblivious to, or dismissive of others’ thoughts and feelings. Even when you tell them how their attitudes and actions are generating adverse consequences, their response will be more about themselves. Such is the self-absorption.
Covert (Shy) Continued

- The “Misunderstood Special Person”
  - “I’m special,” “I’m one-of a kind,” “I’m ahead of my time,” “I’m so unique no one understands me,” and “I’m so smart I’m above everyone else.” Superiority, grandiosity, and entitlement.

- “Exquisitely sensitive”. Takes the Victim Role
  - Affronted by any signs of real or perceived slights, and handles criticism poorly. In the face of negative feedback, some introvert narcissists will defend with an increased sense of superior smugness and dismissal (fight), while others will respond with sullen withdrawal (flight). Typically, they will not let on how crushing the negative comments are, and instead use their well-rehearsed aloofness or sarcasm to continue their schema.

- Impersonal and Difficult Relationships
  - Inability to genuinely connect with people. Aloofness and/or smugness serve as a defensive mechanism keeping people away, lest the narcissist is exposed for her or his interpersonal inadequacies.
  - They make terrible parents.
Emotions

- Unregulated emotions
- Cannot tolerate distress or failure – must blame others
- Avoids responsibility for any part of the problem
- Negative emotions dominate
- Trusts no one
- Empathy is feigned, not real
- Paranoia
EXPLOSIVE ANGER

- Anger is hidden, but then explodes
- Used to influence, keep people away, and to maintain or gain control.
- In relationships, learns all of your most sensitive weak spots, then exploits them to emotionally destroy you.
- Narcissistic rage is unforgettable!
Boundary Violations

- The high conflict individual routinely violates common boundaries as a means of intimidation and control.
How they view you:

- Feared. You have authority that can adversely affect them
- Uncertain. They do not know how to control you.
- Disdain. Barely disguised hatred
- Threat

Probable interactions:

- Attempts to ingratiate by flattering you.
- They will try various ways to manipulate.
- Refuse to engage
- Rage
The Narcissist in Mediation

- Outrageous demands.
- Refuse to consider offers that do not meet their demands.
- Refuse to respond.
- Respond to a question not asked.

Effective Counters

- Stroke their grandiosity
- Confront in private: What is it that you really need today?
- Reality testing in private, never in public.
- Be clear: you want to help them, but they must help you. This creates a “partnership” – but be careful not to be pulled into the fantasy.
Mediator Guidelines

- DO NOT say or insinuate anything negative about their personalities – this backfires and escalates rage.
- Show empathy, listen deeply, demonstrate respect to lower defenses and make room to develop trust.
- Respond to any verbal assault with genuine curiosity.
- Never correct or challenge them in front of others.
Mediator Guidelines

- Do not react to their emotions – this distracts from the issue and leads to more blame.
- Their emotions are often used to manipulate others.
- Think like a detective – just the facts.
Mediator Guidelines

- You are the authority in the room so set the rules and enforce them. There will be subtle and overt pushback, so you must always maintain the authority figure role. The more you let him get away with, the more he will attempt.
Mediator Guidelines

➢ Do not assume that you can influence or change them by modeling good behavior and communication skills. You won’t.

➢ Give them options wherever you can. Giving them options helps them feel respected and in control.

➢ It also prevents nasty hissy fits.
Mediator Guidelines

- Narcissists love drama and revel in the chaos. When you explain a problem or a challenge to a narcissist, direct their attention to the solution.
- Maintain your composure no matter what you feel.
- They will exploit any sign of confusion or weakness.
Understand that the narcissist does not experience the same emotions as you do. They do not experience empathy for anyone else, they do not experience regret or remorse for the damage they cause (yes, they know the damage they cause, but that’s just part of their fun!), they lie constantly and actually believe what they are saying even if it contradicts what they said three minutes before. The ONLY thing they regret is being caught with no way out!
Mediator Guidelines

➢ If you can, make them the hero in their own story—but only in private.
They **MUST** see the settlement as a win!

A small church in Indiana...
Mediator Guidelines

- Do not shy away from explaining negative consequences: When they know that there is a strong enough negative consequence, they can and usually will restrain their behavior – for a time.

- Female narcissists commonly use the “silent treatment” as punishment. Ask, “You have become silent. Can you tell me what is happening in your mind right now?”
Do not do or say anything the narcissist may interpret as disrespectful, even if he is disrespectful. Remember, he sees himself as superior and not bound by anyone’s rules, plays by his own rules and sees his behavior as normal and acceptable, but only for himself. He finds people acting in the same ways he does as disrespectful and threatening.
Mediator Guidelines

- Let them claim any and all good ideas as their own. They will do that anyway and confronting them may result in an explosion.
- Do **NOT** reveal any more of your self than is absolutely necessary as they will attempt to use what they learn to manipulate you—and they are world-class experts at manipulation.
Get everything in writing with as much detail as possible. The narcissist is an expert at finding loopholes and exploiting them to hi/her own benefit. The tighter the settlement agreement (if you get one), the better for everyone.
Mediator Guidelines

- Be aware of your own “stuff:” your emotional triggers, your weak spots, your blind spots, and so on. The narcissist will be trying to locate and identify your every weakness the moment he meets you with the intent of using them against you as part of his manipulation strategy.
Mediator Guidelines

- Choose your battles carefully. High conflict people like to fight and the drama it creates.
- When you wrestle with a pig, you both get filthy – but the pig likes it!
- Be aware of your own emotional triggers and develop better coping mechanisms.
- Set a structure and expectations for talking: no yelling, name calling, interrupting.
Techniques

- Keep emotions (including yours) from escalating.
- To bring them down: Talk lower and slower.
- “I understand your frustration.”
- “I am paying close attention to how you are feeling.”
- “Can you tell me more about that?”
- “Can you help me understand why this is so important to you?”
Establish boundaries. If a boundary is violated, be calm but firm, and don’t bend.

Repeat the expectations and revisit the rules.

Do not ignore the behavior – that causes feelings of abandonment and escalates emotional responses.
Techniques

- Disengage from the drama and manage your own thoughts – take a time out, concentrate on your reaction.
- Do reality testing. Narcissists live in a different reality where they are the only important thing.
  - Praise and quiet coaching are effective.
- They are not overly good at reading body language, so be certain to verbalize.
Guidelines - Caucus

- Ask what is the most important issue to be resolved, and what resolution would look like.
- Do not be shocked by high demands. They tend to believe that they deserve much for doing little.
- Be honest but diplomatic.
Conflict Goals

- The high conflict personality will have unrealistically high goals based on what he/she believes about the other person and the value of perceived damage to themselves.

- Setting realistic goals in caucus elicits more constructive dialogue, though not necessarily resolving the conflict.
What they fear:

- **Borderline**: an unconscious and extreme fear of abandonment – which causes people to abandon them.

- **Narcissist**: an unconscious and extreme fear of being inferior or helpless. This drives extreme efforts to be seen as superior and to insult or demean others. Pushes people away to protect oneself – which tends to push others to seeing the narcissist as inferior.

- **Histrionic**: an unconscious and extreme fear of being ignored. This drives them to constant drama and intense emotional reactions – which pushes people away and to ignore them.
What they fear

Antisocial (Sociopath): an unconscious and extreme fear of being dominated by others. This drives extreme efforts to dominate, manipulate, deceive and harm others – which tends to get them locked up.

Paranoid (common to all 4 Cluster B mental diseases): an unconscious and extreme fear of betrayal by those close to them. This drives them to assume plots and conspiracies, so they hold unwarranted grudges and attack others first to protect themselves – which pushes people to fear being direct with them and to find ways to get rid of them.
Aftermath

• This was not about you.
• Showing him a “mo betta way” is a waste of time and energy.
• Marriage counseling is a waste of time and money.
• You did your best – and most likely no one would have done better.
• Make yourself a stiff drink and relax.
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- Let Us Prey: The Plague of Narcissist Pastors and What We Can Do About It. Cascade Books. 2017

Slides available at: www:Darrellpuls.com