Recognizing and Responding to High Conflict Patterns ⚠

How to Spot the Pattern and Respond in Ways That Lower Escalation

Four Signs of a High-Conflict Pattern

Some people have an enduring pattern of escalating conflict that shows up consistently, especially in close relationships. Bill Eddy, from the High Conflict Institute, identifies four distinct behaviors that appear together as a cluster.

Blaming Others
It's always someone else's fault; consistently sidesteps personal responsibility.

Unmanaged Emotions
Emotional reactivity that takes over most interactions.

All-or-Nothing Thinking
Binary framing: “always/never,” “everyone/no one,” “with me/against me”

Extreme Behaviors or Threats
Doing things that most people wouldn’t do – even under high levels of stress.

Anyone can show some of these signs under stress. What matters is the combination and the repetition. You’re recognizing a pattern, not diagnosing someone.

USE A DIFFERENT APPROACH

In a high conflict pattern, the person isn’t *refusing* to see their impact; they genuinely *can’t*. Explaining things more clearly won’t close the gap; focus on setting limits and providing structure.

TACTICS THAT TEND TO ESCALATE

- ✕ More explanation or evidence
- ✕ Feedback aimed at self-reflection
- ✕ Offering more options or "one more chance"
- ✕ Extra empathy meant to soothe
- ✕ Avoiding or delaying responses or follow-through

TACTICS THAT WORK BETTER

- ✓ **Clear limits and structure**
- ✓ **Focus on moving forward and future behavior**
- ✓ **Clear, consistent consequences and follow through**
- ✓ **Plan for escalation: align early on roles, process, and communication**
- ✓ **Get expert support**

Respond Without Adding Fuel

1. In person, calm with EAR.

- **Empathy:** *"I recognize this is hard."*
- **Attention:** *"I am hearing what you are saying."*
- **Respect:** *“I respect your perspective."*

2. In writing, reply with BIFF. Brief: a short response. **Informative:** neutral facts and next steps; skip defending and correcting. **Friendly:** a warm opening and close. **Firm:** end the exchange or offer one clear next step.

Notes

The 90% Test

Even on their worst day, would 9 out of 10 people do this? If not, then it may be a sign of an extreme behavior.