

# The CARS Method for Resolving High-Conflict Situations

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The CARS Method was developed specifically to address four big areas of difficulty in high-conflict situations, which often involve one or more people with high-conflict personalities (HCPs). But this method can be used with anyone – anywhere. The CARS Method is designed to help you organize your responses to calm down upset people, to redirect their energies and to focus them on positive future choices and consequences. This article is a brief excerpt from our book ***It's All Your Fault at Work: Managing Narcissists and Other High-Conflict People***, Chapter 2, which explains the basics of how anyone can use this method.

## 1. CONNECT with EAR Statements

The first step or skill is to attempt to calm the HCP's emotions by forming a brief positive connection with the person. Of course, the first thing that most people feel like doing when they're blamed or attacked is to attack back—to say, "No, it's not all my fault. It's all *your fault!*" While this might get a reasonable person to stop and assess the situation, with an HCP this response simply escalates the person's emotions and aggressively defensive behavior. In these cases, it is helpful to respond with a statement that shows empathy, attention, and/or respect—what we call an "EAR statement."

This may be very difficult to do at first. However, an EAR statement usually calms down high-conflict people right away, at least long enough to use their problem-solving skills for a while.

### **Empathy**

*"I can understand how upsetting this situation is."  
"I'm sorry to see that you are having to deal with this problem."  
"Wow! I can see how important this project is to you!"  
"I know you are concerned about how this is going to turn out."*

### **Attention**

Let the person know that you really want to pay attention to his or her concerns. High-conflict people put a lot of energy into getting attention, but in the process they turn people off. Most people try to avoid dealing with high-conflict people as much as possible. So the simple act of showing interest and paying full attention is often enough to calm them down, because they don't have to fight for your attention.

*"I hear how important it is to you to get the report done by the weekend."  
"I understand that your budget could be affected by the results of this study."  
"Tell me more."*

### **Respect**

*"You're a really good record keeper. You're very well organized."  
"I really respect how hard you've worked to gather information about this issue and notify us of this problem."  
"I respect your concern that you won't get a response from us, so let me reassure you this is important to us too."*

## 2. ANALYZE Options

After you have connected with the HCP and hopefully de-escalated the situation, you need to consider your alternatives or options. Approach this process in three steps

1. Brainstorm several possible options for yourself and write them down.
2. Check yourself for high-conflict thinking—remember, you are human too. (Georgi calls this the “Santa steps”: “Making a list and checking it twice!”)
3. Select an option and analyze it carefully.

### ***Respond to Proposals***

Another way of analyzing options is to make or respond to proposals. You can almost always take a past problem and turn it into a proposal for the future. Whatever has happened before is less important than what to do now. Avoid trying to emphasize how bad the problem is. With a high-conflict person, this just triggers more defensiveness. Plus, people never agree on what happened in the past anyway. Picture a solution from your list and do it or propose it.

Here are the three key steps for making proposals:

1. **Propose:** *Who* will do *what*, *when*, and *where*.
2. **Ask questions:** The other person then asks questions about the proposal, such as: “What’s your picture of what this would look like, if I agreed to do it?” “What do you see me doing in more detail?” or “When would we start doing that, in your proposal?” Then, the person who made the proposal answers these in detail.
3. **Respond:** The other person then responds with:

“Yes.” “No.” Or: “I’ll think about it.”

And if the other person says “No,” then it’s that person’s turn to make a new proposal.

This method helps keep the situation from escalating. It discourages arguing about proposals, which is what high-conflict people often do. Instead, you just ask for sincere questions and a response. Of course, the questions should be *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* questions, such as sincerely inquiring: “How do you picture implementing that idea? What would my part be?”

For more information about making proposals, see Bill’s book *So, What’s Your Proposal?*

## 3. RESPOND to Hostility or Misinformation

Misinformation and intense blaming is very common in high-conflict disputes and is often the result of distorted thinking (sometimes called “cognitive distortions”). Most often, HCPs don’t realize their thinking has distortions in it. While we all have distorted thoughts occasionally, it’s important to “check ourselves” to be realistic—for example, “Is this really true? Or am I jumping to conclusions?”—HCPs tend to have a lot of these thought distortions and accept them without question. What’s more, they often pass them along to others without realizing how absurd they sound.

And some of the time they knowingly spread misinformation. They think they have to do so in order to protect themselves from the dangers they see around them—which are usually based on their distortions, but they don’t realize that. They often truly believe that others are out to hurt them, and in their eyes this justifies their extreme behavior.

## **Use a BIFF Response**

When responding to misinformation, we recommend the BIFF response: Keep the response brief, informative, friendly, and firm. This is almost always done in the same medium (email, in person, by phone, etc.) that the misinformation was first presented.

**Brief**—Keep your response brief. This will reduce chances of a prolonged and angry exchange. Keeping it brief signals that you don't wish to get into a dialogue. Don't respond with a personal attack.

**Informative**—The main reason to respond is to correct the inaccurate statements. Focus on "just the facts" and the accurate statements you want to make, not the inaccurate statements the other person made. Avoid negative comments, sarcasm, threats, and personal remarks about the other person.

**Friendly**—Consciously thinking about a friendly response will increase your chances of actually responding in a way that is friendly or at least neutral response. Don't give the other person a reason to get defensive and keep responding. Just make sure your response sounds relaxed and non-threatening.

**Firm**—Clearly tell the other person your information or interests on an issue and then close the discussion. Be careful not to make comments that invite further discussion. Sound confident and don't ask for more information. In cases where you will want a response to a specific question, phrase it as a "yes or no" question and ask for a response by a certain date and time.

For more information on BIFF Responses, see Bill's book *BIFF: Quick Responses to High Conflict People, Their Personal Attacks, Hostile Email and Social Media Meltdowns*.

## **4. SET LIMITS on Misbehavior**

In many cases, setting limits is the most important and most difficult step in handling high-conflict people. HCPs generally have less self-control, are more impulsive, and are less aware of the impact of their behavior on others. Further, they often don't care if their behavior bothers or hurts themselves or anyone else. Setting limits is a two-step process:

1. You establish or point out the rules (such as policies, procedures, or laws).
2. You provide logical consequences if the rules are violated.

Of course, this simple process is more difficult with high-conflict people. It's as though their personalities were built to break the rules, to avoid the consequences, and to aggressively claim that rules and consequences don't apply to them because they're "special." Therefore, to effectively set limits on misbehavior, you need to bear in mind several issues you wouldn't need to consider with someone who isn't high conflict, each addressed below.

### ***High-conflict people don't respond with ordinary logic or realistic self-interest.***

High-conflict people misinterpret the danger before them. Therefore, their behavior appears to be illogical and self-defeating. However, they cannot see this. The issue is not the issue. The high-conflict personality is the issue.

### ***What is your goal with the high-conflict person?***

The primary goal is containment of the high-conflict person's behavior, not to "make them see the light" or to control their overall behavior. Since their patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving are imbedded and unconscious, you will be forever frustrated if control is your goal. Remember: Insight? Fuhgeddaboutdit!

Instead of insight or elimination, concentrate on containment. What you really want is to stop their aggressively defensive behavior by setting limits. Their personality and the way they think will not change, but they can learn what desired and undesired behavior is.

***What power do you have to set limits? Use the power you have.***

You have the power to set limits by limiting contact and by limiting what you will discuss. You can tell someone that you either won't discuss certain topics or won't for very long.

In extreme cases, you may decide that the only way to set sufficient limits on high-conflict people is to end your relationship with them. This must be done very carefully so as not to trigger an extreme crisis for them, leading them to attack you and blame you for their upset feelings. In such a crisis, they may also act out by spreading rumors, stalking, waging legal attacks, and sometimes engaging in violence.

Be certain to remain confident when setting limits on high-conflict people. The experience can be very unnerving because high-conflict people are highly resistant to any feedback or restrictions. Ordinary efforts to set limits often fail, so people just give up and give in but this only reinforces the high-conflict behavior. So get some help.

***What power does your organization have to set limits? Use the power structure you have.***

You may need one or more people to work with you in setting limits. Your community may be your workplace, co-workers, managers, union, or human resources department. A community always has a power structure that can be used to set limits.

Avoid becoming isolated—talk to someone. You're not alone in having to deal with an HCP nowadays. As we said at the start of our book, they are everywhere.

***Don't make it personal. Explain the "external reasons" for the limit, such as a rule "that requires me to do this" or "I'm not allowed to do that."***

HCPs usually take things personally, as if you were out to get them. As much as possible, emphasize that you're just trying to help them succeed and that you are required to follow the rules and policies. And if your workplace doesn't have a policy on the subject, tell them you'll get back to them—then develop a policy.

HCPs have a way of finding the gaps in any organization's procedures. If you're in a position to do so, make a policy, let them know what it is, and follow through on enforcing it. This helps HCPs feel more structured and secure—even if they don't say so. In many ways, rules and consequences with HCPs are similar to gently setting limits with children. You do it to help them in the long run.

**Examples**

For numerous examples of using the CARS Method, see our book *It's All Your Fault at Work*, which includes using this approach with customers, co-workers, supervisors and even heads of companies and other organizations.

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*They are the authors of *It's All Your Fault at Work! Managing Narcissists and Other High-Conflict People and New Ways for Work: Personal Skills for Productive Relationships – Coaching Manual and Workbook*. For more, [www.HighConflictInstitute.com](http://www.HighConflictInstitute.com).*