Setting the Agenda
(For Meetings That Include Potentially High-Conflict People)

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Whether you are a manager developing the agenda for a team meeting, a mediator or lawyer setting the agenda for a negotiation session, or a facilitator of a family or community meeting, the way you set the agenda can focus or doom your whole discussion. When there are one or more high-conflict people involved, it becomes especially important to set the tone of the meeting in the way you set the agenda. This article looks at two common problems and three tips for managing this process.

Issues of High-Conflict People

High-conflict people have a lot of all-or-nothing thinking, unmanaged emotions, extreme behavior, and a preoccupation with blaming others. They frequently feel helpless, vulnerable and weak, and often like "victims in life" – which is different from people who are victims in specific situations, such as victims of bullies, domestic violence or torture. By having this victim-in-life stance, they truly feel others are always to blame and that they never play a part in the problems they face – even when everyone else can see that they have a significant role in making things better or worse for themselves.

They may constantly expect to be abandoned, disrespected, dominated, ignored or betrayed, because of their personality patterns. Yet you can't confront them with this, because they lack self-awareness of their part in the problem and will intensely defend themselves by attacking you for criticizing them – even when you thought you were being helpful. So don't angrily confront them or try to give them insights into themselves.

Of course, personality patterns exist across a spectrum, so that some people demonstrate these problems much more than others. Also, many of these individuals can make useful contributions if their negative tendencies are well-managed. With that in mind, it helps to understand two specific problems they often have in meetings – endless grievances and lack of impulse control – and how to manage these common problems productively.

Endless Grievances

For many of the above reasons, high-conflict people seek opportunities to complain and blame, to anyone who will listen. Rather than giving them relief, airing these grievances appears to be an endless process. And if they don't get the sympathy they think they deserve, they may angrily turn against the listener(s).

Therefore, if they are not sufficiently included in setting the agenda for a meeting, they may feel treated unfairly and may feel justified in personally attacking the leader of the meeting and trying to hijack the meeting agenda to air their grievances. To avoid this tendency, it helps to simply

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include them (and everyone else) in setting the agenda from the start, by giving them opportunities to participate – but in ways that are structured and limited.

Tip #1: Getting Agenda Topics

The first tip for managing a good agenda is to include everyone who will attend the meeting or everyone present at the meeting in suggesting agenda topics. You could solicit potential topics beforehand to save time and to avoid surprises, or you could say at the meeting: "For today's meeting, I'd like to give everyone a chance to suggest agenda items for discussion. I'll write these down, then from this list we can make today's Agenda, including the order of issues and where to start. And of course I'd like you to think of some proposed solutions for any problems you put on this list. Who wants to go first?"

If you are the manager/meeting facilitator, you can write down what each person says on a note pad or a group flip chart, so that they feel included, respected and important to the meeting. At this point, just write down everything that is suggested for the agenda, since this is not the Agenda itself, but merely suggestions for the agenda. If someone suggests something strange, still include it in your notes. Then, if you have important agenda items of your own that no one else has mentioned yet, say what they are and make a note of them too.

Tip #2: Finalizing the Agenda

The second tip is to ask the participants to help you finalize the agenda with what really needs to be discussed today and in what order, from the list you gathered. This will help trim and focus the agenda, to fit the time that will be available. As the meeting leader, you can say why certain items may be more important – or why some topics are not yet ready for this particular meeting. But at least you have *considered* what everyone said by writing their items down and thinking about them.

As the meeting leader, you will ordinarily get to write the final agenda, since you are in charge of the process of the meeting. But it may help to have the meeting members jointly determine where to start and the order of the agenda. In high-conflict negotiations, this approach helps calm upset people because it is so inclusive rather than excluding them (which they often expect because of past experiences, when people tried to shut them down rather than working with them in this manner).

Time Allocation: In workgroups in particular, prior to the start of the meeting, it helps to allocate time for each item on the agenda and to select a time-keeper to manage the timing of each discussion. Also, as the manager, you should state ahead of time that you will stick to the timetable and that any further discussions should occur afterwards outside of the meeting. This sets a respectful limit prior to any intensity which may develop over a topic.

In a workgroup team meeting, a manager or other leader can use this approach to help build the team and create a sense of teamwork. The manager can always say why certain topics aren't appropriate for the meeting or why other topics no one else mentioned may need to be discussed. But in order to get "buy-in," it can help to include all of the meeting participants in finalizing this agenda and sticking to topic timetables.

If you are leading a family meeting – such as a family business meeting, a meeting about a member's healthcare or mental healthcare, or a meeting to make eldercare decisions – this type

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of approach can assist you in getting all family members to work together on the issues at hand. The key is including high-conflict members in a focused and limited joint agenda.

Impulse Control Problems

A common problem many high-conflict people have at meetings is a lack of impulse control. So it is not unusual for them to suddenly interrupt the group discussion and demand that the group address a topic that they suddenly feel emotionally intense about. For example: "We can't talk about this until we change our whole approach. I insist that we throw out this year's goals and start over like this…" This often catches the group and the group leader off-guard, so they pay undue attention to this interrupter and then wonder how to regain control of the meeting. This should be anticipated.

Tip #3: Maintaining the Agenda

In the above scenario, the group leader should be prepared to gently – and immediately – get back to the discussion of the topic at hand. For example: "Actually, that's not on the agenda for today. You can suggest that for a future meeting's agenda. Now let's get back to the topic at hand." This isn't to say that re-examining this year's goals should never happen, but it shouldn't be in the middle of discussing some other agenda item that everyone else agreed to discuss at this meeting.

Of course, if something comes up that seems worthwhile to consider, you can always discuss adding it to the end of the agenda. It is important, however, to be consistent in your responses so that a high-conflict person does not feel disrespected or marginalized by the process. This consistency of approach will go a long way toward creating a trusting environment for everyone.

Summary

High-conflict people appear to be increasing in organizations, families and communities these days. Yet many of them have worthwhile contributions to make and can be managed with good structure and limit-setting. By including everyone's suggestions for topics (Tip #1) and including everyone in finalizing an agenda with time allocations (Tip #2), even high-conflict people can feel valued and more invested in restraining their urge to air their endless grievances. If necessary, the manager or meeting facilitator can also use the agenda for gently reining in disruptive comments (Tip #3), without passively accepting the disruption or angrily confronting the person and creating a scene (and a new grievance). You can actually maintain more control by being more inclusive, using a structure and limit-setting in this manner from the start.

Bill Eddy is a lawyer, therapist and mediator. He is the President of 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 Work℠: Personal Skills for Productive Relationships – Coaching Manual and Workbook. Other methods developed by Bill Eddy include: New Ways for Families®, New Ways for Mediation℠, New Ways for Work℠, The CARS Method℠ and BIFF Response®. For more information on managing a potentially high-conflict person or situation, visit us at www.HighConflictInstitute.com.

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