

High Conflict Employees

The inevitable link between high conflict people, their behaviour and low emotional intelligence.

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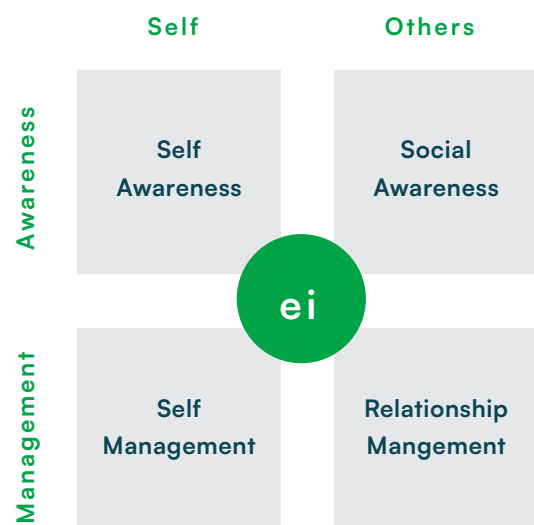
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I haven't yet met a manager or business owner with a bit of work experience under their belt who has not had at least one experience of working with or having to deal with a high conflict employee at some point in what is sure to be a memorable chapter of their work life — and not necessarily for the right reasons.

It is likely the high conflict individual may be described colloquially as “high maintenance”, “like a dog with a bone”, “utterly exhausting” or some other descriptor pitching this person at the most extreme end of ‘challenging’ compared to their peers and co-workers. It should come as no surprise then that some of the populist literature refers to them as “emotional vampires”. Let's explore what is going on and why they are such hard work.

Over the years, we have conducted formal research into what profile constitutes a high conflict personality, and more importantly, behaviour in the workplace. Through this research bolstered by our experience and learning through the various workplace mediations, team assessments and coaching engagements we have undertaken, we have formed some consistent insights into this particularly challenging employee type. As you prepare to read this list, I hazard to guess that you may already have somebody in mind that you suspect might be deemed to be “high conflict”.

Here is a list of some of the dimensions and factors that were identified. In addition, we have found a useful model and overlay is to consider high conflict behaviour in relation to emotional intelligence as there would appear to be a high inverse correlation between the two. That is, high conflict: low emotional intelligence (and dare I say, vice versa). These hallmarks and factors have been organised in terms of Daniel Goleman's 4 dimensions of emotional intelligence shown below as so much of what we experience with high conflict employees tends to reflect one or more dimensions of emotional intelligence that is poorly developed or non-existent!



I have taken the liberty of **highlighting in bold** some of the key dimensions that we find resonate strongly with clients we support when dealing with high conflict people.

SELF AWARENESS →

- **Lack personal insight and is unable to reflect on own behaviour**
- **Self-absorbed - focused on getting their own needs met (irrespective of the impact this might have on others)**
- Rules apply to others not to them — they need to be treated specially
- May lack remorse for the impact they cause on others



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High Conflict Employees and Emotional Intelligence

SELF MANAGEMENT →

- Poor impulse control
- Mood swings from charming to vindictive
- **Will not accept negative feedback and likely to respond in an aggressively defensive manner**
- Arguments often lack logic or reason and tend to be argued more emotively
- More likely to make vexatious or multiple grievances or claims — can sometimes become querulous in their pursuit of a litany of grievances, allegations and complaints.
- **Avoid responsibility for both the problem or solution**
- Find it difficult to accept and heal from loss
- Get easily stuck in conflicts over minor or existent events
- **Develop ‘targets of blame’ for whom they can become highly emotionally aggressive and blame totally for everything wrong in their life**

SOCIAL AWARENESS →

- **Lack empathy for others**
- Evidence high conflict thinking and reasoning driven by their inner world and deeply held fears
- See their targets as either ‘all good’ or ‘all bad’ with no positive qualities at all — noting all goods can flip to all bads on a whim
- Frequently misinterpret events and other people’s intentions

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT →

- Puts others down
- May manage well upwards — often levels above direct line manager
- Preoccupied with blaming others - it’s always someone else’s problem or fault

- Rigid and uncompromising
- **Preoccupied with blaming specific people (often their manager) who becomes their targets of blame**
- Recruit others (negative advocates) to attack their targets
- Often present as a convincing victim of some one else who, usually, has become their target of blame
- Feel entitled to things (above others) and demand it now
- Manipulate relationships to serve own interests

You may have noted above that the self management and management of others quadrants tend to be where the full challenge of dealing with high conflict employees is truly experienced. So, step one is recognising that you might be dealing with a high conflict person in which case your usual “bag of tricks” may not be working, or everything you have tried has made little if any impact. Step two is learning some new approaches, disciplines and skills to improve how you deal with them. Good luck.

Some of the distinctions in this article have been adapted from Bill Eddy’s book, “It’s All Your Fault” — 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others For Everything (2012)



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