

Yes, No or I'll Think About It

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Whether in a divorce, a workplace dispute, or a conflict with a neighbor, it's easy to get caught up in defending our own behavior and point of view. This is especially true when we are dealing with a high conflict person (HCP). They quickly "push our buttons," and it's easy to react before we know it. They often seem driven to engage in negative conversations rather than trying to solve problems. The focus quickly becomes personal attacks and counter-attacks.

But you don't have to join in. Instead, you can use two simple steps that seem to help, no matter what setting you are in. If you think you are going to be dealing with an HCP, avoid getting hooked and feeding the conflict by reminding yourself of these two steps before you start talking. And if you are in the middle of an argument, you can always shift to this approach.

First, let's look at a couple of typical high conflict arguments in divorce and workplace disputes:

DIVORCE:

Joe [responding to negative feedback]: "So what! Sometimes I have to work late on Fridays, so I'll be late for picking up the kids. You'll just have to live with it if you want me to keep my job. You don't give a s—t about how hard I work to pay you child support!"

Mary: "You are so insulting. I have half a mind to go back to court and just end your visitation. Wait 'til the judge sees all these rude emails you keep sending to me!"

WORKPLACE:

Steve: "You always talk loud in your cubicle next to mine. You are a rude and insensitive person. I don't know why you had to pick this cubicle. It was really pleasant in this office before you moved in!"

Sharon: "You know, you're an a—hole. I have to make a lot more calls than you do. How can you say such B.S. You know you're the busybody here. Nobody likes you. They've all told me, behind your back!"

Instead of getting caught up in these defensive and personal disputes, just focus on two steps:

- 1) At any point in the dispute, you can say "What do you propose?" Or you can just make a proposal.
- 2) In response to a proposal, you can simply say: "Yes" "No" or "I'll think about it."

(If you can both agree to use this approach, you probably are not dealing with an HCP.)

1) First Person: MAKE A PROPOSAL

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 and propose it.

For example, in the DIVORCE dispute: "If you're going to be late to pick up the kids on Fridays, then I propose we just change the pickup time to a more realistic time. Instead of 5pm, let's make it 6:30pm."

Or in the WORKPLACE dispute: "I propose that we talk to our manager about finding a better cubicle for you, since you have so many phone calls that need to be made."

2) Second Person: YES, NO, or I'LL THINK ABOUT IT

All you have to do to respond to such a proposal is say: Yes, No, or I'll think about it. You always have the right to say: Yes, No, or I'll think about it. Of course, there are consequences to each choice, but you always have these three choices at least. Here's some examples of each:

YES: "Yes, I agree. Let's do that." And then stop! No need to save face, evaluate the other person's proposal, or give the other person some negative feedback. Just let it go. After all, hostile attacks are not about you. They are about the person making the hostile attack. You are better off to ignore everything else.

NO: "No, I don't want to change the pickup time. I'll try to make other arrangements to get there on time. Let's keep it as is." Just keep it simple. Avoid the urge to defend your decision or criticize the other person's idea. You said no. You're done. Let it drop.

I'LL THINK ABOUT IT: "I don't know about your proposal, but I'll think about it. I'll get back to you tomorrow about your idea. Right now I have to get back to work. Thanks for making a proposal." Once again, just stop the discussion there. Avoid the temptation to discuss it at length, or question the validity of the other person's point of view. It is what it is.

When you say "I'll think about it," you are respecting the other person. It calms people down to know you are taking them seriously enough to think about what they said. This doesn't mean you will agree. It just means you'll think about it.

MAKE A NEW PROPOSAL: After you think about it, you can always make a new proposal. Perhaps you'll think of a new approach that neither of you thought of before. Try it out. You can always propose anything. (But remember there are consequences to each proposal.) And you can always respond: Yes, no, or I'll think about it. (And there are consequences to each of those choices, too.)

AVOID MAKING IT PERSONAL: In the heat of the conflict, it's easy to react and criticize the other person's proposals—or even to criticize the other person personally, such as saying that he or she is arrogant, ignorant, crazy or evil. It's easy and natural to want to say: "You're so stupid it makes me sick." Or: "What are you, crazy?" "Your proposal is the worst idea I have ever heard." But if you want to end the dispute and move on, just ask for a proposal and respond "Yes" "No" or "I'll think about it."

High Conflict Institute provides training and consultations regarding High Conflict People (HCPs) to professionals dealing with legal, workplace, educational, and healthcare disputes. Bill Eddy is the President of the High Conflict Institute and the author of "It's All Your Fault!" He is an attorney, mediator, and therapist. Bill has presented seminars to attorneys, judges, mediators, ombudspersons, human resource professionals, employee assistance professionals, managers, and administrators in 25 states, several provinces in Canada, France, and Australia. For more information about High Conflict Institute, our seminars and consultations, or Bill Eddy and his books go to: www.HighConflictInstitute.com or call 602-606-7628.