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Our Interior Landscape

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Managing High-Conflict Personalities— A Missing Piece

By Stephen H. Sulmeyer, JD, PhD

Every collaborative professional knows how challenging and draining it can be dealing with high-conflict people in our cases. Whether these people are angry, rude, controlling, manipulative, insulting or disrespectful; whether they suffer from an undiagnosed mental health disorder; or whether they're simply trying to protect themselves from overwhelming pain by defaulting to outmoded coping strategies, the net effect on us is often the same: we can get thrown off-center, we can start to doubt ourselves and our competence, and we can often reach for our own less than optimal coping strategies. Many well-meaning conflict professionals (such as Bill Eddy in his book *High Conflict Personalities*, a book I admire very much) encourage us to focus on and try to understand what makes the difficult person tick, and to come up with strategies for dealing with such persons. As important as such an approach is, it is only half the story. What has been under-emphasized is the necessity of understanding who we are on the other end of such difficult people: how our reactions to such individuals might be contributing to the difficulties we experience with them, and what we might do to shore up our resilience. By devoting more time and energy to ourselves and the nature of our defenses and reactions, as well as our strengths, we can greatly increase our capacity for tolerating the inevitable discomfort that high conflict engenders.

I start from the premise that almost everyone is afraid of the painful and frightening affects that arise in them in the face of high conflict. I also start from the premise that most of us default to the defenses we perfected in childhood to avoid feeling and being aware of such emotions. The word Freud coined for such defenses is resistance. Resistance naturally tends to get triggered in the face of difficult people and situations, so as I see it resistance itself is not the problem. The problem, rather, is our unawareness of our resistance or, if we are aware of

our resistance, our refusal to question it and instead to automatically go along with our self-protective strategies and behaviors anyway. Either way, such giving in to our resistance and the fears the resistance is trying to allay results in our “playing it safe,” maintaining an alienating distance from the parties and from ourselves. Clients can feel, even if only unconsciously, when we are less than fully connected to them. If we can develop the resilience that will allow us to be open to what is actually arising within us, we can permit ourselves to be emotionally impacted by the parties—including difficult personalities—and stand with them in the center of their conflict.

To my mind, the key to self-resilience in the face of high conflict is the development of our negative capacity. I define negative capacity along similar lines to the poet, John Keats's description of what he called “negative capability,” which he described as the ability to stay with confusion and doubt “without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” It is the capacity to tolerate what feels intolerable within us without either suppressing it or acting it out—that is, without grasping at the life-preserver of our usual defenses, including our rational/ logical thinking and our tendency to move into problem-solving mode. The first prerequisite of negative capacity as I use the term is mindfulness. It is mindfulness that gives us the ability to “sit in the fire” of our experience without running away—to stay *present* to and *allow* painful, difficult and even terrifying feelings and emotions. Inevitably, this refusal to grasp for our usual defenses results in an experience of not-knowing, something most lawyers are notoriously uncomfortable with, and which can be quite disorienting for anyone. Importantly, the allowing of our inner experience includes the toleration of not-knowing and its concomitant discomfort.

But negative capacity is not a grit-your-teeth-and-take-it

way of tolerating uncomfortable thoughts and feelings by mere force of will. Here we encounter the second prerequisite of negative capacity: *welcoming* our experience with genuine caring and curiosity, desiring to become intimate with it. Gabor Maté calls this *compassionate inquiry*. John Prendergast calls it *affectionate attention*. It is fueled in part by loving the truth more than we love feeling good. And it is fueled in part by holding ourselves with at least as much compassion as we hold others. Self-compassion, in turn, can be aided by approaching our inner experience along the lines suggested by Internal Family Systems, which recognizes that we are made up of many parts. Compassionate self-inquiry in this regard might start with such questions as, what part of me is triggered by this sort of person? Why does this part of me react in the particular way that it does? What are its default self-protective mechanisms, and why does it feel the need for protection? What is this part of me needing from me right now in order to feel safe and loved? What do I need to do, internally, to maximize my own resilience in the face of such challenging individuals? Such compassionate questioning allows us to achieve what the philosopher Eric Voegelin called *reflective distance*, meaning a certain amount of safe space between ourselves and our troublesome feelings while still maintaining the ability to reflect upon those feelings. It also leads to something many of us are truly frightened of—vulnerability. And yet it is precisely the allowing of our vulnerability that, perhaps paradoxically, permits us to land squarely in our humanness, which leads to greater intimacy with ourselves and the people we work with.

This combination of mindfulness and inquiry often leads to a palpable shift in which our seemingly unendurable feelings and sensations reveal their truth, just as in a Greek myth where a monster finally shares its gifts. Consider this quotation from Jack Kornfield:

Tibetan practices teach us that we benefit by honoring and feeding the demons. When the demons arrive we must recognize that they are part of the dance of life itself. When they threaten, it is only our illusions that are in danger. The deeper our bow to the awesome changing powers of life, the wiser we will be, and when we embrace them, they turn into a rainbow.¹

I believe Gary Friedman was pointing to something

similar when he wrote, with regard to our negative judgments of others that can arise in mediation,

We discovered that the judgments that seem the most destructive—the ones laden with negative emotions and characterizations of the clients—are as valuable as they are inescapable. Our judgments, when we examine them, can point us toward emotional layers of the situation that are essential to helping our clients solve their problems... “[W]e often find that with every discomfort, doubt, irritation, and judgment we notice, we’re creating a map of the emotional terrain of the situation, a framework of concerns that any solution will have to take into account to work for the parties.²

Thus, negative capacity leads to a “positive” capability. If we stay with the not-knowing and the discomfort something else opens up, including our somatic and heart intelligences, our intuition, our insight, and our wisdom. Negative capacity enables us, in other words, to harness other, positive potentials that we have, and to make space for something genuinely new and unexpected to arise. All of these can then lead to both connection with the difficult person or persons in question, as well as discovery of the keys to possible agreement and resolution. And in the process of harnessing these positive competencies something inside of us relaxes, because we are no longer fighting our experience. This relaxation leads directly to resilience, clarity, and flexibility, all of which are attributes of successful self-care.

It can also lead to what I refer to as *discernment*. By sitting in the fire of our discomfort, by tolerating what seems intolerable, an inner calm arises. Like the eye of a hurricane, we can abide in this calm even though we are surrounded by a vortex of difficult feelings and reactions. And in that inner clearing a kind of centeredness and stillness are possible that allow us to attend to what is arising within us and outside us, and to discern what is, or what might be, really happening. This is not dissimilar to what Adyashanti describes in the following quotation:

Once you taste this stillness, this peace, then the ego will stand out in stark contrast to it. The vortex of suffering will then be much easier to see. You may go unconscious for moments, you may not always see the ego trying to hijack you with various thoughts,

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but even when that happens, if you just stop for a moment and see the pattern, then a gap opens up. It's a doorway to a different possibility—a possibility to experience the peace and happiness for which you've always been longing—even when you are right in the middle of conflict.³

As an example: imagine being in a seven-way meeting and suddenly feeling utterly incompetent. (I know none of you have ever had this experience, but try to imagine it.) The last thing we want to feel, let alone be perceived by others, is that we are incompetent. Our usual response to feeling incompetent is probably something like “oh my god,” followed by “what do I need to do so I at least appear competent?” This is what I call taking our feelings at face value, and then reacting to them. Imagine

now that, instead of reacting this way, you were to notice that feelings of incompetence are arising in you, to feel those feelings, and then to ask yourself, “I wonder what it might mean about what's happening in this meeting that these feelings are arising in me? Could it be that someone else in the room is feeling this way? Might someone else in the room be feeling lost, confused, scared, and helpless?” In this way we are not only discerning what we are feeling, but also attempting to discern what that feeling might mean about what's happening in a collaborative meeting. It's no longer just about us!

In this hypothetical situation we would, in other words, be attempting to discern what is happening within the *interpersonal field* that is created whenever two or more people are together (even by Zoom). The interpersonal field is an ontologically real phenomenon that debunks the illusion of separateness. Rather, it is a manifestation of our connectedness. Even though we feel into the interpersonal field through the lens of our own consciousness and feelings—which is why it's so easy to assume that whatever we're feeling is about us—in fact what we're feeling is influenced by what others in the field are feeling. Our feelings, in other words, are in *sympathetic resonance* with the people with whom we are present. Just as a plucked violin in one corner of a room will cause the same string on another violin in the opposite corner of the room to vibrate, so one person's feelings of fear or incompetence will cause others in the room to feel similarly. How do we know who the “real” source of the feeling is? We can't. But by exercising our discernment, we can at least start asking questions, like, “I'm wondering if anyone in the room is feeling confused right now, or am I the only one?” There is usually a collective sigh of relief when everyone raises their hands.

When there are one or more difficult people in that meeting, reflective distance and inner discernment allow us to ask similar questions regarding feelings we may be having of judgment, contempt, disgust, fear, and so forth. Again, such feelings might be our own, and/or might belong to others in the room — including the difficult person. We could then ask questions about the uncomfortable feelings in the room, or we could simply remain centered and allow the messiness to continue to unfold and, ultimately, reveal itself. Either way, by

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resisting the temptation to react defensively, we might be able to hear what the difficult person is saying behind his or her words, find something lovable about that person, and perhaps be able to say along with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we would find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all our hostility.” Attending to process in this way often leads to a great leap forward substantively as well.

Finally, when it comes to “managing” high-conflict personalities it’s crucially important that we not forget our bodies. Basic self-soothing techniques can be invaluable when dealing with a high-conflict individual. These include slow, deep, diaphragmatic breathing, feeling our feet on the ground, sitting upright, sensing our arms and legs, and feeling *where in our bodies* we are feeling discomfort and tension. All of these techniques tend to engage our parasympathetic nervous system, which is what calms and eventually shuts down our fight-or-flight response. Plenty has been written about these techniques, so I’ll simply mention them here. But this is not to devalue them. On the contrary, getting centered in our bodies is a good place to start when dealing with high-conflict personalities.

To conclude, when dealing with high-conflict personalities it behooves us not only to try to understand *what kind* of difficult personality we’re dealing with and what might be the best strategies for “managing” them, but perhaps even more importantly to attend to

ourselves and our inner thoughts, reactions and defenses. By managing our inner state, and attending to our thoughts, fears, judgments and reactions, we minimize the odds of our own acting out and contributing to impasse. We also open the possibility of using our discomfort to find the key that is needed to disarm the difficulty and reach a resolution that is satisfactory to all. By simultaneously attending to our bodies we can further give ourselves the support we need to respond to a given situation with curiosity, compassion, and wisdom. As one mediator reminds us, “Engaging conflict with awareness is a powerful spiritual practice because we are confronting the protective mechanisms of our ego in the moment. Much in the same way that we have learned to countenance difficult sensations while meditating, we find that we can remain present despite all sorts of impulses to do something else. We discover that an impulse is not an imperative.”⁴

Notes

¹ Jack Kornfield, *After The Ecstasy, The Laundry* (2001) at 136.

² Gary Friedman, *Inside Out* (2014) at 46, 98.

³ Adyashanti, *Falling Into Grace* (2013) at 66-67.

⁴ Diane Musho Hamilton, *Everything Is Workable: A Zen Approach to Conflict Resolution* (2013) at 30.