

Practical Skills to De-Escalate Conflict

20/06/2023

CCH Learning:

Hi everyone and welcome to today's webinar regarding Practical Skills to Deescalate Conflict. I'm Alison Wood from CCH Learning Wolters Kluwer and I'll be your moderator for today.

Just a few quick pointers before we get started. I'd like to let you all know in the handout section of the GoTo Webinar panel is where you'll find your PowerPoint presentation for today. If you are experiencing sound problems, you can jump into the audio section and try toggle between audio and phone. And shortly after the presentation today, we will send you an email letting you know the e-learning recording is ready to be viewed. You can ask questions at any point during the session today, simply type them in the questions box and I will collate those questions and ask them at the Q&A at the end of today's presentation.

CCH Learning also offers a subscription service, which many people have termed Netflix for professionals. It provides members with access to our entire library of recordings as well as live webinars for a very competitive flat fee. That's for over 500 hours of content. For CPD purposes, your viewing is logged automatically.

Your presenter today is Helen Jarvis, counsellor and founder of Ripple Learning. Helen is an experienced nationally accredited mediator, family dispute resolution practitioner, counselor, coach, facilitator of restorative engagement conferences and clinical supervisor in private practice. She helps individuals and organizations to have the difficult conversations that often accompany the distress and conflict typically experience during periods of change. She's also a trainer for the Mediator Training Program and graduate diploma of Family Dispute Resolution for the College of law. Helen is also the founder of Ripple Learning, a social enterprise which facilitates customized workshops for workplaces on the skills people need to resolve conflict, manage stress, and maximize performance. 100% of the profits are directed to effective youth mental services. So without any further ado, I will pass you over to Helen to commence today's presentation.

Helen Jarvis:

Thanks so much Alison, and lovely to connect with you all today. Today we're going to spend time in quite a practical zone talking about the skills that we can use to deescalate conflict in all those tricky, messy, difficult conversations that you find yourselves in, whether that might be working with a client, whether it might be communicating with a colleague, trying to manage a staff member or sometimes managing up within your organization. And of course their skills are always also going to be useful on the home front as well.

We're going to talk particularly about the tactical, pragmatic skills you can use to take conflict from that highly energized, highly activated intense mode where you find yourself in that space thinking, "I'm really not sure what to say or how to respond." Perhaps responding angrily, assertively or aggressively or finding yourselves walking away from the conversation thinking, "Ah, I should have said... I wish I could have... If only I thought at the time to say this then a path forward might have been found." So they're the sorts of situations that we'll focus on and navigate today.

I want to name at the start though that I'm not coming at this conversation from the frame of reference that implies in any way that conflict is a bad thing. Actually, conflict can be really useful and helpful at its best. When you get conflict that is constructive, you're going to get effective problem solving, lots of creativity, a shift in mindset that facilitates change and growth, building mutual respect and a new sense of trust within teammates when we found our path through conflict in a constructive mode. Of course we don't want to end up down the destructive end of the spectrum and that's what we're trying to steer away from today. Or once it's in that highly emotive space, how to move into that solution-focus mode rather than finding yourself staying stuck.

Conflict, interestingly, I think is often viewed by people as being a crisis station, something to avoid. And I note you can see up in the top right-hand corner of the visual here is the traditional Chinese symbol for the word crisis. I love it because in one image it captures the image for danger and opportunity. And I think when we are talking conflict, both are present. There is both danger in the moment if it's not managed well, but also lots of opportunity for those really constructive outcomes to be found.

Effectively, what we are trying to do all the time is hunt for that sweet spot between silence and violence. And the pendulum keeps swinging. So every single interaction we are in where there's conflict, that line, that ideal line that somewhere around the assertive mark down the bottom of the pendulum here, that ideal moment is going to be in a different place in every single context. So if you find yourself thinking, "I've had lots of practice at conflict but I still haven't mastered it yet," that absolutely makes sense because it's actually very hard to do conflict perfectly because there are so many variables in the mix in every single situation.

So one of the observations I'd make as we talk about the practical skills we need, one of them is to go kindly with ourselves, to stay in the zone where we're curious about how to find the best possible path forward but not judging our own efforts as we try to navigate it because it is complex and the path forward is never going to be consistently the same, which means that our practice of conflict resolution is never going to be perfectly done. You're just hunting for that sweet spot between silence and violence, and indeed between that passive and aggressive end of the spectrum.

The conflict emerges continuously and often for us in the types of situations where expectations don't match reality, always going to generate huge stress and often conflict, often in situations where we are navigating change and particularly where we don't feel safe. I've popped up here the Change Curve. Some of you might recognize it as the Kubler-Ross stages of grief or a variation of that. The Change Curve was actually developed before those Kubler-Ross stages of grief. But very normal human journey. Anytime we navigate change of any kind is to find ourselves going on a bit of a rollercoaster.

Mostly somewhere on that journey there's been a period of frustration where we feel really stuck and it's a tension point where conflict often emerges. Conflict also often emerges when we're at different stages on that change journey. So if you are in a team where there's been a lot of change and you are moving forward experimenting with the new or more decisively deciding to move forward, but you find yourself interacting with people who are back stuck in that frustrated, angry mode, the interaction between people being at different stages in that change journey can also increase our stress levels and of course also increase the conflict.

At the heart of it really, we're talking about all those times when people don't feel safe. So before we get into the practical skills we're going to use, I want to touch just for a few minutes on what's happening in our brains and bodies in situations when our stress levels are really high and we don't feel safe. Because I think when we understand the dynamic of what's happening in our brains and bodies, it fundamentally changes the way we choose to manage our own emotions in the situation of conflict and also how we choose to engage with others in that period of conflict.

So I've popped up here on the left some of the typical symptoms that you will often see emerging yourself when you are anticipating working into that difficult conversation where there might be conflict or when you watch the conflict coming at you across the room through the look or someone coming to engage in dialogue with you. Most of us will find that you feel your heart start to beat a little bit faster. Often your mouth goes dry, the muscles get tense fraction when you're in period of conflict for a long period of time. Often people get those tension head headaches from those tight muscles in the shoulders and neck going up into the head. In those really high conflict patches, your breathing might become faster and more shallow, perhaps some sweating in the mix as well and difficulty concentrating.

Effectively, what we're talking about is that fight, flight, or freeze response in action. Everybody's familiar with those terms, but let's talk for a minute about what's happening within our brains. Over on the right-hand side of the slide, you can see an image there of a brain, everybody's brain, as if it's kind of cut through on the side. So it gives us a bit of a look inside internally. The way the diagram's drawn, it captures what's often talked about the three levels of the brain or the triune brain.

The reptilian brain sitting down at the base of our brain, attached to our spinal cord and running down and connected to our sensors. This is the bit of the brain whose job it is to keep us alive, to keep our heart pumping, to keep us breathing, to keep oxygen flowing to our brain. Often gets referred to as the fast thinking brain because it is the bit of the brain that needs to stay in operation at all costs no matter what is occurring. And so in situations of high stress, in situations of high pressure and often high conflict, all our energy gets redirected down to these fast thinking components of our back brain so that the focus stays on ensuring that we continue to breathe and operate and stay alive.

Up above that reptilian brain is our mammalian... It often gets called the mammalian brain. It's our limbic system which is the seat of our emotional and feeling response. Up above that is our neocortex. Down the front where the snail is pointing is our prefrontal cortex. This section of the brain sometimes called the human bit of the brain is also often referred to as the slow thinking part of the brain, and it's because there's an order of processing in operation.

So as humans, we scan the environment for threats all day, every day. You are scanning it while you sleep, you scan the environment as you emerge into the day, head off to work, sitting at your desk reviewing your emails and the inbox that's filled overnight. And as we read through and anticipate the stress and conflict that goes with the task to be completed or the difficult conversations to have, our stress response gets activated. And very quickly within about 15 milliseconds, the message goes from our sensors up through our reptilian brain and into our mammalian brain and we have first an emotional response to the situation where before we can even name what it is that's causing our stress, what it is that's worrying us, before we can do any processing or organizing of our thoughts around how to proceed, our emotional response kicks in first. And so this fast thinking piece of our brain is that physical response that activates our heart to beat faster, ensures we keep breathing and our emotional response.

Now if the stress levels aren't too ridiculously high, the message then heads up to our neocortex and our prefrontal cortex to give a name to what it is that we are knowing and experiencing as stress and then to be able to engage in an analytical and solution focused way to problem solve in relation to the stress or what we're talking about today as in relation to the conflict that triggered that stress. But the message takes a little while to get here.

Now, if the stress levels are really high, the message may never make it past the mammalian brain in an organized format into our slow thinking neocortex and prefrontal cortex. It's almost as if that part of our brain, and in many respects it does go offline and stops operating and functioning properly. So there's times when you find yourself feeling really lost for words, struggling to find an appropriate response are going to be the times when your reptilian brain and your mammalian brain, that emotional response has overridden that logical, rational problem solving piece of the brain.

Dan Siegel, who's an expert in this area, uses the phrase "flip the lid" to describe what's happening for humans in those high stress moments where effectively he would say that prefrontal cortex goes offline, we flip our lid and there's next to no logical, rational problem solving happening up there. Now the challenge for us in a situation of high conflict is you have two people with flipped lids, the person who perhaps brought the conflict to us and for ourselves as well, being triggered by the person we're engaging with our prefrontal cortex also goes offline. And so you have two people engaging in a highly emotional way with their fast thinking parts of their brain activated and that logical, rational bit of their problem solving bit of their brain not online yet.

Now I've kind of lingered here in the explanation of this because I think when you understand that it's an order of processing thing and we are going to react first both physically and emotionally before our logical, rational problem solving bit of our brain has the opportunity to override and reprogram our decision making, that the reaction happens first. And so because of that, in situations of conflict and high conflict, the skills we're going to apply need to focus first on how do we speak to our reptilian brain and our mammalian brain to convey to ourselves that we are safe. Because if we convey to ourselves that we are safe, we are going to be able to bring that logical, rational problem solving bit of our brain back online.

Similarly, for the person that we're interacting with, that we're in conflict with, we need to be able to convey to them that they are safe. There is no point us trying to have a logical, rational problem solving conversation with them until they're feeling safe. Because quite literally, the bit of the brain we need them to be engaging isn't working effectively at that point in time. So from a skills' perspective, which is what I'm going to start to engage with now, our focus is on keeping ourselves in that logical, rational space and calming ourselves but on also supporting the person we're engaging with to feel safe. And of course it's a little bit of a dance as we go.

So the skills we'll touch on over the next hour is the skills of how to regulate our own emotions and stay calm in the moment, the skills we're going to use to hear them out because helping a person to feel really deeply heard and understood is the most effective way to bring them into a zone of emotional safety as quickly as possible. Then we'll talk through the skills of how to engage assertively, how to communicate our views and needs assertively and respectfully in the hope that we can keep both ourselves and them in an emotionally safe zone so that we can engage in logical, rational problem solving, giving those prefrontal cortex as something to do. We'll also spend a little bit of time talking about the skills we need to repair in situations where the conflict has merged because we've stuffed up, we've done something wrong, and we need to make an apology.

And then towards the end, we'll touch on the situations where all these other skills I've been talking about aren't effective. So that small percentage of the population which are often referred to as high conflict personalities, quite often some personality disorders in the mix. We need to shift gears a little bit when we look at deescalating conflict with engaging with those personality types. So we'll touch on that a little towards the end as well.

Okay, so let's talk a bit about what we can do first of all to keep ourselves calm and centered. And remember, the goal is to get that prefrontal cortex to be able to turn back on. First thing I'd say is we want to think carefully about the where and the when of any conversations of conflict. If you can possibly control the location and the timing, you are in a position then to be able to buy yourself time to let some of that adrenaline and cortisol out of your system or you have to do some exercise to release it from your system so that you're in a state that you're already less triggered.

Ideally, you'd also want to be able to choose a location which is private and confidential so that for the two of you in conflict with each other, others aren't going to be able to observe because of course that's going to make both of you feel more unsafe most of the time I'd say. Sometimes if physical safety is in the mix, a public context may be more appropriate. But I'm not really talking about those at physically unsafe situations as much today.

The next thing I'd say is that we want to actually actively trick our body into a calm state by doing the opposite of what that threat response activation has done to us. So when we are triggered, when that threat response is activated, your muscles tighten, your breath speeds up, you hold yourself more tightly. And so if we want to regulate our own emotions, we want to do a big breath out and just slow our breathing right down. We're also going to consciously choose to relax our body. You might choose to sit back in your chair, put yourself into that more slumped body position that conveys your body the message that "I'm in no rush. There's plenty of time here" and creates that feeling of relaxation and actively letting your jaw muscles relax, letting the muscles in your body relax.

Then giving our prefrontal cortex something to do also helps it to come back online and stay online. In my mind, I often use that phrase that we all use in relation to muscles. That use it or lose it, use your muscles or you lose your muscles. It works the same with your prefrontal cortex. Get that logical, rational problem solving bit of your brain busy and engaged in consciously making decisions about the choices you are making as opposed to allowing reactivity to come into the picture. So lots of conscious choices to bring us into that centered and grounded space.

Now let's talk about what we can do to support them to get grounded and to feel safe in the conversation. The most effective technique is active listening. So I'm going to introduce you to our H.E.A.R. Them Out model of active listening and really just break down the component parts of what it means to really deeply listen. Oh, it looks like our R's moved on this slide. It should be sitting up above the reframe. We'll fix that before we send it out to you. So if I focus first on what's happening under the H for here, if we are really deeply listening to somebody and really hearing them, we're going to be listening in a purposeful way for what is it they're telling us. In other words, what is the problem from their perspective that's triggered all this conflict? What are their emotions? What do they feel in relation to this? And underneath all the mess and turmoil that comes tumbling out, what is it that's at the heart of what really deeply need?

Now their heart of what they need is often at the core of the key that unlocks the conflict. When you get to the bottom of what is sitting underneath the mess of what they express and hunt for the kernel of the need that sits in the middle, that gives you a sense of what needs to be addressed to make them feel really deeply safe. So we want our listening to be purposeful. Notice, we are not listening to think about, "How am I going to respond? How am I going to counter? What am I going to say in response to what they're saying?" If we're busy doing that, if we're thinking about how we're going to respond, we've actually stopped listening because the research shows we can't multitask. We can only attention switch. So for someone to feel like you're really deeply listening to them in the moment, all your effort and energy has to be focused on what it is that they're saying, what they feel and hunting for what it is they need underneath it all.

Now because it tumbles out in a mess of chaos, we're also going to do some exploring, asking some open questions to be really curious about what is it that's going on here. What's triggered this heightened response for them? Questions like, "Can you tell me more about where you're coming from that? What is it that's got you so particularly angry today? This is a situation perhaps that's arisen before, but today your response is really heightened. Tell me what it is that's triggered you so particularly strongly today. What do you think might be some of the possible solutions we could pursue to find a path forward? What is it that has you feeling frustrated, teary, embarrassed, ashamed?" Whatever it is you think the motion might be, asking as many questions as we possibly can to as fully understand where they're coming from as possible.

Now, active listening means that we are not just hearing what they're saying, what they feel and what they need and asking questions to understand more. Active listening is just that, it's active. And so it means that we need to offer acknowledgement by either reflecting what they've said, perhaps repeating words and phrases from what they've said as they draw breath, paraphrasing what we've heard them say, or offering a really comprehensive summary that acknowledges what it is they've said, what it is they feel and what it is they need.

So perhaps we're talking about a client, we're heading to tax return time, a client that's frustrated that perhaps we haven't got the tax return completed and back to them in the timeframe that they were hoping or expecting. And so they've expressed to us in very high levels of anger how unresponsive we are and how slow our turnaround time is and how unsatisfied they are with the work we've done. So if we're going to offer an acknowledgement, I might be saying to Bob, "Bob, look, I just want to acknowledge that I can hear that your level of frustration is very, very high today. And you are clearly feeling very frustrated about the turnaround time, how quickly we have."

"Or in this case from your perspective, how slow we've been in getting the tax return completed. You've also focused on some concerns you have about our response rate to particular questions that you had and really feeling that we are not getting the information back to you in clear enough language that makes it understandable for you. And again, the timeframe within which we are doing that is, from your perspective, being really suboptimal. That's left you in a situation where you are feeling as if you're struggling to meet the deadlines that you have and that's having an impact on your work. Have I got that right?"

And the last bit is where we check for understanding. Now it might be as I'm having this conversation with Bob, I'm thinking to myself that I disagree with him, that there's lots of ways in which I feel his expectations are unreasonable because actually we've got several months to get the tax returns done yet, that actually I felt my answers to his questions were really clear and there's not much more information I could give him. It doesn't actually matter in that moment of conflict whether I am right or not. What matters is that he feels really deeply heard by me. And that acknowledgement of what he said, what he feels and what he needs is really key to helping him feel very deeply heard in the moment.

And then we check for understanding. Because if I ask Bob have I got that right and I've missed something, Bob's going to let me know. So he might come back at me with a couple more barrels of things that I've missed, but that what's helpful about that is I'm able to offer further acknowledgement to pick up on all the things I miss and acknowledge his view, his perspective of what's happened and what is it that he needs. And I might finish by saying, "Bob, I'm gathering that what matters most to you is clear, succinct language from me, accurate explanations that are technically correct, and also timeliness from your perspective is really vital. So I want to make sure that I capture those needs really clearly."

Now the last skill with our missing R up here that I do want to use is the skill of reframing. Because when we convey to a client an acknowledgement, we want to make sure that we are not amplifying the catastrophizing language, the black and white thinking, the really intensely held views that they had. So when we offer the summary, we're going to reframe the language to take it from the all or nothing thinking that they're using and pull it back to something that creates a sense of hope for a potential for change. So if Bob was to say to me, "The level of performance by your organization is the worst I've ever seen. You've let me down in the extreme," my reframing might say, "Bob, on this occasion, our work has disappointed you." And so I'm creating a sense that it may not be as terrible as he said, but of course taking care not to minimize too far or he is going to come back at me with more barrels.

So that's our skill of really hearing them out, listening for what it is they think, feel, or need, asking lots of open questions to be curious and find out more, and offering a really comprehensive acknowledgement that includes reframing. Now most of the time when you are using this skill set, you can feel like you are just stating the obvious. You're sitting there thinking to yourself, "Yep, I know what's going on here," and your brain is tempted to tick straight into solutions. Resist that urge because their readiness to engage with solutions is not yet there because that prefrontal cortex is not turned on in the state of high conflict. They're responding emotionally. So when you use your active listening skillset to hear them out, you are speaking directly to their reptilian brain and their mammalian brain, their limbic system to convey that you are genuinely interested in what it is that they're saying. And that creates for them a feeling of safety when they feel heard and understood, and then they're then able to move forward into a solution focused mode.

I want to talk just for a minute about some of the things to avoid when we're doing that active listening, using our empathetic listening, and pick up particularly here on a couple of key phrases that I'd really encourage you to avoid. Couple of the standouts are, "Calm down, calm down." Often when there's anger and conflict, people attempted to pop their hands up and wave them at the other person saying, "Calm down. Calm down." Actually, that tends to strongly activate an angry response. And so avoid using that language. The other words I really want to draw your attention to is for us to avoid using the phrase "I understand." Actually, there's been a lot of research that shows when we use that phrase, we trigger that mammalian brain, the reptilian brain, and that stress response and that person we're engaging with is much more likely to have an emotional response to what it is we are saying and for that prefrontal cortex to go offline. So instead of saying, "I understand," show them you understand by hearing them out and offering a really full comprehensive summary.

Okay, so let's move on through some of our skills. So we're keeping ourselves grounded and calm ourselves, and then we're going to focus on hearing them out to create safety for them so that they can then move forward into a solution-focused mode. Now of course, if we're deescalating conflict, we are not going to deescalate conflict with a view to being walked all over, giving in and doing exactly what it is they want in every respect. We want to make sure that we're then able to engage in a way that conveys what it is we need out of the situation as much as we have heard what it is that they need. So that means we need a way to really actively find that sweet spot between silence and violence, between passive and aggressive. And what we are hunting for is being able to communicate in a way that is assertive.

Now at the heart of it, being assertive means that we come into the conversation with the mindset and attitude that says, "Actually, we both count here. You count and I count and I'm engaging in a respectful way, which shows that I'm open to dialogue. I'm genuinely interested in finding a solution that meets either all your needs and all my needs or at least some of both of our needs. And my communication style is firm, but polite, warm and friendly." Our tone is conversational. We are honest and we stand up for ourselves. But without swinging to the end of the spectrum that says, "Actually, you don't count. Let me tell you how it's going to be. Let me put you down, talk over you, push the outcomes I'm seeking on you" because as soon as I swing to this aggressive end of the spectrum, the person on the receiving end loses their sense of emotional safety, okay?

What that's going to result in is bringing them to either the aggressive end of the spectrum or they'll swing straight to the passive end. So they either meet us head on and you've got two people with flipped lids. In either end of the spectrum you've got flipped lids in the mix, no prefrontal cortex is online, and so you've suddenly got two people that are back into high conflict or one person goes into the passive end side of the spectrum, gives in, or walks away. And down that passive end, the mindset we bring is, "Actually, I don't count. Let me just do it your way." Perhaps we're self-deprecating, avoiding eye contact, inclined to be submissive. Okay? You probably get the, yeah? We're trying to strike that balance between passive-aggressive and find that assertive sweet spot. But as I said at the start, that perfect spot in the pendulum is not clear. We're going to keep moving and adjusting depending on what the situation calls for.

Aside from attitude, let's talk about some of the techniques we want to use when we're engaging assertively. Our mindset is hopeful. We go into the conversation with the, "We can solve this. We can sort it out" mindset. Our language is clear and direct. We are not going to waffle around and beat around the bush, but safely and calmly and kindly go straight to the heart of the matter. We're going to name it but not confront it and separate the person from the problem. Okay? So we're not going to personalize it. I'm not going to say to Bob, "Bob, what you don't understand is how hard we've been working. You give no consideration for the amount of workload we're carrying at this time of year. You're really not reading the emails I send you." Now, all those kind of new statements of course are going to trigger Bob to have a stronger, more reactive response.

My language is going to instead make use of "I" statements. "I'm surprised by your feedback, Bob, and I'm taking that in. I feel I've made a lot of attempts to actually really outline in detail the answers to your questions, so obviously you and I need to talk further about what I might be missing or what's not clear, and we can problem solve that together." So my language is about how I'm impacted and what I need. It's not using "You" language that points the finger at Bob and highlights his faults, his inadequacies in the situation. And of course our mindset is a problem solving one. "Together we can find a way forward and we can solve this. I've heard what it is you are seeking and I've hopefully conveyed to you what it is that's important to me here so that we can find a way forward together."

Then we enter that zone where we start to engage in a problem solving way. So let's talk a little bit about the problem solving toolkit without going into too much detail, because I'm conscious with the professionals who are watching this webinar. Problem solving is what you do all day every day, particularly technical problems, be it legal problems or accounting problems. But let's spend a little bit of time talking about how we might go about analyzing a problem that is a conflict problem. There's some particular frames of reference we can use to help us there.

We'll do a little bit of an analysis on the next slide around that. And at the heart of it, we are then trying to engage with interest around what the other person's goals are, what their needs are, what their values are. And while communicating what it is we need to want, we then move into that lovely brainstorming phase where we can craft solutions together that ideally meets each of our needs at least to some extent. Or if we are choosing not to other meet the other person's needs at all, we go into that with really conscious decisions around that being made.

Let's talk about how we might analyze the dispute for a minute. And at the heart of it, we've got our interest or interests in the middle, which in every single dispute, each of the individuals in the conflict are going to have their own collection of interests, the things that they're seeking. And when we were talking about hearing them out, we are referring to that as their needs. What is it they really need out of the situation?

Those interests fit into different types of conflicts. So we might have ideology conflicts where we have a different sets of values and beliefs that might be informing our interests. Perhaps Bob's value or belief might be around a particular style of communicating or timeliness for him might be a one-day turnaround response might be his expectation. My expectation around appropriate turnaround response, my ideology, my philosophy around that might say a two to three week period is reasonable. And so there's a disconnect for the two of us, this around our individual value systems or perhaps our work ethics.

There might be conflict from a relational perspective in terms of communication style. So some people are going to be much more direct in their style, others are naturally going to be more circular in their approach. And perhaps sometimes that might reflect cultural background, that they might not be as inclined to name as directly what's in the mix. There might be a history of the dynamic of the relationship between us. So not just the communication conflicts, but that dynamic between us over time, which has contributed to the dynamic between us now. Bob's experience of our working relationship might be that for the last three years he felt that I was slower than he anticipated and he's reaching the end of his patience around what he feels is a reasonable timeframe. And so this year his engagement with me is much more heightened in style than it otherwise would've been.

Sometimes there might be structural conflicts in the mix, which might be about the process, the system, the roles and responsibilities. The complaint from Bob, you might be listening to this webinar as the receptionist that handles the complaint that comes in the first instance. And of course, it's not your role to handle that. You're not in a position to provide the relevant information. Sometimes the conflict is a data conflict one, a conflict around the facts, the truth of what did or didn't happen. It might be that actually I feel I met Bob's expectations and threshold because I responded to his email and his request within the two to three days that I imagined he was seeking, but actually my email got lost in junk mail, and so it wasn't until he followed up that he got the original email from me. And so suddenly, we have a data conflict where Bob feels that I've not provided him with the information he needed and he feels let down. That's his truth. My truth is that I did provide him with that information.

And so we often need to... And I've obviously chosen a very simple scenario here, but regardless of what the conflict is, we need to do a little bit of deconstructing to analyze what are the component parts here, because the way we go about problem solving is going to be different depending on what those component parts are. I'm not ever going to be able to change Bob's value system around work-life balance and what's an appropriate turnaround time. He's not going to be able to change my value system around what's an appropriate work-life balance. We actually can't go back and change the past relationship history between us. And we certainly can't change each other's perspectives about the truth, the data. What we can do is shift and adjust our communication styles, at least in the moment. And what we can always do is engage with genuine curiosity around what the underlying interests are that we both have.

In any conflict, we also need to acknowledge that our perspective that we bring to it is also based on our perspective around our rights, both our legal rights and our social rights or perhaps our contractual rights, and is also informed by the power dimensions between us. If Bob is a high value customer that's been a significant percentage of our business over a very long time, then that affects the power dimension between us because I'm really relying on Bob for business. But there could be all sorts of different power dimensions that are in the mix.

So when we're engaging in that problem solving way, it's often worth stepping back from the conflict and analyzing some of the component parts, teasing them about and exploring, "What elements can I address here so that as we seek to apply a problem solving mindset, we are making some really conscious choices around how to proceed?"

Okay, so we've talked about how we keep ourselves calm, how to hear them out, engage assertively, and then of course the problem solving skill. Now, let's talk about those times when we have to take one down where we know we've stuffed up and we need to apologize in order to begin to affect repair in the relationship in order to deescalate the conflict. Because if my truth is actually that I didn't send Bob the information he needed and I know I didn't, and he's right, he asked for it ages ago, I didn't send him the information and his frustration levels are really high because I've been unresponsive, well, I actually do owe Bob an apology. It's not going to be enough for me to hear him out or for me to apply problem solving mindset in an assertive way. I'm also going to need to offer a genuine and authentic apology in order to affect some relational repair before we can move forward and do some problem solving together.

There is an art to apologizing. In many cases, it is that necessary first step that we need to make, but it's very rarely enough to simply say, "I'm sorry." Actually, we all value different aspects of an apology. Some people really need an expression of regret that acknowledges the impact we've had on the other person. So if I'm an apologizing in that way, I might say to Bob, "Bob, look, I just want to say I'm so sorry that I have not come back to you with that information in a timely manner. I can see that that's impacting your ability to meet deadlines that you are trying to achieve. It's left you feeling under high levels of pressure at a point in time when you've already got a lot going on your plate, and I'm really sorry for the impact that my mistake or lack of progress has made on you." So I'm acknowledging the impact on him.

Sometimes what it is that Bob's seeking is me for me to simply say that I was wrong and that might be all I need to do in my acknowledgement to him. Sometimes he might need both for me to say I was wrong and I'm sorry that it's had this particular kind of impact on you. In many cases, but not always, the person on the receiving end of an apology also wants to see a commitment from us to change. That is to not repeat mistakes.

So to be able to say, "I'm sorry that these are the changes I've made and I'm... And these are the changes I've made, rather, to ensure that it never happens again. Yeah, Bob, I want to let you know that when and when you sent an inquiry through to me, I'm committing to ensure my turnaround time is within this period of time. And each future email you get, I'm going to make sure I always diarize that, carve out, block out time in my diary so I can make sure I can attend to it. You're a high value customer for us and I want to make sure I'm prioritizing meeting your needs." So that's me making a genuine commitment to change in not repeat past mistakes.

The last dimension of an apology that is sometimes but not always required is to be able to offer to make it up to him in some way. And perhaps that might be reduction in fees or commitment to a faster turnaround time the next time round, offering an additional service above and beyond what we normally would as a way to make it up to Bob.

Different people have different needs when it comes to apologies. In some cases, you might find that you need to package all those four elements together for the person you're apologizing to feel that they have been apologized to. Sometimes one or more of these might be enough. More importantly though than anything, the apology really needs to be authentic if you're going to effectively deescalate the conflict when mistakes have been made. In the absence of an apology, they are still going to feel triggered and unsafe, and so the conflict is going to go on and remain.

Okay. So those skills I've talked about so far are going to work probably for about 95% of the population, 90 to 95, somewhere in that range. But there is a group within our population really in any country where these techniques are just not going to be as effective. So if you've been sitting here listening to the webinar thinking, "Yeah, Helen, that sounds all well and good, but I got in my mind this one or two particular people for whom I've tried all those things and it's never worked," then absolutely you are right. Those techniques are not going to work with that individual. So let's talk about how you might deescalate conflict when you are engaging with those what are often termed high conflict personalities. But I do want to acknowledge that label is a little bit problematic because of the reasons that high conflict is such a part of their world.

To talk about this group, I'm just going to leverage the definitions that Bill Eddy uses. So he's our researcher in this space that's based in the US. He describes high conflict personalities as people who instead of sharing responsibility for solving problems, they repeatedly lose it. That prefrontal cortex goes offline again and again, and they increase conflict by making it intensely personal and never take responsibility for anything. He goes on to say that the hardest thing to get about high conflict personalities is that they have no idea. They lack awareness of how they contribute to their own problems. The reason they lack that awareness is actually they're scanning their environment for threat all day, every day. They see threat everywhere, and so they flip their head often and that prefrontal cortex goes offline again and again.

For those folks, what you see is lots of all or nothing, black and white thinking. Everything's always really, really good or really, really terrible. Their views are very positional in nature. All their engagement involves emotional dysregulation or almost all of it. Lots of extreme anger, fear, a response that's out of proportion to the trigger and no sense of insight into why they're engaging the way they do. What that means in terms of behaviors is lots of verbal yelling or denigration, perhaps engaging physically, blaming everybody else, and of course the absence of taking responsibility for the situation or in any effort to be part of a solution.

Now, hearing them out doesn't help because at some point in time you're going to have to stop listening and find a path forward, and there is never going to be enough listening. As soon as you engage assertively because they're highly, highly tuned and highly sensitive to spot the threat of your more assertive engagement, even that is likely to trigger that stress response for them and they will become emotionally dysregulated and struggle really to engage in a solution focused way. So hearing them out doesn't work. The assertive communication style doesn't work. It's really challenging for them to engage in a problem solving mindset. And of course, apologizing isn't going to help or be appropriate either.

So we really need to shift gears when supporting these people. As I name before, that that term high conflict personalities I think is problematic because actually they're a very vulnerable cohort, and I think it's important to acknowledge the vulnerability of those people to be in a situation where as a result of that personality disorder, they find themselves triggered again and again and again throughout their day and having that heightened emotional response all the time would actually be a really tough way to be living. So what they need from us is a different set of strategies. If we're going to deescalate conflict in the presence of a personality disorder, our strategies are more one of containment.

What we need to do is make sure we respond to all the issues they raise first in writing at least once. Now, in a workplace environment, that capturing it in writing is particularly important. When I lived and worked in the US at one point, and in New York, there was a phrase that we just used very often, which was CYA, stands for Cover Your ***. And so the message is, when engaging and working with folk, you might have that more high conflict personalities, at least once you want to respond to everything in writing in order to CYA. Once that's been done, because as soon as you send that response, you'll get back a very long response. Most of the time every bullet point responded to in detail. After that, we're going to shift gears. And our response is going to be to keep it short, be clear about what actions we will and won't take, and ensure our tone is respectful and warm. So it's decisive and confident, but we are not going to linger in the conversation.

And if at all possible, we're actually going to stop engaging unless we're in situations where others are involved and actions needed to ensure they're safe, or perhaps there's a new issue that arises. But there is no point trying to change them because they're in a space where there is so much vulnerability in the mix and more comprehensive support would be needed for them to really make a change. So the strategies you're going to use are one of containment.

Now I'm conscious I've run through that really quite quickly. We could spend a whole session going in depth on the challenge of how to contain those high conflict personalities. If you're someone who wants to go and read more deeply in this space, Bill Eddy's works work is fabulous. The research he's done in this area is really useful. So you might actually find engaging with some of his literature very helpful.

I do want to just name as we wrap up because we've run through a lot of techniques and tools that can be used quite quickly here. But as before we go to questions, I just want to name briefly that when I finish with a conversation about how to contain high conflict personalities and contain the conflict in order to deescalate in those situations, people often work away thinking, "That's an easier skillset to use. I can engage in a way that is brief, contains them as respectful is short, less is more, and in many cases avoid and ignore." But actually, if you use that technique with 95% of the population, you are actually going to trigger a stronger stress response and higher levels of conflict. So what we need to do is to go back to those skill sets of really hearing them out, respond assertively and engage in a solution focused way while staying calm ourselves and apologizing appropriately when required. You want to use that skillset for 95% of the time. If that stops working, then shift gears and start to apply your containment skillset.

Well, I hope that helps us a quick collection of techniques you can use to help deescalate complete. Alison, how are we going? Have we got any questions today?

CCH Learning:

Yes, we certainly do, Helen. Couple of questions have come through. And just a reminder, if anyone else would like to pop a question in the question's pane, please do so and then we can run through those in our Q&A.

All right, in the interim, I will just mention our upcoming webinars. So tomorrow we are looking at End of Year Financial Cash Flow Modeling. On the 22nd, Establishing and Managing Healthy Workplace Boundaries. 27 June is Tax Effect Accounting and then we have our Tax Technical Update for the month. On the 28th, we're looking at Salary Packaging of Electric Vehicles and bit of a break for the school holidays. And then 12 July, Keeping In-house investments. So if you jump on the CCH Learning website, you can find the details of all those sessions and many more as well.

All right, let's jump into these questions here, Helen. So first one is from Catherine, and she said, "You mentioned not to say calm down. Could you please run through some other things that you could say instead?"

Helen Jarvis:

Yeah, great question, Catherine. Rather than saying calm down, you could actually use your body, and this is a bit different to what you could say to them, use your body to support them to calm down. So if I demonstrate, if you and I are in a situation of conflict, a high conflict, Catherine, and I stay agitated and I sit up and I hold my body tightly and I'm speaking assertively and strongly, I'm going to increase the conflict. And if I'm saying to you, "Come on, calm down. Calm down," that's going to trigger you more and make you feel more vulnerable. But if I take a deep breath and just sit back and slump and breathe out, I'm going to convey to you that actually I feel really calm. And that's actually a very effective technique in supporting you to feel calmer. And you'll notice as I've done it, I've also slowed my voice and slowed my breathing and dropped my tone.

By being calm, you will end up feeling calmer. And as I demonstrated, I've kind of pushed it to the edge of almost ridiculous, so you can see what it is that I'm doing. It's a strategy that actually mediators will use in practice to support people in conflict to regulate their emotions. So we might lean in, engage with the conflict a little, take a breath, sit back and slump our shoulders. And you will find that actually the person you are engaging with copies. It works because of the mirror neurons that we have in our brains. Humans learn social skills by copying what it is that other people do. So you can actually use your body and your breath and your voice to help them to calm down without ever saying calm down. And much more effectively than saying calm down. That helps a little.

CCH Learning:

Thank you, Helen. Some good techniques there. A couple more questions here. So Brad has asked, "What should I do if I think the person might become physically aggressive?"

Helen Jarvis:

Great question, Brad. Okay, so... Oh, I do not want you to take away from the techniques today that you should sit down, sit back, and leave yourself in a physically vulnerable situation. So a good follow up question to Catherine's a moment ago. If the conflict is high and you are concerned from a physical perspective, you want to create physical distance between you and the other person if you think they're becoming aggressive. If you are in a room with them, you are going to move towards the door. So you're in a position to be able to exit the room if it looks like the conflict is escalating further.

You might find that you need to say, "I really want to take the time to hear where you're coming from, and I think both you and I need just a little bit of time to get ourselves into a calmer zone before we have this conversation. So I'm going to step away for five, 10 minutes and just make sure I'm in a calm zone and give you space to do the same. And then let's have another go at the conversation." So Brad, put physical safety first before anything. It's like your standard first aid doctor's ABCD, start with danger, assess for danger. There's no point trying to hear them out and make them feel emotionally safe and physically safe if you are not physically safe. So yeah, put your physical safety first. And if necessary, leave.

CCH Learning:

Perfect. Makes sense. Thank you, Helen. And last question for now. So this one's from Lane. "So I find that I don't sleep well after I've had an interaction where there is conflict. The conversation just keeps playing over and over in my mind and I find myself thinking about what I could have said or what I should have said. So how do I get better at coming up with the right response in the moment?"

Helen Jarvis:

Yeah. Lane, first of all, can I just say it's super normal to go back around and circle over it at night, the day after. It's your body's way of processing. And you are hunting for that sweet spot between silence and violence. "Should I have said more? What could I, would I, should I have said?" But stay kind to yourself because it doesn't matter how much you practice, you're still never going to get perfect at it. You'll get better, but you won't get perfect. But specifically to your question of how do I find the right response, or should we say let's reframe that and say the best possible response you could in the moment, focus all your energy on what it is that they're saying rather than what you want your response to be. Get that prefrontal cortex engaged in really actively listening to what they said, what they feel, and what they need.

If all your focus is on what's happening for them rather than what's happening for you and what responses you could possibly offer, you are more likely to come up with a response that's useful for them. Because remember, your starting point is to offer that comprehensive acknowledgement. And so if you are listening in a really focused way to what they said, what they feel, and what they need, your acknowledgement is going to be really comprehensive. They'll feel really heard. And by the time you get to the end of that process, you'll be calmer and they'll be calmer. You'll both be able to think more clearly, and you are much more likely to come up with an appropriate response and language that's effective in the moment, in a zone where you are calm and they're calm. If they're still triggering you, it's going to be really hard to come up with the right response. So your focus is on getting them calm first, using your body language, using your voice, and hearing them out.

CCH Learning:

Thank you, Helen. All right. So thank you for running through those questions. Appreciate all your advice there. And we'll just look at wrapping up the session here.

So in terms of next steps, I'd just like to remind the audience to please take a moment to provide your feedback when exiting. And another reminder that shortly after the session, you'll receive an email letting you know you can watch the e-learning recording and also access the PowerPoint, transcript, and CPD certificate.

So thank you very much to Helen for the session today, and thank you to the audience for joining us. We hope to see you back online for another CCH Learning Webinar very soon.