

SLIC Solutions: Setting Limits and Imposing Consequences in 2½ Steps



By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.

We live in a rapidly changing world, with rules and standards frequently in flux. However, most people are sufficiently self-regulated to maintain civility and cooperation in the midst of vagueness and uncertainty. Not surprisingly, setting limits on those with misbehavior has become one of the most important skills to have in today's world, especially in high conflict situations. This is especially true since the pandemic and the increase in high conflict behavior worldwide. But in today's world, Setting Limits is often ineffective if it isn't combined with Imposing Consequences (thus the acronym: SLIC). People often say: "But I told him to stop!" Or: "I'm sure she'll come to her senses." As I describe in my new book—*Our New World of Adult Bullies: How to Spot Them – How to Stop Them*—some people really do lack the ability to stop themselves, so others have to do it.

While most of us dread imposing consequences, it doesn't have to be complicated. Since 2008, High Conflict Institute has been developing and teaching simple techniques for managing high conflict behavior. These skills can be learned by almost anyone with practice. SLIC Solutions is the last of four simple techniques that we teach for any conflict situation in our overall *CARS Method*® of conflict resolution: CONNECTING includes a simple *EAR Statement*® for calming upset people and connecting with them. ANALYZING options includes *Making Proposals in 3 Steps*™ for making decisions large and small. RESPONDING with a *BIFF Response*® can be used with emails and other written communication when someone is hostile, demanding, or misinformed. Now, for SETTING limits, we suggest *SLIC Solutions*™ which can be applied in 2½ steps. This article will explain how you can gain confidence in setting limits and imposing consequences in any situation.

Step 1: Setting Limits

Setting limits simply means defining the behavior you want or don't want another person to do. It's good to emphasize the positive—what you want someone to do—although sometimes saying what you don't want may be just as important. For example: "Please be quiet in the hallway or move your discussion somewhere else. We're trying to have a meeting in here." This is always better than yelling "Shut Up out there."

It helps to set limits in a matter-of-fact or just slightly-raised tone of voice, even if you're upset. When you vent intense emotions on another person, it tends to trigger their defensiveness and they may react to your tone rather than thinking about how to fulfill the limit you requested. Try not to make it personal, so that the person doesn't feel that their life, reputation, or credibility are being challenged. Instead, make it clearly about the specific behavior you want. "Please refrain from discussing with Fred the confidential information I gave you yesterday." This is much better than: "Shut the 'f' up about what I said yesterday, you a—hole!" People often confuse being aggressive and profane with being firm. Showing that you are in control of yourself, and that you can be calm and reasonable are usually more effective and you will be respected more for it.

Including a Credible Threat of Imposing Consequences

Setting limits without the credible threat of imposing consequences is often pointless when serious behavior or high conflict people are involved. They don't like being told what to do. At first, when you are setting limits, you might put it as a request or an order, if you are a parent, a judge, or administrator. But if it is important to you and it is ignored, then the second time you say what the limit is it helps to notify the person of what the consequence will be. "If you keep talking about my mother in those terms, then I'm going to have to end this conversation."

"If you keep interrupting me in front of my supervisor, then I'll have to meet with him without you." "If you keep scheduling events for our child during my parenting time, then I'll have to talk with my attorney about next steps." "If you keep talking after your three minutes are up at this community meeting, then I'm going to have to turn off your microphone and have you escorted out of the meeting."

Amazingly, a credible threat of serious consequences may at least give a high conflict person pause to think about their behavior. They really don't routinely think about consequences as they are so emotionally preoccupied in the moment. It can be especially impactful if your tone of voice and history of setting limits show that you are very likely to impose the consequence if necessary.

Step 2: Imposing Consequences

If the person continues engaging in the behavior you set limits on, then it's time to impose the consequences. Sometimes you may decide to go more quickly to the consequence or give the person a third chance. But be careful not to continue to make empty threats. That's the surest way to teach the person that you do not mean what you say for now and in the future. Setting limits without imposing consequences can make things worse.

When you are imposing the consequence, make sure it is something you have control over. Telling someone that they should feel guilty or ashamed of themselves for their behavior, or telling them that they are being inappropriate, is not effective limit-setting. Yet people say this all the time as a substitute for real limit setting. It just doesn't work because you don't have control over how another person thinks or feels. With high conflict people, they may believe that their behavior is normal and necessary even when no one else does (because it has been part of their personality possibly from birth or at least early childhood).

Think your consequence through ahead of time, especially before you announce it. Don't be surprised when the other person argues with you and resists the consequence. Be prepared. Either have an answer ready for each possible argument, or simply repeat your consequence and implement it. "I won't be discussing this further. Remember, I told you that I would do XYZ if you continued to do ABC."

"You have arrived an hour or more late to pick up our child twice now. Therefore, I will leave after 30 minutes and not wait for you in the future." (Other parent says that's a violation of the parenting plan.) "Actually, you are the one violating our plan, which gives the exact time you should be picking up our child. This is simply the consequence for your violation."

If it's appropriate, point out that this was their choice. If the other person did not respect the limit you set, then they have chosen to have the consequence—since you warned them ahead of time. But it is a judgment call for you in terms of whether to point this out or not.

For a judge, SLIC might look like this:

Sir, If you continue to avoid attending the 52-week domestic violence treatment group I ordered, then I am likely to stop your parenting time until you get started. Your prior behavior poses a danger to the child as well as his mother until you get treatment for it.

Ma'am, If you continue to avoid bringing your child to the father for his parenting time, then I am likely to make a change of custody to the father and impose a 30-day no-contact period so they can return to the positive relationship they had before the separation. There has been sufficient investigation to make it clear that the father has done nothing inappropriate.

In the workplace, SLIC might look like this at a meeting:

Mr/Ms Smith, If you continue to disrupt this meeting with personal negative comments about other members, then I will have to stop the meeting and determine whether you can remain and speak civilly, or whether you will have to be removed from the meeting, or whether the meeting will have to be ended. The business at hand in this meeting can easily be discussed without resorting to personal negative comments. Can you agree to stop?

Step 2½: Give the person an EAR Statement (in about half of SLIC situations):

EAR Statements include a statement showing empathy, attention and/or respect. (See my little book: *Calming Upset People with EAR: How Statements Showing Empathy, Attention and Respect Can Quickly Defuse a Conflict.*) In many situations, an EAR statement can help you connect with someone in the most difficult circumstance.

Often it can be helpful to add an EAR statement at the beginning, middle, or end of setting limits and imposing consequences. This can be especially helpful with children and vulnerable adults who just acted badly and aren't able to reflect on their own behavior. "I can see that this is not what you wanted and hopefully it won't be necessary next time." (Empathy) Or: "I'm not being helpful to you if I let you get away with this. Even I have limits. I'm paying attention to how I can help you succeed." (Attention) Or: "I respect your efforts to comply with my expectations. However, it is not enough and therefore I must impose this consequence." (Respect)

But in other circumstances it may not be helpful to give an EAR statement, such as with bullies, narcissists, and antisocial personalities. People with narcissistic personality traits (lack of empathy) or antisocial personality traits (lack of remorse) will simply manipulate your EAR statement and use it against you. "You said you cared about me and had empathy for me. How can you care about me and yet refuse to allow me to do ABC? You're a hypocrite. I'm going to tell people that you really aren't the nice person you appear to be." Or: "If you really paid attention to what I have told you, you would sign this paper here." Or: "If you really respected me, you wouldn't insult me with this consequence. You're a little person and no one respects you."

Rather than getting into such arguments and manipulations, skip the EAR statement altogether if you anticipate such a response. Set your limit, impose your consequence if necessary, and then stand firm. Be prepared for such a response if you think the person may have a lack of

empathy or remorse and will use your kind words against you. Don't get stuck defending yourself or your consequence.

If you are dealing with a bully, then you are facing someone who has a drive to dominate or destroy you and others. If you give a bully an EAR statement, they will use it to put you down and dominate you—and try to wiggle out of the consequence. Therefore, it's better to be prepared and focus on setting your limits and, if necessary, imposing your consequences. Stand firm and get help if necessary. If you're dealing with a bully, it often takes more than one person to stop them.

Conclusion

SLIC solutions are often necessary in today's world. Everyone can get better at the skill of Setting Limits and Imposing Consequences on a regular basis. It's always easier to do this consistently on a small scale, rather than waiting until problems have become really large. Fit the consequences to the limit violation. In families, at work, and in our communities, everyone can play a part in setting limits (making rules, policies, laws) and supporting appropriate consequences.

In half the cases, it can help to gain cooperation and maintain relationships by including a statement that shows empathy, attention and/or respect (EAR statements). Yet in the other half of cases, it's better to avoid EAR and stay focused on setting limits and imposing consequences without allowing yourself to be manipulated or talked out of it. In modern times, this skill is more necessary than ever. The more people who regularly do this, the safer and happier the world will be for all of us.

Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq. is a lawyer, therapist, mediator, and worldwide trainer for professionals managing high conflict situations and personalities. He is the author of over twenty books, including *Our New World of Adult Bullies: How to Spot Them – How to Stop Them*, released in June 2024, which emphasizes successfully setting limits and imposing consequences in many of the 60 examples described.