HOW TO GIVE A BIFF RESPONSE(SM)

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Hostile email, texts and other electronic communications have become much more common over the past decade. Most of this is just "venting," and has little real significance. However, when people are involved in a formal conflict (a divorce, a workplace grievance, a homeowners' association complaint, etc.) there may be more frequent hostile email. There may be more people involved and it may be exposed to others or in court. Therefore, how you respond to hostile communications may impact your relationships or the outcome of a case.

Do you need to respond?

Much of hostile e-communication does not need a response. Letters from (ex-) spouses, angry neighbors, irritating co-workers, or attorneys do not usually have legal significance. The letter itself has no power, unless you give it power. Often, it is emotional venting aimed at relieving the writer's anxiety. If you respond with similar emotions and hostility, you will simply escalate things without satisfaction, and just get a new piece of hostile mail back. In most cases, you are better off not responding. However, some letters and emails develop power when copies are filed in a court or complaint process – or simply get sent to other people. In these cases, it may be important to respond to inaccurate statements with accurate statements of fact. If you need to respond, I recommend a **BIFF Response(SM)**: Be Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm.

BRIEF

Keep your response brief. This will reduce the chances of a prolonged and angry back and forth. The more you write, the more material the other person has to criticize. Keeping it brief signals that you don't wish to get into a dialogue. Just make your response and end your letter. Don't take their statements personally and don't respond with a personal attack. Avoid focusing on comments about the person's character, such as saying he or she is rude, insensitive or stupid. It just escalates the conflict and keeps it going. You don't have to defend yourself to someone you disagree with. If your friends still like you, you don't have to prove anything to those who don't.

INFORMATIVE

The main reason to respond to hostile mail is to correct inaccurate statements which might be seen by others. "Just the facts" is a good idea. Focus on the accurate statements you want to make, not on the inaccurate statements the other person made. For example: "Just to clear things up, I was out of town on February 12th, so I would not have been the person who was making loud noises that day."

Avoid negative comments. Avoid sarcasm. Avoid threats. Avoid personal remarks about the other's intelligence, ethics or moral behavior. If the other person has a "high conflict personality," you will have no success in reducing the conflict with personal attacks. While most people can ignore personal attacks or might think harder about what you are saying, high conflict people feel they have no choice but to respond in anger – and keep the conflict going. Personal attacks rarely lead to insight or positive change.

FRIENDLY

While you may be tempted to write in anger, you are more likely to achieve your goals by writing in a friendly manner. Consciously thinking about a friendly response will increase your chances of getting a friendly – or neutral – response in return. If your goal is to end the conflict, then being friendly has the greatest likelihood of success. Don't give the other person a reason to get defensive and keep responding.

This does not mean that you have to be overly friendly. Just make it sound a little relaxed and non-antagonistic. If appropriate, say you recognize their concerns. Brief comments that show your empathy and respect will generally calm the other person down, even if only for a short time.

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FIRM

In a non-threatening way, clearly tell the other person your information or position on an issue. (For example: "That's all I'm going to say on this issue.") Be careful not to make comments that invite more discussion, unless you are negotiating an issue or want to keep a dialogue going back and forth. Avoid comments that leave an opening, such as: "I hope you will agree with me that …" This invites the other person to tell you "I *don't agree.*"

Sound confident and don't ask for more information if you want to end the back-and-forth. A confident-sounding person is less likely to be challenged with further emails. If you get further emails, you can ignore them, if you have already sufficiently addressed the inaccurate information. If you need to respond again, keep it even briefer and do not emotionally engage. In fact, it often helps to just repeat the key information using the same words.

Example

> **Joe's email**: "Jane, I can't believe you are so stupid as to think that I'm going to let you take the children to your boss' birthday party during my parenting time. Have you no memory of the last six conflicts we've had about my parenting time? Or are you having an affair with him? I always knew you would do anything to get ahead! In fact, I remember coming to your office party witnessing you making a total fool of yourself – including flirting with everyone from the CEO down to the mailroom kid! Are you high on something? Haven't you gotten your finances together enough to support yourself yet, without flinging yourself at every Tom, Dick and Harry? ..." [And on and on and on.]
>
> **Jane**: "Thank you for responding to my request to take the children to my office party. Just to clarify, the party will be from 3-5 on Friday at the office and there will be approximately 30 people there – including several other parents bringing school-age children. There will be no alcohol, as it is a family-oriented firm and there will be family-oriented activities. I think it will be a good experience for them to see me at my workplace. Since you do not agree, then of course I will respect that and withdraw my request, as I recognize it is your parenting time." [And that's the end of her email.]

Comment: Jane kept it brief, and did not engage in defending herself. Since this was just between them, she didn't need to respond. If he sent this email to friends, co-workers or family members (which high conflict people often do), then she would need to respond to the larger group with more information, such as the following:

> **Jane**: "Dear friends and family: As you know, Joe and I had a difficult divorce. He has sent you a private email showing correspondence between us about a parenting schedule matter. I hope you will see this as a private matter and understand that you do not need to respond or get involved in any way. Almost everything he has said is in anger and not at all accurate. If you have any questions for me personally, please feel free to contact me and I will clarify anything I can. I appreciate your friendship and support." [And that's it]

Conclusion

Whether you are at work, at home or elsewhere, a BIFF Response can save you time and emotional anguish. The more people who handle hostile mail in such a manner, the less hostile mail there will be.

Bill Eddy is an attorney, mediator and therapist, and the author of several books including:

- *BIFF: Quick Responses to High Conflict People, Their Personal Attacks, Hostile Email and Social Media Meltdowns, 2nd Ed.* (Unhooked Books, 2011, 2014).
- *So, What's Your Proposal? Shifting High-Conflict People from Blaming to Problem Solving in 30 Seconds* (Unhooked Books, 2014).
- *SPLITTING: Protecting Yourself While Divorcing Someone with Borderline or Narcissistic Personality Disorder* (New Harbinger, 2011)
- *It's All YOUR Fault! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything* (HCI Press, 2008)

Bill Eddy is also the President of the High Conflict Institute, which provides speakers, training, consultation and resources for professionals and anyone dealing with high conflict disputes at work or in their personal lives. High Conflict Institute has given trainings in over 25 states, several provinces in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France and Sweden.

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