COACHING FOR A BIFF RESPONSE(SM)

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A **BIFF Response**(SM) is designed to calm a hostile conversation. They can be written (or said) by anyone, although it takes practice and it helps to have someone review your BIFF Response before you send it. BIFF stands for **Brief**, **Informative**, **Friendly** and **Firm**. This method is described in depth in our little book *BIFF: Quick Responses to High Conflict People, Their Personal Attacks, Hostile Email and Social Media Meltdowns*.

Many people today are trained Coaches who are assisting individuals who are working on improving their interpersonal skills and/or dealing with a high conflict situation. This article is designed for professionals serving as Coaches, but it can be applied by anyone helping anyone write an effective BIFF Response.

Since High Conflict Institute was established four years ago, we have coached business partners, human resource professionals, neighbors, parents of adult children, spouses going through a divorce, and many others. We have learned that coaching others to do a BIFF Response can be highly effective if the Coach asks the following ten questions of the individual who has written a draft of a BIFF Response (who I'll call the "Client" – whether it's a business client, friend or family member).

1. Is it Brief?
2. Is it Informative?
3. Is it Friendly?
4. Is it Firm?
5. Does it contain any Advice?
6. Does it contain any Admonishments?
7. Does it contain any Apologies?
8. How do you think the other person will respond?
9. Is there anything you would take out, add or change?
10. Would you like to hear my thoughts about it?

The Goal of Coaching for a BIFF Response

To be the most helpful as a Coach for a BIFF Response, it helps to remember that there is no single "right" way to write a BIFF Response. In many ways it's like cooking. What works for one person is almost always different from what works for another person. The BIFF Response always belongs to the person writing it. It is very important for the BIFF Response Coach to avoid "correcting" the Client's BIFF Response as soon as it has been written. The goal is to help the Client learn to write a BIFF Response, so they can do them on their own, if necessary. The only way to effectively do that is to help the Client analyze his or her own BIFF Response. These questions keep the focus on helping the Client do just that.

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You will notice that the last question is "Would you like to hear my thoughts about it?" You might wonder why that isn't the first question. You might really, really want to give suggestions right away. But by keeping this question for last, you put the focus on having the client really think about what he or she has written. This means that when you ask the first question, "Is it Brief?" you are careful not to start suggesting how it could be longer or shorter. Let the person think about it for a moment and decide for him or herself.

It helps to introduce these ten questions with an explanation like this:

> "Whenever we write a BIFF Response – and I've written many myself – it helps to discuss it with someone else before we send it. When I've given my BIFF Response drafts to someone else, they have usually suggested that I trim them down – sometimes even cutting them in half! And I've usually agreed! It's hard to see in our own comments what might trigger more anger or misbehavior from the other person. It's often easier for someone else to spot those trigger words or sentences. But I want to start out by letting you analyze your BIFF Response, as this will help you get better and better at writing a BIFF Response that accomplish what you want.
>
> "So I would like you to read your BIFF Response out loud. Then, I'm going to help you by asking you 10 questions, so you can think about your BIFF Response. And remember, there's no one right way of writing a BIFF Response. My goal is to help you think about whether it will accomplish what you want with the person you are dealing with at this time."

BIFF Response Writers Feel Vulnerable

One thing we have learned about coaching BIFF Response clients is that they often feel very vulnerable, because they are usually dealing with a high conflict person (an HCP) who is criticizing them mercilessly or making the Client's life miserable in some other way. When they write a BIFF Response, they are trying to regain a sense of balance and peace, so it is a time when they are very vulnerable to the feedback of others. Therefore, it is very important that they feel safe with you, rather than even a hint of criticism, as you help them decide whether they believe it's going to be an effective BIFF Response.

With this in mind, it helps to be supportive and encouraging during the first nine questions, rather than exact. Your response to their answers can be positive, while leaving room for you to make suggestions at the end with question #10. So when your Client says: "I think it's Brief," you can say "It looks like that to me too" and move on. Then, when you get to say your thoughts at the end (but only if the person says "Yes, I want to hear your thoughts"), you can say something like this: "While it looks Brief, you might want to take out the third sentence, and make it even briefer. That sentence seems like it might trigger an emotional response because of … But of course, it's up to you. It's your BIFF Response. What do you think about that?"

You can use a similar response when the person thinks about whether it's Informative. This questioning process does not need a big response. Most often the person will simply say: "Yes, I think it's Informative." Then you can say: "Ok. And do you think that it's Friendly?" You can go through this questioning process quickly or slowly, depending on what the Client wants to say about it.

Sometimes, the Client will spontaneously decide to change something. In this situation, you can ask the Client what he or she thinks about it now. You might ask your Client to read it out loud again and see what they think. Remember to keep the focus on the Client's analysis of the BIFF – not yours.

The Triple A's

The Triple A's are: **Advice, Admonishments** and **Apologies.** These are less obvious than the first four questions about a BIFF Response and are a whole chapter in the BIFF Response book. If your Client is not familiar with the Triple A's or has forgotten them, you can briefly explain these when you ask the questions:

> "5. Does it contain any Advice? By this, I mean are you telling the other person how to deal with a particular problem a particular way? This almost always triggers a defensive and often attacking response back at you. Unless the person you're dealing with specifically asked for your advice, it's usually better not to give it –

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especially in a BIFF Response that's intended to end the conversation or give two limited choices. So do you see any advice in your BIFF as its currently written?"

"6. Does it contain any Admonishments? In other words, are you speaking to the person like a parent telling a child how to behave. This never works in a BIFF Response. When people are feeling defensive, the last thing they want is for you to tell them they are doing something wrong. The whole point of a BIFF Response is to calm down and end the conversation, without triggering a defensive response. Do you see any hint of that in your BIFF Response as it is currently written?"

"7. Does it contain any Apologies? This can be confusing. In general, apologies are a good thing. However, if you are dealing with a high conflict person, they tend to use your apologies against you, like ammunition. Avoid apologizing for anything of substance, like: "I shouldn't have done such-and-such." Or: "I'm sorry I hurt you by doing xyz." Or: "I guess my strategy failed." Or: "I know I haven't been sensitive to your needs." These types of apologizes blame you and HCPs are preoccupied with blame, and will use it to prove that it really is: All YOUR Fault! Of course, social apologies are okay, like "I'm sorry I'm a few minutes late." Or: "I'm sorry to see that you're in this difficult situation." With this in mind, do you see any apologies in what you have written?"

Your Thoughts

When you finally get to your thoughts – if you have been asked to give them – it is important to make them tentative. Remember, there's no one right answer and it's up to the Client to decide how it is written. For example, "You might want to think about that third sentence. I think it might trigger an intense response from the person you're dealing with, because he or she already said such-and-such. What do you think?"

Suppose the Client says: "I agree it should be changed. How should I say it?" Ideally, you will respond by saying: "Why don't you give it a try first, and see how it sounds. You've been doing great so far." This keeps the emphasis on your goal, which is to help the Client do his or her own analysis of the BIFF Response. It also helps boost the Client's confidence, at a time when he or she may be feeling extremely vulnerable about writing anything, because of so much criticism from the person they're dealing with.

If you decide to give a suggestion, try to give two or three: "You might try saying '…" or you might try saying it this other way "…." What do you think?" This helps them continue to think about it and make it their own writing, rather than simply doing what you said. The best coaching is when the Client feels smart, rather feeling that the Coach is brilliant. When your coaching, it's not about you.

An Example:

Suppose the client has written the following:

"Yolanda, thank you for your email. I thought about it a lot. I agree we should stop doing our math homework together. It will help us each try harder to learn it ourselves. But I disagree that I was just "using" you and not helping you at all. I'm still glad that we're friends and will talk about other things when we're together. Sam."

After you've gone through all your questions, Sam asks you for your thoughts. It could go like this:

Coach: "Overall, I really like it. However, I'm concerned that the phrase 'using you' might backfire. Yolanda might focus on that and attack you back, such as: 'Well, you WERE using me. I'M the one who figured out how to really do the assignment.' Then, Sam, you'll feel even more defensive. What do you think about leaving out that phrase? Or even that whole sentence?"

Sam: "But I can't just let her think I was using her, because I wasn't!"

Coach: "Well, it's up to you, of course. But from what you've told me, I don't think you will prove anything to her on this subject. If YOU are confident that you weren't using her, then do you really need her to even discuss it with her? Especially in this BIFF Response? Perhaps you could tell just her that sometime when you are being friends talking about something else."

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Sam: "I'll have to think about it."

Coach: "Why don't you try reading it without that third sentence, and then decide."

Sam: " 'Yolanda, thank you for your email. I thought about it a lot. I agree we should stop doing our math homework together. It will help us each try harder to learn it ourselves. I'm still glad that we're friends and will talk about other things when we're together. Sam.' You're right. It does sound better that way."

Coach: "Great! Let me know how it works out after you send it."

And then you can tell yourself (privately): "Way to go, Coach!"

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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