



BIFF Response™ at Work Responding to Hostile Mail

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Hostile mail – especially email – has become much more common over the past decade. Most of this mail (commonly email) is just “venting,” and has little real significance. However, when people are involved in a formal conflict (a workplace grievance, a divorce, a homeowners’ association complaint, etc.) there may be more frequent hostile mail. There may be more people involved and it may be shown to others or in court. Therefore, how you respond to hostile mail may impact your relationships or the outcome of a case.

Do you need to respond?

Much of hostile mail or email does not need a response. Email from irritating co-workers, (ex-) spouses, angry neighbors or even attorneys do not usually have legal significance. The email 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™: 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. 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 add a friendly greeting and friendly closing. Don't give the other person a reason to get defensive and keep responding. Make it sound as relaxed and non-antagonistic as possible. Brief comments that show your empathy and respect will generally calm the other person down, even if only for a short time.

FIRM

In a non-threatening way, tell the other person your information or concerns about 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, such as: "I hope you will agree with me ...". This invites the other person to tell you "*I don't agree.*" Just give your friendly closing and then stop.

However, if you need a decision from the other person, then end with two choices, such as: "Please let me know by Friday at 5pm if I should pick up those documents or you will send them to me." By limiting it to two choices, you are less likely to trigger a new argument. By giving a response date and time, you avoid having to keep contacting the person. If he or she does not respond by then, you can choose whether to ask again or take other action.

Firm doesn't mean harsh. Just sound confident and end the back-and-forth nature of hostile communications. 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

Roberta was terminated after a long progressive discipline process, with repeated failure to comply with the company rules. There had been several incidents in which she was believed to have harassed other employees, although none of the incidents ever resulted in legal claims (fortunately). After being counseled by the Human Resources department several times without any change in her behavior, she was terminated. Since she was not a member of a union and there was no contract for her position, she was let go "at will" of the company, without justification necessary (although the company had plenty of it).

Jerry is the Human Resource manager who dealt with her in the termination process. Jerry has remained in contact with Roberta by email, in order to be helpful to her and to help keep her calm during this transition in her life. Here is an example of the emails he gets from her:

Hi Jerry,

I had another job interview this week. This is good, because my medical benefits are running out, thanks to you. You had no right to ruin my career and make it impossible for me to get a good letter of reference. Your corrupt company will be exposed sooner or later. By the way, I need a copy of that last list of job duties that I had. I've asked you three times for it, and you refuse to respond. Let me know if I need to drop by to pick it up.

Your old friend,

Roberta

Here's the email that Jerry is thinking of sending. What do you think? Is it a BIFF Response?

Hi Roberta,

First of all, it will not benefit you at all to make threats about "exposing" our company. We have done nothing wrong and are ready to refute any claims you may raise against us.

I was not aware of you ever asking for a list of your job duties. Please see it attached. As a reminder, you are not allowed to return to our company, nor allowed to set foot on our grounds. We will have you arrested if you attempt to do so. I hope that this message is clear.

Sincerely,
Jerry Butler
Human Resource Manager

Is it a BIFF?

Brief? Yes, it's fairly brief.

Informative? Yes and No. It goes beyond straight information and sounds defensive.

Friendly? Not really. It focuses on her negativity, unnecessarily. Nowhere does he make an attempt to connect in a friendly way. You can tell that he's pretty angry with her, by emphasizing the negative and purely setting limits, rather than trying to have a calming influence on her. While his anger is understandable, it won't help him bring an end to having conversations with her.

Firm? Yes, somewhat. It sounds very firm, in that he is telling her the consequences of various actions. However, it's not firm in terms of ending the conversation. It is defensive and will reinforce her defensiveness with him and trigger even more communication from her.

Would the following be a BIFF Response?

Dear Roberta,

I'm glad you're making progress and getting interviews. I really want you to find a company that's a good fit for you.

I am attaching a copy of your job duties. I hope that helps!

Best wishes!

Jerry

Is it a BIFF?

Brief? Yes, it's very brief.

Informative? Yes, it explains how he wants her to find a good fit, and he attaches her job duties. There is nothing in this that sounds defensive or would trigger defensiveness for her.

Friendly? Yes, he expresses his positive wishes and responds to her request with straight information.

Firm? Yes, in that he does not invite a response to anything. He has put an end to that conversation, even though he knows there will probably be more. But his response took a minimum of time and effort – and calmed the conflict.

Conclusion

Whether you are at work, at home or elsewhere, a BIFF Response is an easy way to save yourself time and emotional anguish, while you look good to your co-workers and supervisors. 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***, from which this is partially excerpted, and ***It's All YOUR Fault! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything***. He 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. For more information, see www.BIFFResponse.com and www.HighConflictInstitute.com.