



**South
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**South
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2016 Legislative Update

Representative Bruce W. Bannister
Greenville, SC



**South
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**Engagement Skills for Dealing
with High Conflict Individuals**

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San Diego, CA



COACHING FOR A BIFF RESPONSE^(SM)

© 2012 by **By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.**

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.

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 –

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 apologies 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."

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.

**Tools for Dealing with
High Conflict Individuals**

January 20, 2017

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PLAN FOR THIS SESSION

1. How all our brains respond to conflict
2. Understanding high conflict people
3. Strategies and practical tips

2 Hemispheres of Brain (approx.)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Left Hemisphere</u> • "Logical Brain" • Generally Conscious • Language • Thinks in words • Planning • Examines Details • Rational analysis • Systematic Solutions • Positive Emotions Calm, contentment, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Right Hemisphere</u> • "Relationship Brain" • Generally Unconscious • Observes relationships • Thinks in pictures • Creativity, Art, Intuition • Non-verbal Skills • Facial recognition & cues • Gut feelings • Negative Emotions Hurt, anger, fear, etc.
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Corpus Callosum

- The main wiring between the hemispheres of the brain, that aid in the flow of information back and forth. More flow is better.
- It's damaged or smaller in children repeatedly exposed to abuse, as well as in some adults with personality disorders.
- Some people get stuck in the upset emotions of the right hemisphere and can't access their left hemisphere to help resolve negative emotions.

Amygdala in Non-Verbal Communication

Amygdala of the brain:

- "Smoke Detector" of the brain
- "Hijacks" brain for fast, unconscious defensive responses
- Shuts down logical, analytical thought

-- Daniel Goleman
Emotional Intelligence (1995)

- Most of the time the Left Hemisphere is dominant, but in a crisis or totally new situation, the Right Brain is dominant.
- Right Amygdala is especially attentive to facial expressions of fear and anger; can respond in as little as 6 milliseconds

-- Allan Schore
Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self (2003)

Why We Get Hooked into High Conflict

- Our brains are "wired" for group survival.
- All human beings, including professionals, are wired to respond instantly and unconsciously to high intensity emotions.
- Amygdala in the brain is wired to identify facial expressions of fear and anger, and to respond instantly in protective action.
- HCP's chronically, publicly and intensely have facial expressions of fear and anger.

THE BRAIN IN CONFLICT

PROBLEM-SOLVING LEFT BRAIN THINKING

- Slower
 - Analyzes Problems
- Flexible Thinking
 - Sees choices
- Managed Emotions
- Moderate Behaviours
 - To maintain relationships

DEFENSIVE RIGHT BRAIN THINKING

- Focus on Quick Action:
 - Higher Thinking & Problem Solving is Shut Down
- All or Nothing Thinking
 - Eliminate or Escape from the Enemy
- Intense Emotions
 - Driving Fight or Flight Behaviour
- Extreme Behaviours
 - In a fight for survival or perceived life or death dangers

“The Issue’ s Not the Issue”

- In high-conflict situations, the issue is not the issue. The high-conflict thinking is the issue, with distorted perceptions and expectations.
- For many people with high-conflict personalities, they are stuck in their negative emotions (R.B.) and can’ t easily access their problem-solving skills (L.B.)
- To handle them, you need to learn to communicate with the Right Brain

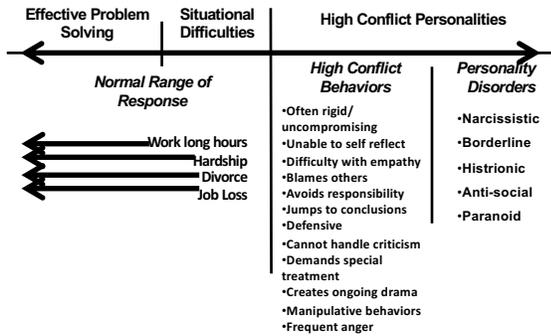
Talking to the Right Brain (the Elephant)

- Tone of voice and body language is amazingly important: Calm, Confident, Firm
- Avoid logical arguments in times of stress
- Avoid giving Negative Feedback (about the whole person, focusing on the past, negative tone of voice)
- Avoid threats: these escalate people who are stuck in their right brain
- Don’t say they have a personality disorder or need therapy.

Disclaimer

- This seminar does not train you to diagnose personalities.
- It may be harmful to tell someone that you believe that they have personality problems or a high conflict personality.
- Just develop your Private Working Theory
 - Private (Don't tell the person you think this)
 - Working (Use it in adapting your approach)
 - Theory (Accept that you may be wrong)

The Continuum



COMMON ISSUES of HCPs

- Rigid and Uncompromising
- Difficulty Accepting and Healing Loss
- Emotions Dominate Thinking (**Can Hide This**)
- Inability to Reflect on Own Behavior
- Difficulty Empathizing With Others
- Preoccupied with Blaming Others
- Avoids Responsibility (For Problem or Solution)
- Depends on Others to Solve Problems
- They may have Personality Disorders

4 Key Skills for Managing HCPs

C.A.R.S. Method

1. **CONNECTING** with E.A.R.
2. **ANALYZING** options and dilemmas
3. **RESPONDING** to misinformation
4. **SETTING LIMITS** on behavior

Lower YOUR Expectations For Change

- Your not going to change your client. Forgetaboutit!
- Life-long personality patterns don't change with a statement, no matter how angry or sensitive you are.
- Change takes a *Program of Behavior Change* (therapy, batterers' groups, drug treatment, etc.)
- HCPs may not change attitudes, BUT may change behavior to avoid consequences.
- Many HCP clients can reach reasonable settlements, but it may take 3 times as long. Be patient.
- You're not responsible for their outcome – just your standard of care.

Big Paradigm Shift of Managing High Conflict People

- Your focus needs to be on *your relationship* with the person, rather than their outcome. So as they move forward, then backward, you can calmly move them forward again. Don't become stressed by their "resistance."
- **The Paradox:** When you focus on the relationship rather than their outcome, you are more likely to get good outcomes.

**Dancing with the Resistance
(The “2-Step”)**

Resistance to change is normal
Direct confrontation triggers defensiveness

1. Show respect for their concerns
(no matter how absurd)
2. Then give them information/education:
“You might not realize this, but ...”
(Like motivational interviewing)

**1. CONNECTING:
Empathy, Attention & Respect**

You’ll be frustrated by the HCP’s emotional reactivity and thinking distortions. It’s easy to get “emotionally hooked,” and to withhold any positive responses. It’s easy to feel a powerful urge to attack or criticize.

Instead, consciously use your E.A.R.:

- EMPATHY
- ATTENTION
- RESPECT

E.A.R. Statement

- Example: “I can *understand* your frustration – this is a very important decision in your life. Don’t worry, I will pay full *attention* to your concerns about this issue and any proposals you want to make. I have a lot of *respect* for your commitment to solving this problem, and I look forward to solving it too.

Cautions about E.A.R.

- Avoid believing or agreeing with content.
- Avoid volunteering to “fix it” for them (in an effort to calm down their emotions).
- Be honest about empathy and respect (find something you truly believe)
- Keep an arms-length relationship.
- You don’t have to listen forever.
- You don’t have to use words or these words.

Fears and EARs for HCPs

Their Fears

- *Being abandoned*
- *Being seen as inferior*
- *Being ignored*
- *Being dominated*
- *Being taken advantage of*

Possible EAR Responses

- I’ll listen
- I want to help you
- I respect your efforts
- I’ll pay attention
- I’ll work with you on this
- I understand this can be frustrating/confusing

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**3. Responding to Misinformation
(Maintain a Healthy Skepticism)**

- Remain skeptical of the accuracy of the person’s information. There may be many cognitive distortions.
- Let them know that you will never know the full story. It is *possible* the extreme statements they are making are true. **“You might be right!”** And *possibly* not true.
- But next steps can still be taken and decisions can still be made about the future.

B.I.F.F Responses

Brief: Keep it brief. Long explanations and arguments trigger upsets for HCPs

Informative: Focus on straight information, not arguments, opinions, emotions or defending yourself (you don’t need to)

Friendly: Say you have empathy for their concerns; you will pay attention to their concerns; you will respect their efforts (E.A.R.)

Firm: Gently repeat information and close the door to further argument

See article: *Responding to Hostile Mail*

Coaching for BIFF Responses: 10 Questions

1. Is it Brief?
2. Is it Informative?
3. Is it Friendly?
5. Is it Firm? 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?

4 Key Skills for Managing HCPs

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**2. ANALYZING Options
(Give them a Choice)**

In high-conflict situations, don't focus on feelings. You won't resolve their emotional issues. Just acknowledge their frustrations. Talk to the right brain.

Instead, focus the upset person on a choice:

- The goal is to get the upset person focused on problem-solving, away from his or her emotions.
- This puts responsibility on the person to help solve the problem; puts responsibility on the person for making the choice.
- It gives them some power, when they feel powerless.

**Ask for or Make a
PROPOSAL**

- You can turn any complaint into a proposal.
- Focus on the future.
- When they are blaming or complaining, just ask you: **"So then, what do you propose?"**

4 Key Skills for Managing HCPs

C.A.R.S. Method

1. CONNECTING with E.A.R.
2. ANALYZING options and dilemmas
3. RESPONDING to misinformation
4. **SETTING LIMITS on behavior**

4. SET LIMITS

Use Indirect Confrontations

Set Personal Limits on Inappropriate Behaviour, whenever possible, because HCPs can't stop themselves, BUT,

- Avoid challenging the person or your relationship.
- Avoid attacking their defenses (resist saying how self-defeating their behavior is, how contradictory their thinking is, how inappropriate their emotions are, etc.).
- Avoid attacking your relationship with them (like telling them they are a difficult client, that you feel insulted by them, or threatening to end it if they proceed this way).

**Indirect Confrontations
(Cont' d)**

- Focus on rules and the perceptions of those external to them and external to your relationship with them, as reasons to act differently.
- "The law requires..."
- "A judge would likely see this as violating..."
- "It might appear better if you..."
- "I understand, but someone else might misunderstand that action..."
- "The Court prefers that..."

SET LIMITS
Predict Consequences

- HCPs do not connect realistic CONSEQUENCES to their own ACTIONS, especially fear-based actions.
- They feel like they are in a fight for survival, which blinds them to realities.
- Their life experiences may have taught them different consequences than most.
- They can be educated by a caring person.

Summary of Key HCP Skills

1. **CONNECTING:** Respond with Empathy, Attention and/or Respect (E.A.R.)
2. **ANALYZING:** Analyze problem, select option and work with HCP to create and execute plan or proposal
3. **RESPONDING:** Use BIFF (Be Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm)
4. **SETTING LIMITS:** Don't make it personal. Use policies, procedures, rules and regulations.

Closing Points about HCPs

- HCPs behavior is mostly unconscious
- HCPs want relief from their constant distress
- HCPs push professional boundaries out of desperation, not out of intent to be difficult
- Direct confrontation brings resistance and escalation of blame, not insight for HCPs
- Most HCPs have problem-solving skills, which you can access if you calm their emotions
- Many HCPs can be helped



HOW TO GIVE A BIFF RESPONSE^(SM)

© 2007 by **By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.**

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.

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:

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- [*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)



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Calming Upset People with E.A.R.

By Bill Eddy, LCSW, ESQ.

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Everyone gets upset some of the time. High conflict people get upset a lot of the time. A simple technique called an “E.A.R. Statement” can help you calm others down. This is especially helpful if you are in a close relationship or a position of authority. High conflict people tend to emotionally attack those closest to them and those in authority, especially when they are frustrated and can’t manage their own emotions. The intensity of their uncontrolled emotions can really catch you off-guard. But if you practice making E.A.R. statements you can connect with upset people and usually help them calm down.

E.A.R. Statements

E.A.R. stands for Empathy, Attention and Respect. It is the opposite of what you feel like giving someone when he or she is upset and verbally attacking YOU! Yet you will be amazed at how effective this is when you do it right.

An E.A.R. Statement connects with the person’s experience, with their feelings. For example, let’s say that someone verbally attacks you for not returning a phone call as quickly as he or she would have liked. “You don’t respect me! You don’t care how long I have to wait to deal with this problem! You’re not doing your job!”

Rather than defending yourself, give the person an E.A.R. Statement such as: “Wow, I can hear how upset you are. Tell me what’s going on. I share your concerns about this problem and respect your efforts to solve it.” This statement included:

EMPATHY: “I can hear how upset you are.”

ATTENTION: “Tell me what’s going on.”

RESPECT: “I respect your efforts.”

The Importance of Empathy

Empathy is different from sympathy. Having empathy for someone means that you can feel the pain and frustration that they are feeling, and probably have felt similar feelings in your own life. These are normal human emotions and they are normally triggered in people close by because emotions are contagious. When you show empathy for another person, you are treating them as a peer who you are concerned about and can relate to as an equal in distress.

Sympathy is when you see someone else in a bad situation that you are not in. You may feel sorry for them and have sympathy or pity for them, but it is often a one-up and one-down situation. There is more of a separation between those who give sympathy and those who receive it.

But you don't even have to use the word "empathy" to make a statement that shows empathy. Here are some examples:

"I can see how important this is to you."

"I understand this can be frustrating."

"I know this process can be confusing."

"I'm sorry to see that you're in this situation."

"I'd like to help you if I can."

"Let's see if we can solve this together."

The Importance of Attention

Getting attention is one of the most important concerns of high conflict people. They often feel ignored or disrespected and get into conflicts as a way of getting attention from those around them. Many have a lifetime history of alienating the people around them, so they look to others – professionals, friends and new acquaintances – to give them attention. Yet they rarely feel satisfied and keep trying to get more attention. If you show that you are willing to pay full attention for a little while, they often calm down.

There are many ways to let a person know that you will pay attention. For example, you can say:

"I will listen as carefully as I can."

"I will pay attention to your concerns."

"Tell me what's going on."

"Tell me more!"

You can also show attention non-verbally, such as:

Have good "eye contact" (keeping your eyes focused on the person)

Nod your head up and down to show that you are attentive to their concerns

Lean in to pay closer attention

Put your hand near them, such as on the table beside them

(Be careful about directly touching an upset HCP – it may be misinterpreted as a threat, a come-on, or a put-down)

The Importance of Respect

Anyone in distress, and especially HCPs, need respect from others. Even the most difficult and upset person usually has some quality that you can respect. By recognizing that quality, you can calm a person who is desperate to be respected.

Many high conflict people are used to being disrespected and being independent and "not needing others." This characteristic often leads them into conflict with those around them, who don't wish to see them as superior and are tempted to try to put them down. This just makes the HCP even more upset.

Here are several statements showing respect:

“I can see that you are a hard worker.”

“I respect your commitment to solving this problem.”

“I respect your efforts on this.”

“I respect your success at accomplishing _____.”

“You have important skills that we need here.”

Why E.A.R. is so Important

Upset people, especially high conflict people, may not be getting empathy, attention and respect anywhere else. They have usually alienated most of the people around them. It is the last thing that anyone wants to give them. They are used to being rejected, abandoned, insulted, ignored, and disrespected by those around them. They are starving for empathy, attention and respect. They are looking for it anywhere they can get it. So just give it to them. It's free and you don't sacrifice anything. You can still set limits, give bad news, and keep a social or professional distance. It just means that you can connect with them around solving a particular problem and treat them like an equal human being, whether you agree or strongly disagree with their part in the problem.

Many HCPs also have a hard time managing their own emotions. Since brain researchers have learned that we “mirror” each other's emotional expressions, it makes sense to respond to upset people with a calm and matter of fact manner – so that they will mirror us, rather than us mirroring their upset mood (which is what most people do much of the time – and it just makes things worse).

Managing Your Amygdala

Of course, this is the opposite of what we feel like doing. You may think to yourself: “No way I'm going to listen to this after the way I've been verbally attacked!” But that's just your amygdala talking, in an effort to protect you from danger. Our brains are very sensitive to threats, especially our amygdalas (you have one in the middle of your right brain and one in the middle of your left). Most people, while growing up, learn to manage the impulsive, protective responses of their amygdalas and over-ride them with a rational analysis of the situation, using their prefrontal cortex behind the forehead.

In fact, that is a lot of what adolescence is about: learning what is a crisis needing an instant, protective response (amygdala) and learning what situations are not a crisis and instead need a calm and rational response (prefrontal cortex). High conflict people often were abused or entitled growing up, and didn't have the secure, balanced connection necessary to learn these skills of emotional self-management. Therefore, you can help them by helping yourself not over-react to them. Just use your own prefrontal cortex to manage your own amygdala – which will help the upset person manage theirs.

It's Not About You!

To help you stay calm in the face of the other person's upset, remind yourself “it's not about you!” Don't take it personally. It's about the person's own upset and lack of sufficient skills to manage his or her own emotions. Try making E.A.R. statements and you will find they often end the attack and calm the person down. This is especially true for high conflict people (HCPs) who regularly have a hard time calming themselves down. All of the E.A.R. statements above are calming statements. They let the other person know that you want to connect

with him or her, rather than threaten him or her. It's their issue and you don't have to defend or explain yourself. It's not about you!

What to Avoid About E.A.R.

Don't Lie:

Upset people are often hyper-sensitive to lying. If you really can't feel empathy for the person, find something that you can respect that he or she has done. If you really can't respect the person, then simply pay attention. You can always just say: "Tell me more." This calms the person, because it tells him or her that you will listen without needing to be persuaded to do so. If your body language shows you are open to listening, most upset people feel better and will calm down enough to tell you what's going on.

You don't have to listen forever:

E.A.R. doesn't mean just listening. It's a statement in response to the person's upset mood, which you can use at any time. It can help you wrap up a conversation, if you need to do something else. High conflict people are known for talking endlessly. Keep in mind that high conflict people often don't get a sense of relief from telling their story or talking about their pain – they have told it many times and it is stuck. Often, they are stuck trying to get others to give them empathy, attention and respect, so that if you just give them an E.A.R. statement, they may not feel the need to keep talking or talk so long. You can interrupt an upset person much of the time, by saying how you can empathize with and respect the person.

E.A.R. doesn't mean you agree or disagree:

Giving your empathy, attention and respect helps you connect with an upset person as a human being. It doesn't mean that you agree or disagree with their point of view. Too often, people get stuck on arguing about an "issue." But with high conflict people "the issue's not the issue" – it's their inability to manage their own emotions and, sometimes, their behavior. If you are challenged about whether you agree or not, simply explain that you care or want to be helpful.

Maintain an "arms-length" relationship:

Giving your empathy, attention and respect to an upset person doesn't mean that you have to have a close relationship. You can still maintain a professional relationship, co-worker relationship, neighbor relationship, etc. In fact, it is wise not to become too close to a high conflict person, so that you don't raise their expectations of you becoming responsible for their welfare or planning to spend more time together than you intend.

Conclusion

Everyone gets upset some of the time. You don't have to be a high conflict person to be upset. At moments of trauma, anger and sadness, we really need the human connection of knowing that someone has empathy for us, is paying attention and still has respect for us. You can give anyone an E.A.R. statement to help them calm down. Nothing in this article is intended to mean that only HCPs get upset.

Making E.A.R. statements – or non-verbally showing your Empathy, Attention and Respect – may help you calm or avoid many potentially high-conflict situations. It can save you time, money and emotional energy for years to come. But it takes lots of practice. You can start today!

Bill Eddy is a therapist, lawyer and mediator. He is the President of the High Conflict Institute and the author of ***It's All Your Fault! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything*** which explains the use of E.A.R. statements further. This book and several other books and articles about managing high conflict people and situations are available at www.highconflictinstitute.com.



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