

Responding To Hostile Email

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Hostile mail – especially email – has become much more common over the past decade. Most of this mail 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 and intensely hostile mail. There may be more people involved and it may become legally significant. You would be amazed at the embarrassing hostile emails that show up in court cases these days. Therefore, how you handle hostile mail may impact the future of long-term relationships and the outcome of a case. The following are some suggestions based on my experience with high conflict people:

1. Do you need to respond? Much of the hostile mail today does not need a response. Letters from (ex-) spouses, angry neighbors, irritating co-workers, or attorneys do not usually have legal significance. If someone says nasty things about you or someone else in a letter, the letter has no power, unless you give it power. Often, it is designed to get you engaged in a battle of emotional venting for the sake of relieving the writer’s anxiety.

Generally, responding with similar emotions and hostility will simply escalate things without satisfaction, and you will just get a new piece of hostile mail back in return. 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. At that time, it may be important to respond to inaccurate statements of fact with accurate statements of fact (leaving out your opinions). Therefore, sometimes you need to respond.

2. Don't Respond Emotionally Brain research shows that our ability to think rationally is impaired when we are very upset—and hostile mail can trigger many emotions. Therefore, you do not want to respond until you have recovered from these emotions. This is a common mistake people make in quickly responding to hostile e-mails. Calm yourself down first, either by taking a break, getting some exercise,

doing another project, talking to a friend or neutral relative, etc.

3. Determine Your Goal Before You Write Is your goal to get the other person to do something? If so, focus on what you want the person to do – not on what he or she did wrong. For example, if a neighbor has been loud, request that the person try to keep it quiet during specific times that are important to you. Avoid focusing on comments about the person’s character, such as saying he or she is rude, insensitive, or stupid. These do not motivate high conflict people. Once you have identified your goal, I recommend writing a B.I.F.F. response: 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 the other person will be tempted to criticize in your writing. It also signals that you don’t wish to get into a dialogue. Just make your response, then end your letter.

Don’t take their statements personally (even if they were intended as personal attacks) and don’t respond with an item-by-item personal attack. It just escalates the conflict and keeps it going and going and 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 statement the other person made. For example: “Just to clear things up, I was out of state on a trip on February 12th, so I would not have been the person who was making loud noises that day.”

Avoid negative comments, like little digs. Avoid sarcasm. Avoid threats. Especially avoid personal remarks, like those about someone’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 and going. Personal attacks rarely lead to insight or positive change.

FRIENDLY

While you may be tempted to write a response in anger, you are much more likely to reach your goal by writing in a friendly (and brief) 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.

This does not mean that you have to be overly friendly. Just make it sound a little relaxed and non-antagonistic. Make it sound like you recognize their concerns. Brief comments that show your Empathy, Attention and Respect (E.A.R.) 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 leave the door open to 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 does not need further discussion.” 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 anyway, you can ignore them, if you have sufficiently addressed the inaccurate information already. 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. (“As I said in my email of March 6th, that is all I am going to say on this subject.”)

Example Joe: "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 at the last job and witnessing you making a total fool of yourself in front of everyone – including flirting with everyone from the CEO down to the mailroom kid! Are you high on something? I think you have a personality disorder! Haven't you gotten your finances together enough to support yourself yet, without flinging yourself at every Tom, Dick and Harry? ..." [And the email goes on like this for about 2 pages.]

Jane: "Thank you for responding to my email 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 simply provided factual information, kept it brief, and did not engage in defending herself in response to Joe's many accusations. 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."

Comment: Again, Jane has kept it brief, informative, friendly and firm. With other people involved, it is important to keep a door open for communication and show a willingness to correct any misconceptions,

if necessary. There is no need to address all of Joe's allegations in this group email, as it will just escalate the dispute and other people will feel they have to get involved.

The above example has the man sending the hostile email. My experience in many court battles is that hostile mail is fairly equally sent by men and women – and both men and women have a hard time not getting engaged in these battles.

This example also includes a reference by Joe that he thinks that Jane has a personality disorder. While I write books and give seminars on the topic of personality disorders in legal, workplace and neighbor disputes, I strongly advise against telling someone that you think they have a personality disorder. The goal is to understand the patterns of behavior and use this information to handle the person and solve the problem – not publicly label people. Those who are eager to say, "you have a personality disorder" are more likely to be those with personality problems themselves.

Conclusion

Whether you are at work, at home or elsewhere, a B.I.F.F. response can save you time and emotional anguish. The more that people handle hostile mail in a manner such as this, the less hostile mail there will be.

***High Conflict Institute** provides training and consultations regarding High Conflict People (HCPs) to individuals and professionals dealing with legal, workplace, educational, and healthcare disputes. Bill Eddy is the President of the High Conflict Institute and the author of "It's All Your Fault!" He is an attorney, mediator, and therapist. Bill has presented seminars to attorneys, judges, mediators, ombudspersons, human resource professionals, employee assistance professionals, managers, and administrators in 25 states, several provinces in Canada, France, and Australia. For more information about High Conflict Institute, our seminars and consultations, or Bill Eddy and his books go to: www.HighConflictInstitute.com or call 619-221-9108.*