

## CHAPTER ONE

# ARE YOU BEING HELD HOSTAGE WITHOUT KNOWING IT?

*A nine-year-old girl was spending time with her grandparents in Kansas. The grandfather was away, so she was sleeping with her grandmother. Suddenly, she awoke in the middle of the night to see her elderly grandmother sitting up in bed and a man standing over her, dripping with rain and with a wooden club in his hand, ready to strike. The little girl felt a scream rising, and then her grandmother touched her hand and she felt a flood of calm wash over her. The grandmother said to the man, "I am glad you found our house. You've come to the right place. You are welcome here. It is a bad night to be out. You are cold, wet, and hungry. Take the firewood you have there and go stir up the kitchen stove. Let me put some clothes on, and I will find you some dry clothes, fix you a good hot meal, and make a place for you to sleep behind the stove where it is good and warm." She said no more but waited calmly. After a long pause, the man lowered the club and said, "I won't hurt you." She then met him in the kitchen and cooked him a meal, gave him the dry clothes, and made a bed up for him behind the stove. The grandmother then went back to her bed and she and her granddaughter went back to sleep. They awoke in the morning to find the man gone.*

*At about 10 A.M., the police arrived with a canine unit that had followed the man's scent to the house. They were shocked to find the grandmother and granddaughter still alive. The man was a psychopathic murderer who had escaped from prison the night before and had brutally slaughtered the family who were the nearest neighbors.*

This amazing grandmother had created so much emotional bonding with the intruder that he could not kill her. She had treated him with a kindness and respect that had disarmed him both literally and figuratively. The fact is people do not kill people; they kill things or objects.

This remarkable story is summarized from Joseph Chilton Pearce's book *Magical Child*.<sup>1</sup> Think for a moment. What would you do if you were taken hostage? Imagine that you suddenly found yourself in a hostage situation where you are held with a gun against your will. How would you react? How would you feel? What would you do? What would you say to the hostage taker(s)?

Fortunately, the likelihood of physically being taken hostage is slim. However, all of us can be taken hostage metaphorically—that is, made to feel threatened, manipulated, and victimized—every day by bosses, colleagues, customers, family members, or virtually anyone with whom we interact. We can also become hostage to events or circumstances happening in our lives. We can even become hostages to ourselves, our own mind-sets, our emotions, and our habits.

Consider the following everyday situations in which people allow themselves to be taken hostage.

- While you are in your car on your way to work, another driver cuts you off. Immediately you feel angry and hostile toward the “jerk” in the other vehicle. This feeling can linger, keeping you in a negative frame of mind for a good part of the day.
- Your boss criticizes you, and in response, you defend yourself or even attack her, causing the situation to escalate. The conflict stays in your mind, resulting in a feeling of distrust between the two of you.
- You are going on a business trip and, because you are leaving, your child cries. You then rush out the door feeling guilty and telling yourself that you are a terrible parent. For the remainder of the trip, you feel down and even depressed.
- You say hello to a colleague as you walk by, but he does not respond. You begin complaining to others about your colleague, your work, and the company. Soon you start thinking, “Nobody cares about people around here.”

People enraged by another person, a traffic jam, missing luggage, a lost job, a delayed flight, or even the weather—any set of external circumstances beyond their control—are allowing themselves to be taken hostage. Without realizing it, how many of us let an external event control our lives? Have you ever been upset because your holiday was ruined by bad weather? Have you ever been put into a bad mood by someone else's negative attitude? Have you ever said to someone, "You make me so upset!" If so, you have allowed yourself to be taken hostage.

Many business people I work with have high intellectual intelligence (IQ) and yet have an underdeveloped sense of emotional intelligence (EQ). They concern themselves with facts, figures, and details at the expense of the emotions, feelings, and motivations of their coworkers. Even the terms *hard facts* and *the soft stuff* used in business imply that data are somehow real and strong while emotions are weak and less important. I have seen examples of overdomineering leaders inflicting untold pain and misery on employees through their need to control both people and situations. Employees can also take their bosses hostage, minimizing success and making work a misery.

The competitive nature of many business leaders can lead to situations in which they compete with their own people and other teams rather than collaborate. Issues may then be driven under the table, and conflicts can go unresolved, creating an atmosphere of discomfort, hostility, or even fear.

I meet many business leaders who misunderstand the role of power in leadership. Through an inability to face their own personal fears or concerns, they are driven to use power, control, and formal authority as the ways to manage their people. It is easy either to take others hostage or to take yourself hostage in the work environment to avoid those difficult conversations. In contrast, open and honest dialogue is necessary to build a sustainable and high-performing team environment. By identifying a common agenda, using ongoing dialogue, and creating a climate of trust, leaders can empower their people to perform at their full potential. Harnessing the competitive instincts of the individual into a drive toward a common goal can bring out the best in every team.

Authentic leaders learn to manage their competitive nature and find that, ironically, through helping others to grow and develop, they actually have greater success than if they concentrate only on themselves.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (4th ed.) definition of a hostage is “one that is manipulated by the demands of another.” In the workplace, managers and/or staff can sometimes feel like hostages caught in the cross fire between the boss, the customers, and colleagues. Entrepreneurs who must, for example, fire twenty-five employees can be held hostage to their own emotions and feelings of pain at the action they know they must take. In today’s business world, the global accessibility created by technology can intrude on family and personal lives to the extent that people feel hostage to their jobs, causing profound pain to others and themselves. Bosses who face employees who are not motivated or colleagues who are cynical may begin to feel their work has no value. The result is they become hostage to their staff’s low motivation and the cynicism of colleagues.

While the likelihood of literally having a gun to our heads is thankfully small, the real concern is the endless number of situations in which we feel controlled, attacked, and compelled to respond. These situations can lead to an escalation and a sense of helplessness and feeling like a hostage.

The feeling of being held hostage is particularly apparent in interpersonal relationships when power, authority, or position are abused or unduly feared. On the one hand, the person in authority may misuse power while, on the other, the person subject to that authority may be unduly afraid. The question is, Why do so many people endure unhappy situations? Why do they stay in abusive relationships, either with a partner, at work, or with a friend? The reasons are complex, but, essentially, they have lost the ability to control their brain to focus on other options and to use personal power to act on those options.

## CONTROLLING OUR BRAIN IS ESSENTIAL

According to neurologist Paul MacLean, the human brain consists of three separate, though interconnected, brains.<sup>2</sup> They are the

reptilian brain, the limbic system (sometimes referred to as the “Paleomammalian brain”), and the neocortex.

At the most basic level, the human brain is hardwired for attack or defense. This fight-or-flight mechanism is controlled by our reptilian brain rather than by the rational part of the brain. The reptilian brain has a single focus: survival. It does not think in abstract terms or feel complex emotions. It is responsible for basic urges such as fight, flight, hunger, or fear. It is also nonverbal, operating purely at the level of visceral stimulus response. It is filled with programmed responses and will repeat the same behaviors over and over again, never learning from past mistakes. It remains active, even in deep sleep, and is the part of the brain always on the lookout for danger. It is called the reptilian brain because its basic anatomy is also found in reptiles.

The limbic system is the brain we share with other mammals, and it handles emotions and feelings. Everything in this emotional system is either agreeable or disagreeable, and survival depends on the avoidance of pain and repetition of pleasure. It appears that the limbic system is the primary seat of emotion, attention, and emotionally charged memories. It acts as a judge in relation to the neocortex, deciding whether the ideas there are good or bad. The limbic system expresses itself exclusively in the form of emotions.

The neocortex is the part of the brain that we share with the higher apes (for example, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans), although ours is more sophisticated. It is in the neocortex that we process abstract thought, words, symbols, logic, and time. MacLean refers to this brain as “the mother of invention and the father of abstract thought.”<sup>3</sup> Although all animals also have a neocortex, theirs are comparatively small. For example, a rat without a neocortex can act in a relatively normal way, whereas a human without a neocortex would be in a vegetative state. The neocortex is divided into left and right hemispheres, known as the left brain and the right brain. The left half of the cortex controls the right side of the body and vice versa. The left brain is more rational and verbal, while the right side of the brain is more spatial and artistic.

We can be taken hostage by the fight-or-flight mechanism in the reptilian brain or by the emotions in the limbic system. When taken hostage in this way, we succumb to what Daniel Goleman calls an “amygdala hijack.”<sup>4</sup> (The amygdala is a small brain structure that is

part of the limbic system; see also Chapter Eight of this book.) This occurs when someone overreacts in an impulsive, instinctive way, producing a negative outcome. The neocortex can override the emotions from the other two brains and make it possible for us to choose whether or not we become hostage to automatic emotional reactions.

The phrase “going postal” refers to one kind of situation in which the limbic system takes over and leads to serious consequences. The term was coined in the United States after a postal worker who was fired returned to the post office with a gun and shot some colleagues. Today the phrase is used in general when someone goes into a rage. Such incidents of rage happen all over the world, though more typically with words and emotions rather than physical violence. When operating at the level of primitive brain responses, people can get themselves into situations in which they repeat the same pattern and experience the same problems over and over. However, by using the neocortex, people can overcome the emotions that are hijacking them and choose to give a different meaning to a circumstance rather than complying with a set pattern that repeats a negative situation. We can learn to manage emotions and to regulate their discharge. For example, when you lose your luggage at the airport, rather than yelling at the person behind the lost luggage counter, it is better to control your anger and work with that person to find your luggage.

## POWERLESSNESS IS POISON

Feeling powerless is one of the first signs of being taken hostage. Powerlessness poisons the person through feelings of helplessness or entrapment. The poison creates a cycle that provokes continuous negative interpretations of reality.

What are the words or phrases that accompany this feeling of being a hostage?

- “I have no choice.”
- “I am trapped.”
- “I feel terrible.”
- “I just hate this.”
- “It’s going to be another one of those days!”

Such phrases are negative self-talk that comes from our inner worlds. The dialogue we have with ourselves inside our heads can either keep us in a hostage state or help us to control it. The hostage feeling starts with the mind-set of being forced to do something we do not want to do and then continues with a negative attitude. We can understand the poison in our state of mind by listening to the words we use. The hostage mentality focuses on the negative by repeatedly telling us what we cannot do, how helpless we are, and that we will never get what we want. Interestingly, research by Robert Schrauf, an applied linguistics expert, shows that regardless of culture or age, we have far more words that express negative emotions than positive ones. In studies of thirty-seven languages, researchers found seven words related to emotions that have similar meanings in all these languages: joy, fear, anger, sadness, disgust, shame, and guilt. Of these seven words, only one is positive—joy.<sup>5</sup> This research is significant because it helps us to understand the importance of finding positive ways of describing emotional experiences. It is a combination of self-talk and the management of our emotions that determines whether or not we are a hostage.

*Mary confronts her manager, James, because of a strong exchange between the two of them in a meeting during which Mary felt embarrassed in front of her colleagues. Mary says, "I think you were really over the top attacking me like that." James responds, "Look, I was just telling the truth, and if you don't like it you can always leave the team."*

James reveals he has been taken hostage because of his defensive-aggressive response. What is the alternative? Ask a question. Engage in a dialogue to clarify intentions. Make a concession or even an apology. For example, he could say, "Mary, help me to understand what you did not like about what I said" or "Would you like to know what my intentions were?" or "I apologize for saying you can always leave the team; that was over the top."

In this kind of situation, a true leader will work to keep the relationship intact and manage any desire to retaliate by focusing on the needs of the employee, the team, and him- or herself. Successful leaders are able to take this approach instinctively and automatically. Others lack the knowledge or the skill to deal effectively

with such situations, and they can learn a great deal from hostage negotiation techniques.

As we saw with James and Mary, if someone provokes a reaction from us when we are not in control, we can easily become metaphorical hostages. This is a problem because it creates a block in the bond in the social relationship and drags us into a negative emotional reaction that can lead to a state of cynicism and detachment. Ultimately, negative states are a problem because they may interrupt social bonding and affect a person's physical health in many ways.

The goal is to maintain a sense of control through the mind-sets we have and the words we use. This is how hostage negotiators succeed. The challenge is to remain both authentic and spontaneous at the same time. The following example shows how our mind-sets are critical in controlling focus and attention.

*If you are walking down the street and someone comes up behind you, puts a gun to your head, and says, "I am going to kill you," you do not have to feel like a hostage. While it is true that physically you are indeed a hostage, you do not have to feel like one because you still have the power to think, feel, breathe, and speak. You can ask the hostage taker a question. "Will you please put the gun down and let me help you get what you want?" If the response is, "No, I am going to kill you right now," change the goal, and with another question you can say, "Please, will you just give me five minutes so you can tell me what you want? I am George and I have four children." The gunman says, "No, I am going to kill you right now." Ask again. "Will you give me just four minutes, then? I really want to help you get what you want." The gunman says, "No, I am going to kill you right now!"*

Now, when I share this story I ask if this is a good negotiation, and most people say no. Actually, it is a good negotiation. You are still alive! Controlling one's state, managing one's feelings, and using words—to ask questions and seek a solution—is what hostage negotiation is all about. "Will you give me three minutes?" "No." "Will you at least give me two minutes?" "Okay, Buddy, you've got thirty seconds." In those thirty seconds, you had better bond and engage in dialogue as you have never done before in your life! In a subtle way, the no's are a concession and must be seen with a pos-



itive mind-set. As we will see later (in Chapter Seven), concessions are part of the fundamental process of creating and maintaining bonds. If we could measure the blood pressure and state of arousal of the man holding the gun, it would be lowering with each concession. Of course, if you have the opportunity to escape safely, you should take it. If you cannot escape, your best bet is to talk. Hostage negotiators use questions to find out what is motivating the other person and to lead the focus of the dialogue.

Over twenty-five-hundred years ago, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote that the biggest problem in the world was that individuals experienced themselves as powerless.<sup>6</sup> A hostage mind-set makes people feel negative, trapped, powerless, disconnected, and unable to influence and persuade. That negative state can easily persist, poisoning their minds, emotions, bodies, and souls. The hostage mentality can lead to an embittered or resentful attitude over major losses such as death, divorce, or loss of a job, and even over relatively “small” things such as the loss of an office, an argument with a neighbor over noise, or a disagreement between husband and wife over household chores.

Sadly, much of everyday life for many people is built around negative states. When this happens, the negativity takes root, festers, and poisons the mind so that reactions tend to be out of proportion to the actual event itself.

According to psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven Sauter, the less control a person feels he or she has over a stressful situation, the more traumatic it will become.<sup>7</sup> The person who feels like a hostage may be displaying what Seligman calls “an attitude of learned helplessness.” This is characteristic of people who have no sense of “controllability,” or, in other words, those who lack a feeling of control over persons, things, and events.<sup>8</sup>

In his studies of the relationship between fear and learning, Seligman accidentally discovered an unexpected phenomenon while doing experiments on dogs using Pavlovian techniques (classical conditioning). The Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov had discovered that when dogs are presented with food, they will salivate. He then found that if a ringing bell is repeatedly paired with the presentation of food, the dog salivates. Then, if the bell is rung and there is no food present, the dog still salivates. The dog has learned to associate the bell with food.<sup>9</sup>

In Seligman's experiment, instead of pairing the bell with food, he paired the bell with a harmless shock, restraining the dog in a hammock during the learning phase. The idea was that after the dog had learned the association, it would then feel fear when it heard the bell and run away or display some other avoidant behavior. Seligman then put the conditioned dog into a cage that consisted of a low fence dividing the box into two compartments. The dog could easily see the fence and jump over it if it wished. When the bell rang, Seligman was amazed when the dog did nothing. He then decided to shock the conditioned dog another time and, again, nothing happened. The dog just lay in the box. Then, when Seligman put an unconditioned dog into the box, as expected, it immediately jumped to the other side. What the conditioned dog learned during the period it was in the hammock was that escape was futile, and therefore it did not try to escape even when the circumstances made it possible to do so. The dog had learned to be helpless and passive—in other words, to be a hostage.<sup>10</sup>

The theory of learned helplessness was then extended to human behavior and provided a model to explain depression, a state characterized by a lack of control over one's life, a state of indifference, and a lack of feeling. It was discovered that depressed people learned to be helpless and believed that, whatever they did, any action was futile. Researchers have discovered a great deal about depression from learned helplessness. They have also found exceptions—people who do not get depressed even after many difficult life experiences. Seligman's research revealed that a depressed person thinks about negative events in more pessimistic ways than does a nondepressed person.

Those people who allow their thoughts to drift toward the negative are more likely to feel that their situation is hopeless than are those people who have a positive mind-set. Unfortunately, many of us can become hostages through our own passivity, enduring pain, like Seligman's dogs, and failing to understand that we do have the power to do something about it, even if there is a real gun at our head. There are people who are held hostage with a gun to their head who do speak, think, and act. And yet, there are people with no gun to their head who spend their lives feeling like a hostage to their boss, colleague, spouse, friend, or anyone who has power over them.

## THE STOCKHOLM SYNDROME AND HOSTAGE MENTALITY

The term *hostage* is often associated with an extreme act when one person or group, often viewed as terrorists, takes control away from an individual or group and keeps them captive against their will with the goal of getting something. An unusual event that can occur is when the hostage forms an emotional bond to the hostage taker, as illustrated by the following story.

*In April 2005, police arrested convicted murderer Randolph Dial, who had kidnapped Bobbi Parker during his escape from an Oklahoma jail in 1994 and then lived with her for some eleven years. Her two daughters were eight and ten when she was taken hostage, and her husband was the assistant warden at the prison. Dial was quoted as saying, "I had worked on her for a year trying to get her mind right. I convinced her that the friend was the enemy and the enemy was the friend." Investigators believe that Dial kept Parker from escaping all those years by threatening to hurt her family. Bobbi Parker was not held by handcuffs or ropes. In fact, sometimes she was able to drive alone. She was held by her own fears and the feeling of powerlessness to act with the goal of protecting her family. This unusual bonding can happen when there is a deep emotional shock such as fear of being killed or fear of someone else being killed.*

These positive feelings toward the hostage taker can develop spontaneously and without conscious control; this is called the Stockholm Syndrome, a condition in which hostages become sympathetic toward their captors and begin to identify with them and defend them against the authorities. It is the ultimate attempt by a hostage to survive.

*On August 23, 1973, two bank robbers carrying machine guns entered a bank in Stockholm, Sweden. After being trapped, they took four terrified hostages, three women and one man, for 131 hours. The hostages were strapped with dynamite and held in a bank vault until they were rescued on August 28. Authorities were alarmed at the growing hostility of the hostages to the police during the siege. The hostages had begun to feel the captors were actually protecting them from the police. After their rescue, the hostages continued to show a shockingly hostile attitude toward the*

*authorities, considering that their captors had threatened and abused them and they had feared for their lives. In the interviews following their release it was clear they supported their captors and actually feared the authorities who came to their rescue. One woman later became engaged to one of the hostage takers, and another developed a defense fund. Clearly, the hostages had bonded emotionally with their captors.<sup>11</sup>*

Perhaps the most famous example of someone exhibiting the Stockholm Syndrome was Patty Hearst. She was a millionaire heiress who was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army in February 1974, and she went so far as to assist the group with armed bank robberies. She was later released from prison as authorities gained a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

The Stockholm Syndrome is one of the most interesting phenomena of attachment and bonding behavior. It is a survival mechanism whereby the hostage, in a severe emotional shock of fearing death, begins to feel gratitude for still being allowed to live. In addition, when food and water are given, more gratitude emerges, which further deepens the bond. "Gifts" such as being allowed to go to the bathroom with dignity or being allowed to move around continue to deepen the bond. The former enemy is now becoming an ally. Further exchanges and dialogue can lead to the hostage identifying with the cause of the hostage taker. In fact, he or she may then act on behalf of the hostage taker, as we saw in the Patty Hearst example.

A similar thing may happen when a person forms a bond to someone who uses ongoing verbal abuse, negative behavior, or punishment as a form of control. The person becomes a hostage to the abuser after failing to understand his or her own power to draw a boundary or to leave. This is the classic victim-persecutor relationship based on a bond that discounts the pain because of the fear of leaving.<sup>12</sup>

However, the Stockholm Syndrome does not develop in all hostages, due to the failure to bond by either the hostages or the hostage takers. As was mentioned earlier, bonding with a hostage taker is a good survival strategy up to the point when it is appropriate to break the bond, that is, after being rescued or escaping. However, for some former hostages this is easier said than done, which can cause great pain and confusion in their lives.

Recently, another bank robber who took hostages was shot by the police sharpshooter. After he fell to the floor, two women hostages picked him up and physically held him at the door for another bullet. Some people are essentially immune to feeling like a hostage as they have strong identities and they choose not to surrender their personal power to the hostage taker, or may immediately take their power back when it is safe to do so. The important point to remember in these situations is, What is your goal? Be clear about what you want and then act in the way that is most likely to help you achieve the goal. In a hostage situation the goal usually is to survive, and the best strategy for that is bonding.

In some situations, resistance to an event or situation can stimulate an almost automatic reaction that may increase the force against the opposition. The events at Waco, Texas, are an example of when an extreme reaction led to a tragedy.

*In February 1993, more than seventy agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) raided the Branch Davidians, a religious cult led by David Koresh. The ATF suspected the group of having a large cache of high-powered weapons, as well as explosives. According to reports, when the team arrived to enforce warrants for arrest at the cult's compound in Waco, shooting started almost immediately, leaving four ATF agents and six Branch Davidians dead. The FBI moved in, and a lengthy standoff ensued. For more than fifty days, the FBI tried to persuade the Davidians to give themselves up. The standoff ended on the morning of April 19 when a tank and other FBI armored vehicles moved in. The FBI then spent several hours shooting tear gas into the compound. Shortly after noon, the building was engulfed in flames. By the end of the day, more than seventy men, women, and children were dead.*

We can learn much about being a hostage from this tragic story. Did the fact that the ATF lost four members in the initial gun battle, with all the accompanying grief, influence the later drive to attack the Waco headquarters? Or, by overriding the instinctive reaction to attack and the emotional feelings of anger and exhaustion, would it have been possible for the ATF and FBI to use further negotiation to reach a peaceful solution? The answers to these questions are still being discussed by congressional investigations.

County Sheriff Jack Harwell, who had a positive bond with David Koresh that had extended over many years, was quoted as saying, “I would have handled it differently. I think he [Koresh] would have come in to talk to me if I had asked him. Then I would have told him we needed to go back out to the compound to serve these warrants. They thought of that place out there as their country.”<sup>13</sup> Sheriff Jack Harwell was sidelined and mostly excluded from any decision making from the start to the finish. Could his bond with David Koresh have made a difference to the eventual outcome?

There are lessons from this incident that we can also apply to the business world. When there are territorial disputes between departments or differences of opinion between colleagues, a stand-off position often can be avoided through the power of dialogue and by simply talking through the issues.

## BONDING IS THE ANTIDOTE

What I have learned from my years as a hostage negotiator is that we, as individuals, do not have to feel powerless in our daily lives—and that bonding is the antidote to the hostage dilemma.

*In the early morning hours of Saturday, March 12, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia, Ashley Smith was taken hostage in her home by Brian Nichols, the day after he had killed four people at a courthouse. Nichols had shot a judge, a sheriff’s deputy, a stenographer, and, later, a park ranger. Ashley managed to escape unharmed. How did she achieve this? She created a bond with Nichols. At first, Nichols tied Smith up, gagged her, and told her, “I don’t want to hurt you. You know, somebody could have heard your scream already. And if they did, the police are on their way. And I’m going to have to hold you hostage. And I’m going to have to kill you and probably myself and lots of other people. And I don’t want that.” Later, in her book *Unlikely Angel*, Smith revealed that she had given Nichols methamphetamine when he had asked for marijuana. This information does not alter the fact that bonding was at the heart of her survival success.*

*During the ordeal, Smith said, she gently talked to Nichols, turning from hostage to confidant as they discussed God, family, pancakes, and the massive manhunt going on outside her door. They even watched television*

*reports about him together. She had Rick Warren's book, The Purpose-Driven Life, and began reading extracts from it to Nichols, helping him to determine what his purpose in life might be.*

*In reports after the event, Smith explained that she had told Nichols about her daughter and bonded with him after he said that he had a son who had been born the night before. Her husband had died four years earlier, and she told him that if he hurt her, her child would not have a Mommy or Daddy.*

*At one stage, Nichols told her he was "already dead," but Smith urged him to consider the fact that he was alive "a miracle." As they talked through the night, some of the fear subsided and Nichols untied Smith. When morning came, Nichols was overwhelmed when Smith made him pancakes with real butter. He told her that he "just wanted some normalness to his life." They then continued a powerful dialogue and created such a strong bond that he chose not to hurt her and, in fact, released her to go to see her daughter. His last words to Ashley were, "Say hi to your daughter for me."*

*The police commented afterward that she had acted very cool and level-headed, something they do not normally see in their profession. "We were prepared for the worst and got the best," said Gwinnett County Police officer Darren Moloney.<sup>14</sup>*

As discussed in detail in Chapter Three, bonding in a hostage context is the ability to create an emotional connection, even with the most difficult or dangerous person, for the purpose of finding resolution to a difference or a problem. It is the idea of forming a relationship in which we understand what the other person needs or wants and then maintaining the relationship despite our own inner emotions driving us to attack or run away.

For leaders, teams and organizations, bonding is particularly important. The heart of any healthy group lies in the intensity of the bonding between people and to the organization's goals. This can be measured by the degree of engagement and emotional involvement. Whether it is a family, a club, or a company, when members of a group are attached to each other and to common goals, a sense of well-being, high energy, and enjoyment in working together exists. This environment allows people to express

ideas, to feel safe, and to resolve conflicts even when there are profound differences.

When people are thinking with a hostage mind-set, they believe that they have no options but to change the external situation. They must quit their job, move to a new house, or resign from the team. A mind-set of escape connects to how our brain works. As we are hardwired to survive, we are basically looking for danger and paying attention to those things that frighten or scare us. Bonding is often counterintuitive, requiring us to focus on what the other person needs as well as knowing what we want—it allows others to have an impact on us and, in turn, us to elicit a response from them.

Bonding is so powerful because it personalizes the relationship, thereby taking any toxicity and poison out of the process. This power is demonstrated in the story of Nelson Mandela.

*At forty-six, Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment and placed in a cell for almost twenty-six years. Imagine how easy it would have been for him to become embittered and angry. What would this have achieved? He did not have control over the situation, so all he could have done was to be taken hostage. Instead, he remained focused on the positive, even learning the language of the guards (Afrikaans) so he could communicate with them and create a dialogue. When Mandela was imprisoned, his mind-set was to view his incarceration as training and preparation to help bring South Africa out of apartheid. How many of us could spend twenty-six years in prison and see it as training? Mandela was a physical hostage but certainly not a psychological one.*

*While in prison, Mandela rejected offers made by his jailers for remission of sentence in exchange for accepting South Africa's ethnic homeland policy and recognizing the independence of the Transkei, his birthplace. In the 1980s, Mandela again rejected an offer of release on the condition that he renounce violence. "Prisoners cannot enter into contracts. Only free men can negotiate," said Mandela.*

*It is significant that, shortly after his release on Sunday, February 11, 1990, Mandela and his supporters agreed to the suspension of armed struggle. Reports have also revealed that some of the prison guards wept when he was released. Mandela was inaugurated as the first democratically elected state president of South Africa on May 10, 1994.<sup>15</sup>*



## SUMMARY

We can be taken hostage by ourselves or other people just about any time and any place. Thankfully, most of us are not taken hostage with a physical weapon. However, we can become hostages when we give away our personal power and allow ourselves to feel trapped or helpless. Whether it relates to a minor event such as being criticized by a colleague, or a major situation such as having an ongoing struggle with a boss or partner, allowing ourselves to be taken hostage means we will have difficulty resolving the issue in a way that is productive.

Negativity from powerlessness is poison to our mind. People can learn helplessness as a repetitive response to problems of any kind. They have learned that “nothing they do makes a difference,” so they give up and feel like a hostage. The antidote to powerlessness is emotional bonding. By connecting to people or goals, we can create bonds that enable us to feel empowered. Bonding is a survival mechanism for all of us. Through bonding, we enrich our lives.

It is vital to remember that we always have a choice in how we think, feel, and act. Depending on our mental state, the world looks very different. Learning not to be taken hostage by ourselves or others enables us to manage our lives without necessarily changing external circumstances. If we only look externally for satisfaction, we will find only fleeting gratification. To truly change our lives, we have to look inside ourselves. When we make a choice to cooperate, to collaborate, or even to give in, we are not being a hostage. When we are aware that we have a choice in any given situation, it enables us to feel more positive about the circumstances.

We can choose to enjoy all our relationships in a hostage-free state of being. Does this mean we will not face challenges or frustrations? Absolutely not. Freedom does not mean becoming disconnected—a person still needs to make concessions to a boss, customer, spouse, or friend; however, it is done from a positive state rather than from a negative state with a feeling of powerlessness.

With practice, we can recognize when we are reacting in an aggressive or defensive way and thereby either being taken hostage or taking someone else hostage. We can then choose the way we react. We need to focus our mind on the words we use and the transactions we use with others.

If we are able to recognize instinctive emotional reactions that repeat themselves, we can then interrupt the lack of self-management. By understanding ourselves and the way our mind works, we can learn to set ourselves free from inner constraints and make real choices. The concepts are equally relevant to any organization, business, school, or group. By encouraging those around us to also live a hostage-free life, we can manage all aspects of our life more effectively.

### **Key Points to Remember**

- 1.** A hostage mind-set involves feeling trapped, helpless, powerless, disconnected, and unable to influence and persuade.
- 2.** The brain is hardwired to survive by looking for danger and pain. We can override this instinctual aspect of the brain to look for the positive and for ways to act with personal power.
- 3.** Learned helplessness and lack of control of our mind-set causes people to be powerless. Recovering our power to choose a reaction to the events in our lives is possible for anyone who has become a hostage.
- 4.** Know what you want and maintain a mind-set of “everything is possible.” If you do not get what you want, find the positive in not getting what you want. Either way you win and will never feel like a hostage.