

# 1

## 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 up a bed 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*

## 2 Are You Being Held Hostage Without Knowing It?

*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 “idiot” in the other vehicle. This feeling can linger, keeping you in a negative state of mind for the rest of the day.
- Your boss criticizes you, and in response, you defend yourself or even attack, 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 get no response. 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 we 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 *soft skills* used in business imply that data are somehow real and strong, while emotions are weak and less important. That could neither be further from the truth nor from what the research supports. In fact, those who master their own emotions and are comfortable engaging with the emotions of others are the most effective leaders! We have seen examples of over-domineering leaders and micro-managers 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. Both are very frequent scenarios caused by toxic leaders allowing, enabling, and facilitating toxic work environments to brew.

This doesn't just lead to employees leaving. Gallup research from 2022 found that at least 50% of the US workforce are "quiet quitters."<sup>2</sup> These are people who have actively disengaged from their work, but have not actually left their jobs. Not only did disengaged workers cost businesses an estimated \$7.8 trillion in lost productivity in 2022, but there is a personal cost. Quiet quitters are unwittingly allowing themselves to be held hostage. They stay in jobs they dislike because they feel they have no other choice. In doing so, they experience more stress, worry, and negative emotions than their more engaged counterparts.

A 2024 Gallup study found that global employee engagement was only at 23%.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the same study found that engagement has 3.8 times more influence on an employee's stress compared to where they work. This means that what people feel about their jobs and how leaders impact those feelings are far more significant than previously thought. This requires a new responsibility and awareness for modern leaders in the contemporary work environment. Unfortunately, this is so often neglected as a high-performing leadership characteristic.

The competitive nature of many business leaders can result in situations in which they compete with their own people and other teams rather than

## 4 Are You Being Held Hostage Without Knowing It?

collaborate. Issues may then be driven under the table, and conflicts can go unresolved, creating an atmosphere of discomfort, hostility, or even fear. This is the “old-school” philosophy of leadership, which we call “command and control.”

We 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 or staff can sometimes feel like hostages caught in the crossfire between the boss, customers, and colleagues. Entrepreneurs who must, for example, fire 25 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 facing employees who are not motivated or colleagues who are cynical may begin to feel their work has no value. The result is that 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 hand, 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 are no longer leading themselves. As a result, they lose their ability to establish boundaries, control their focus, and use personal power to pursue what they actually seek.

Leadership starts by leading oneself and never being a hostage to internal barriers. Simply put, you cannot sustainably or effectively lead others if you cannot lead yourself. This process starts by freeing yourself from what is holding you hostage.

## Controlling Our Brain is Essential ---

Contemporary neuroscience has reshaped our understanding of how the brain functions, revealing it to be a highly interconnected system that dynamically constructs both our experiences and our responses. As noted by Lisa Feldman Barrett, the traditional notion of the brain being divided into three distinct regions – the reptilian brain, the limbic system, and the neocortex – is outdated. Instead, the brain operates through a complex integration of its various parts, including those responsible for instinct, emotion, and rational thought.<sup>4</sup>

At its core, the human brain is designed to promote survival through intricate neural networks. The fight-or-flight response, once attributed solely to primitive brain structures, is now understood as involving multiple brain areas, including the amygdala and hypothalamus. These regions collaborate to regulate bodily responses to perceived threats, emphasizing that survival instincts arise from a distributed system rather than isolated “primitive” centers.

While certain brain regions are more evolutionarily ancient, such as those involved in basic survival, these areas do not function independently. For instance, emotional processing, including fear responses managed by the amygdala, is not separate from cognitive evaluation. The prefrontal cortex works alongside the amygdala to assess potential dangers and plan responses, demonstrating the interconnected nature of emotion and rationality.

## 6 Are You Being Held Hostage Without Knowing It?

Emotions, once thought to be confined to the limbic system, are now understood as constructed by the brain through the integration of sensory data, past experiences, and contextual factors. This aligns with Antonio Damasio's influential perspective that "human beings are not thinking machines that feel, but are feeling machines that think." Our thoughts are inextricably linked to emotional experiences, showing that cognitive processes are rooted in emotion.<sup>5</sup>

The neocortex (particularly the prefrontal cortex), responsible for higher-order reasoning, does not operate in isolation from these emotional and instinctual circuits. Rational thought and emotion are intertwined, co-creating our responses to the world. Understanding this interconnect-edness highlights that controlling our brain is not about separating rationality from emotion but about recognizing the dynamic interplay between the two.

In summary, controlling our brain involves an awareness of its integrated nature – emotions, instincts, and cognition all contribute to our actions and decisions. Recognizing that we are "feeling machines that think" is central to understanding how emotions influence our behavior. For leaders, understanding this concept is the first step in cultivating emotional awareness and availability, a topic that is further explored in Chapter 2 under the section "Becoming Emotionally Available." There, the practical implications of emotional availability in leadership are discussed, offering tools for integrating these insights into daily practice.

### Enhancing Executive Function for Effective Leadership

Leaders must master control over the brain's executive functions – primarily governed by the prefrontal cortex – if they are to navigate complex decision-making and manage emotional challenges. Executive functions such as impulse control, strategic planning, and emotional regulation are vital for leading effectively, particularly under stress.

However, when faced with emotional overload, fatigue, or heightened stress, the prefrontal cortex's capacity can be compromised. This is where cultivating emotional availability becomes critical. Emotional availability involves being open to and present with one's emotions, as well as those of others, transforming emotional challenges into opportunities for deeper connection and understanding. This ability, when combined with techniques

for stress management and overall brain health, allows leaders to maintain clarity and foresight in difficult circumstances.

A failure to do so can lead to what Daniel Goleman calls an “amygdala hijack,” where emotional overreaction takes control, driven by the amygdala – a key player in the limbic system. (For a more detailed discussion of the amygdala’s role in emotional regulation, see Chapter 8.) When an amygdala hijack occurs, the individual’s prefrontal cortex is effectively bypassed, leading to impulsive, unregulated reactions. The neocortex, however, has the capacity to override these emotional surges if engaged, allowing us to choose a more measured, thoughtful response.

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 after a postal worker was fired in 1984 and returned to the post office in Edmond, Oklahoma with a gun, killing 14 colleagues before committing suicide. This cascaded into a series of other high-profile tragedies at post offices across the United States, notably the 1991 Royal Oak Post Office shooting in Michigan and the 1994 killings at a San Francisco postal facility. Today, “going postal” is used in general when someone goes into a rage, deliberately causing harm to others and self without explanation. 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 executive brain state, 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.

The point is that all humans are feeling beings who happen to think, not thinking beings who happen to feel. Unfortunately, the amygdala hijack takes charge without us even realizing it. Leaders must learn to think and feel at the same time. Our brain is hardwired to have safety and emotional needs met before we can engage in productive, practical, and potent behaviors.

### Powerlessness is Toxic

---

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. Those identified as quiet quitters in the workplace are an example of this kind of cycle. They don't feel empowered to change their situation and this sense of powerlessness can tip them into a negative mind-set.

Over the span of our careers, working with executives all over the world, we have heard so many statements which clearly identify that someone is a hostage in one form or another. What are some of the most common phrases that accompany this feeling of being a hostage?

- “I have no choice.”
- “I can't trust anyone!”
- “I am trapped.”
- “I have to.”
- “I can't stand this.”
- “It's going to be another one of those days!”
- “This always happens to me.”

Think about your own experiences: What expressions do you say to hold yourself hostage? Are there common phrases you say to yourself when you feel like a hostage?

Such phrases are negative self-talk that comes from our inner mind-set and perceptions. 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 37 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>6</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. So, the solution to some of the common phrases mentioned earlier would be:

- “I have a choice and I make my own decisions.”
- “You can stand anything; you’ve overcome challenges before and you have the power to do it again!”
- “What is something new I can try today? Let’s experiment.”
- “I don’t have to do anything; I choose to do.”

Reframing and managing your emotional responses – especially when talking to yourself – gives you a sense of power. Even if you have a gun to your head, you do not have to feel like a hostage. . . you can still breathe, bond, feel, think, and speak! So when others provoke a negative reaction within you or make you feel upset, irritated, frustrated, and so on, you can determine your sense of internal power and decide how YOU want to act.

*Mary confronts her manager, James, because of a negative exchange between the two of them in a meeting during which Mary felt embarrassed in front of their 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 that 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.”

The two most common things leaders do that lead to them being held hostage is not listening or giving space for others to speak, and not apologizing for causing a strain in the bond.

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 themselves. Successful leaders are able to take this

## 10 Are You Being Held Hostage Without Knowing It?

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. We will discuss this as an emotional trigger later on in the book.

### Maintain Internal Control

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 we share this story we 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, you've got 30 seconds." In those 30 seconds, you had better bond and

engage in dialogue as you have never done before in your life! In a subtle way, the answer “no” is a concession and must be seen with a positive mind-set. As we will see later (in Chapter 7), 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 person holding the gun, it would be lowered 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. This requires both a strict discipline of prioritizing listening, and the courage to actively engage in emotional awareness – both with yourself and others. As mentioned before, we have seen so many cases where the absence of just these two characteristics alone catalyzes underperforming and ineffective leadership.

Over 2,500 years ago, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote that the biggest problem in the world was that individuals experienced themselves as powerless.<sup>7</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 partners 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. Maintaining internal focus grants you access to your internal power whenever you feel like a hostage. That is an integral part of self-leadership.

## Avoid Learned Helplessness

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>8</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>9</sup>

## 12 Are You Being Held Hostage Without Knowing It?

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>10</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>11</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 non-depressed person.

Those people who allow their thoughts to drift toward the negative are more likely to feel that their situation is hopeless than 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 question for leaders is, “To whom or to what do you feel like a hostage? And what about it makes you feel helpless?”

## Stockholm Syndrome and Hostage Mentality

---

The term “hostage” typically conjures up images of extreme situations where individuals or groups, often seen as terrorists, seize control and detain others against their will to achieve specific objectives. A curious psychological phenomenon that can emerge in such scenarios is when the hostage develops an emotional bond with the captor, a situation exemplified by several notable cases.

One such case involved Randolph Dial, who was arrested in April 2005 after living with Bobbi Parker for 11 years following his escape from an Oklahoma jail in 1994. Parker, the wife of the assistant warden and mother of two young daughters, was reportedly manipulated by Dial. He confessed, “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.” Parker, despite sometimes being able to move freely, remained captive due to fear and a sense of powerlessness, aiming to protect her family. This scenario highlights how an emotional bond can form in response to severe emotional shock, such as the fear of death or harm to loved ones.

This involuntary emotional attachment is known as Stockholm Syndrome, named after a 1973 bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden. During this incident, two robbers held four hostages in a bank vault for 131 hours. The hostages, strapped with dynamite, eventually began to see the police as the enemy and the captors as their protectors. Even after their rescue, the hostages exhibited surprising loyalty to their captors, with one woman becoming engaged to one of the robbers and another establishing a defense fund for them.

Patty Hearst’s case is another famous instance of Stockholm Syndrome. Kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974, Hearst not only

## 14 Are You Being Held Hostage Without Knowing It?

sympathized with her captors but also participated in their criminal activities. Her actions were later understood within the context of Stockholm Syndrome, leading to her release from prison.

Stockholm Syndrome is a profound example of how severe emotional stress and survival instincts can reshape attachment and bonding behaviors. Hostages, grateful for being kept alive and for basic provisions like food and water, may begin to see their captors in a positive light. Acts of kindness, such as allowing basic dignities, can further deepen this bond. Over time, hostages might identify with their captors' cause, sometimes even acting on their behalf, as seen in Hearst's case.

This phenomenon is not limited to hostage situations. Similar dynamics can occur in abusive relationships, where the abused individual becomes psychologically bound to the abuser, often out of fear and a misplaced sense of helplessness. This victim–persecutor relationship mirrors the hostage–captor dynamic, where the fear of leaving overshadows the pain of staying.

However, Stockholm Syndrome does not develop universally among hostages. The failure to bond can stem from various factors, including the personalities of both the captor and the captive. While bonding can be a survival strategy, it is crucial for hostages to break this bond post-rescue to avoid prolonged psychological distress. Some former hostages, however, find this detachment challenging, leading to significant emotional turmoil.

In recent years, new research has further explored the complexities of Stockholm Syndrome, examining the nuances of how and why such bonds form. Studies suggest that the syndrome involves a complex interplay of psychological defense mechanisms, trauma responses, and social influences. Notably, the syndrome's development is influenced by the duration of captivity, the behavior of the captor, and the pre-existing psychological state of the hostage.

Understanding Stockholm Syndrome is vital in both hostage negotiation and post-trauma counseling. For negotiators, recognizing the signs of bonding can aid in managing the situation more effectively. For mental health professionals, helping survivors break the emotional ties to their captors is a critical aspect of recovery.

In essence, Stockholm Syndrome underscores the intricate ways in which human psychology operates under extreme stress, illustrating the

profound impact of fear and survival instincts on human behavior and relationships.

In a situation George was involved in, 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 that 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.

The Waco siege was a significant and tragic event in American history, and the perspectives of those involved, especially negotiators like Gary Noesner, provide important insights into the complex dynamics of the situation. Here's a narrative highlighting key elements of the siege, particularly from a negotiator's perspective.

## The Waco Siege: A Negotiator's Perspective

---

### The Build-Up

The Waco siege began on February 28, 1993, when the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) attempted to execute a search warrant on the compound of the Branch Davidians, a religious sect led by David Koresh. The ATF suspected the group of stockpiling illegal weapons. The initial raid resulted in a gunfight, leading to the deaths of four ATF agents and six Branch Davidians. The violent confrontation marked the beginning of a 51-day standoff between the Davidians and federal agents.

### The ATF's Approach

The ATF's approach to the initial raid was aggressive and tactical, aiming to surprise and overwhelm the Davidians. However, their lack of understanding of the group's mindset and Koresh's leadership led to an immediate and deadly confrontation. This aggressive entry plan underestimated the Davidians' willingness and preparedness to defend themselves, resulting in a disastrous start to the siege.

### Transition to the FBI

Following the botched raid, the FBI took over the operation, with Gary Noesner leading the negotiation team during the early days of the stand-off. The FBI's strategy involved both negotiation and tactical operations, which created internal conflicts regarding the best approach to end the siege peacefully.

### Gary Noesner's Role

As the lead negotiator, Gary Noesner emphasized the importance of communication and building trust with Koresh and his followers. He understood that gaining the trust of the Davidians was crucial for a peaceful resolution. Noesner's team established a line of communication with Koresh and worked to de-escalate tensions by addressing the group's immediate needs, such as food and medical supplies.

Noesner believed in a patient and empathetic approach, recognizing that the Davidians were deeply influenced by Koresh's apocalyptic beliefs. By listening to Koresh's religious perspectives and engaging in dialogue, Noesner hoped to persuade him to surrender peacefully.

### Internal FBI Conflicts

Despite Noesner's efforts, there were significant disagreements within the FBI about the best strategy. The hostage rescue team (HRT), led by tactical commanders, favored a more forceful approach, believing that increased pressure would compel the Davidians to surrender. This clash between negotiators and tactical teams led to a disjointed strategy.

## Breakdown and Tragedy

The conflicting approaches culminated in a series of actions that undermined the negotiation efforts. For instance, the tactical team used psychological pressure tactics, such as blaring loud music and cutting off electricity, which escalated tensions and reinforced the Davidians' belief in their apocalyptic prophecy.

On April 19, 1993, the FBI, frustrated by the lack of progress, decided to end the siege by force. They initiated a tear gas assault on the compound, hoping to force the Davidians out. However, the assault led to a catastrophic fire, resulting in the deaths of 76 people, including Koresh and many women and children.

## Noesner's Reflections

In his book *Stalling for Time*,<sup>12</sup> Gary Noesner reflects on the Waco siege as a missed opportunity for a peaceful resolution. He criticizes the lack of a unified strategy and the failure to fully commit to the negotiation process. Noesner believes that with more patience and a cohesive approach, the tragic outcome could have been avoided.

## Lessons Learned

The Waco siege underscored the importance of understanding the psychology and motivations of those involved in standoffs. It highlighted the need for clear communication and coordination between negotiators and tactical teams. The tragedy also prompted changes in federal law enforcement policies, emphasizing the primacy of negotiation in crisis situations.

## Conclusion

The Waco siege remains a poignant example of the complexities and challenges faced by negotiators and tactical teams in high-stakes situations. Through the eyes of Gary Noesner, we see the critical role of empathy, patience, and strategic communication in efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Indeed, incidents that have happened since the Waco siege seem to bear this out. For example, in 2014 a standoff between federal authorities and Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher, and his supporters was resolved without bloodshed. Bundy and many of his supporters were armed when they faced off against federal agents over unpaid cattle grazing fees. The trigger for the standoff was the confiscation of Bundy's cattle and violence was avoided by the government standing down and releasing the confiscated animals. There are lessons from *all* of these incidents that we can also apply to the business world. When there are territorial disputes between departments or differences of opinion between colleagues, a standoff position can often be avoided through the power of dialogue and by simply talking through the issues.

## Bonding is the Antidote

---

What George has learned over his 50 plus years as a hostage negotiator and leadership professor is that we, as individuals, do not have to feel powerless in our daily lives – and that bonding is an antidote to the hostage dilemma.

*In the early morning hours, 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>13</sup>*

As we'll discuss in detail in Chapter 3, 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 that relationship despite our own inner emotions driving us to attack or run away. The secret to doing this – especially for leaders – is to prioritize listening, using questions, and showing genuine interest in others. In order to bond, you must provide space for the other person to engage and interact with you. We have noticed that the most successful leaders and executives that we have met in our careers were always those who focused on being interested in others, and not trying to be interesting to others. As management thought leader Tom Peters puts it: “The single most significant strategic strength that an organization can have is not a good strategic plan, but a commitment to strategic listening on the part of every member of the organization.”<sup>14</sup>

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 positive 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 46, Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment and placed in a cell for almost 26 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 26 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, our own mind-set such as telling ourselves we are powerless to change a situation that is within our control, 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 minds. 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

## 22 Are You Being Held Hostage Without Knowing It?

to make concessions to a boss, customer, partner, 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 want to act, and get clear about what we actually desire – this is the pathway to strong self-leadership. This gives us the internal power to control our own actions instead of defaulting to impulsive reactions determined by survival instincts, emotional outbursts, or imagined powerlessness. We need to focus our minds on the words we use and the transactions we use with others.

Ultimately, we can use self-leadership to engage what neuroscientists like Lisa Feldman Barrett and Antonio Damasio describe as an integrated brain state. Barrett emphasizes that our emotions are not hardwired but constructed based on past experiences and present circumstances, allowing us to guide our emotional responses. Damasio also shows that emotion and reason are deeply connected, and together they help us make better decisions. In this state, we can lead ourselves by directing our thoughts and emotions toward solutions, rather than being controlled by them.

If we are able to recognize instinctive emotional reactions that repeat themselves, we can then interrupt the lack of self-leadership. By understanding ourselves and the way our mind works, we can learn to set ourselves free from inner constraints and make real choices to achieve our desired outcomes. These 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. All leadership starts from leading oneself: you cannot effectively lead others if you cannot lead yourself or control your mind-set.
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 and feel powerless. Recovering our internal power requires us to choose an action to the events in our lives, rather than allowing a physiologically predetermined reaction to occur. This is possible for anyone who has become a hostage, is a hostage, or gets taken hostage by recurring conditions.
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.
5. The antidote for being a hostage is bonding, questions, listening, and showing genuine interest in others. Focus on being interested rather than being interesting.
6. The key questions are: How are you holding yourself hostage? And how are you a hostage to other people or external circumstances? Self-leadership requires freedom from internal constraints and external provocations.

