

Hostage at the Table: How Leaders can Overcome Conflict, Influence others, and Raise Performance

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George Kohlrieser (2006). *Hostage at the table: How leaders can overcome conflict, influence others, and raise performance*, Jossey-bass. Price: Rs. 1451; Pages 272, hardbound, ISBN: 9780787985646.

Introduction of the Author: George Kohlrieser has multiple streams to his credit. He is an organizational and clinical psychologist, a hostage negotiator, professor of leadership and organizational behavior at the International Institute for Management Development and a consultant to global organizations around the world.

An overview of the book: The book, as diverse as the author, captures the rich and varied experiences of the veteran hostage negotiator. He has delved deep into the minefield of the resource of his profession and has created veritable nuggets of insights on leadership and everyday living. The buy-in from the reader is ensured because of real time examples.

The book is a repository of very telling personal experiences and high drama of how Kohlrieser handled emotion packed hostage-negotiations. On this framework the author weaves the tapestry of the entire book bringing in aspects of effective conflict resolution bonding, and dialogue. The author whisks the readers on a journey as an empowering leader and guides our minds to be in a shackle free state. The book is a protective shield against the traps of being a 'hostage'.

The compelling stories of real life hostage situations, introduce the seemingly simple concepts in the passing; but they become powerful and profound in their impact when practiced and understood. A Warren Bennis book, part of a series, *Hostage at the Table* lives up every bit to the promise it holds, and is devoted exclusively to new and exemplary contributions to management thought and practice.

Review: The book comprises nine chapters. Chapter one examines the postulate that one is being held hostage without one's knowledge. 'Mind's eye' a component that focuses on finding one's freedom forms chapter two. While Chapter three explores the potential of the bonding cycle, 'Secure base' is introduced in the fourth chapter with a discussion on the art of conflict management in the fifth chapter.

Chapters six and seven examine effective dialogue and the power of negotiation. Mastering one's emotions becomes the focal point in the chapter eight and the book concludes with a final chapter on living with a hostage-free state of mind.

Every new concept in the chapter is introduced against a hostage situation or a snippet of real-world experience thus setting the context. The practical situations add a dash of reality to the concepts and make them more appealing and relevant.

The chapters conclude with a snapshot, summing up the learning points. A numbered section of key points helps us have a quick recap of the sum and substance of the chapter. This strategy not just nudges the memory but also makes a quick review possible. An in-depth study with such a crisp gist at the end of each chapter positions the book as a good read, midway between academicians and students of the subject; be it a layman or a serious reader, the book sustains interest levels.

The first chapter points out that in everyday life we are 'being taken hostage'. It clarifies that we are not victims of circumstances and that we all have the power to choose and act. The author culls out illustrations within

a specific hostage environment and as well as real life scenarios, where people allow themselves to be taken hostage, inadvertently.

The chapter further elaborates on the Stockholm syndrome, and the fight or flight mechanism to which our brains are tuned. Kohlrrieser argues in favor of controlling our brains and practicing greater awareness of our emotional reactions in order to overcome powerlessness and helplessness which would create a hostage mindset. Calling for efforts to override the instinctual reaction of the brain to escape danger and pain, the author explores the notion of acting with personal power, in pursuit of a hostage-free state.

The second chapter focuses on the mind's eye as a means to influence inner and outer states. Successful athletes such as Lance Armstrong and Ben Lecomte, overcame insurmountable odds by choosing to focus on the possibilities and not on obstacles. They achieved exemplary results in their respective fields with the power of being in the right state and looking through the mind's eye. The power of visualization to hold a mental imagery of the desired future state, and the effect it can have on making that state a self fulfilling prophecy is delineated both at the individual level for ensuring successful performance and at the level of a leader to goad a collective towards the realization of a shared vision.

The bonding cycle runs us through a gamut of reasons which invite a hostage state. Being stuck in the state of separation or grief, or inability to establish bonds and the consequences of broken or ruptured bonding is illustrated by walking readers through the bonding cycle. The importance of forming, maintaining and renewing bonds even when confronted with differences or situations of conflict form the basis of a powerful tool. This helps one to understand motivation both in self and that of others.

The process of grief, the different stages of grieving and the implications of suppressed or blocked emotions in engendering a hostage mentality is also discussed, in the light of what other scholars on the subject have stated. Emerging manifestations of broken bonding in the form

of psychosomatic illness, violence and aggression, addiction of various forms, depression, burnout and stress reactions are all seen as succumbing to hostage states.

An important facilitator for focusing on the mind's eye and overcoming the hostage mindset would be what the author terms as a secure base. The definition of a secure base would be people, goals, or things to which people bond in a special way drawing on them for protection, comfort and a sense of security. Secure bases affect one's self esteem and facilitate bonding.

Kohlrrieser discusses the primacy of establishing bonding and the need for the hostage negotiator to become a secure base to the hostage taker, in order to establish trust. In organizations then, the focus is on the leader to become the secure base for winning the trust of people in the organization. Various types of secure bases, such as important people in one's life who provide comfort and security, goals that guide behavior, and even the threat of fear and success are discussed.

Conflict is a part of our everyday human behavior that stems from a basic fight-or-flight instinct. Too often, however, we believe that conflict is something that must be avoided at all costs; this tendency to suppress conflict can spark a cascade of negative emotions that eventually derail managers, leaders, and organizations.

The section on conflict management and negotiation, examines the causes of conflict with emphasis on various types of losses, such as loss of attachment, loss of identity, loss of meaning and loss of control. The concept of conflict is layered and is taken further to examine the sources of broken bonding which may trigger conflict.

The root cause analysis of conflict and violence especially in a hostage situation is seen as broken bonding and failure to deal with loss. Kohlrrieser speaks of the resolution of conflict in terms of creating and maintaining a bond with the other party even in the presence of differences. Avoiding conflict is seen as being taken hostage to the fear of conflict.

An interesting analogy that is offered is that of putting the fish on the table; just as someone has to do the dirty

work of cleaning the fish first in order to enjoy the benefits of making a meal of it, so also conflict and its surrounding issues need to be put on the table for discussion and dialogue. Otherwise the conflict would fester and raise more concerns in the long run. Some valuable insights for resolving conflict are offered, by way of attending to needs, interests, and emotions.

Before introducing the concept of negotiation, Kohlrrieser elaborates on effective dialogue. It is introduced as a precursor to effective negotiation and is differentiated from mere talking; the body, emotions, intellect and spirit are being engaged in the process of dialogue. The power of dialogue to foster a deeper exchange even when parties are in major disagreement is depicted.

Certain common blocks to effective dialogue and the means to remove these blocks are offered. In discussing the power of negotiation, real world hostage situations are illustrated to draw insights for effectively engaging in dialogue, forming bonds, identifying needs, wants and interests of the other party, and finding options and bargaining for mutual benefit. Using influence and persuasion, the value of concession making and applying the law of reciprocity are considered as ways to move the dialogue forward for effective negotiation.

The book also incorporates a section on managing emotions. An analogy of hostage situations charged with emotions has a direct bearing to a large part of leadership which revolves around channelizing and harnessing the emotions of people in the organization. The process of how emotions work and the stages and patterns of emotions are discussed in detail. In dealing with emotions, the neuro-psychological framework of the buildup of emotions and successive hijack of the thinking part of our brain is depicted and explained.

Means to de-escalate emotions are also discussed at length. Awareness and cognizing around emotions are suggested ways to maintain power over emotions and avoid becoming hostages to them. Living with a hostage-free state of mind is summarized as finding freedom through exercising choice, building self-esteem and practice of humility. The experience of flow or a state of mind of complete immersion is seen as a continuous

lifelong learning. Kohlrrieser asserts that the decision of living life hostage-free is a choice that one can make to retain power and control and train the mind's eye to focus on the intended goal.

Throughout the book, the hostage metaphor assumes a larger meaning and signifies not only situations where one feels powerless in a physical sense, but also, and more so, psychologically - when we give in to despair and relinquish our own personal power to face predicaments and make choices that can free us of the shackles that bind us. In that sense, *Hostage at the Table* is an inspiring book, to look within for the contours of what may be limiting us and what keeps us back from achieving our full potential.

Extremely well written and tightly packaged, the book is likely to appeal to a wide audience who may or may not be exposed to the literature on conflict, negotiations, leadership and that of emotions. However, in some places, one wishes that there was a little more explanation of the terms used providing for further conceptual clarity. The section on negotiation and conflict come to mind as a case in point. Interestingly, Kohlrrieser calls it the 'art' of conflict management and not the 'skill' or 'science', alluding to the subtleties involved in managing conflict and engaging in negotiations. Perhaps, the author has wisely shied away from discussing the various strategies of conflict management and negotiation, which otherwise find mention in any book on the subject.

An intriguing context is set by invoking the hostage situation and drawing lessons from it, for understanding conflict, negotiation processes, leadership and the underlying psycho-dynamics. The treatment and execution have been done quite artfully..The use of personal anecdotes and real word experiences that become starting points for the discussion in each chapter make the arguments more compelling and increase the capacity of readers to resonate with the content. *Hostage at the Table* is a must-read and effectively translates arcane and obtuse concepts into simple easy-to-understand insights. The sheer skill of the author has elevated a dry academic discourse to an engaging and fascinating read.

George concludes: "Take time to reclaim yourself and decide to be who you want to be. Live life as an adventure, a journey, and view it as an opportunity to learn, to contribute, to grow every minute, every hour, every

day. Accept the tremendous power that is within you, and, with humility, make the choices that you want in order to enable your life to be fulfilling with a hostage-free state of mind".

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