

## INTRODUCTION

Nobody's been shot yet. Yeah, I know, those aren't the most reassuring words you've ever heard, but from where I'm sitting, they're downright optimistic.

Two guys tried to rob a convenience store, but the cashier hit the silent alarm. Police arrived, bad guys went barricade and took the cashier hostage. The Emergency Services Unit—a fancy way of saying SWAT—is now stacked up outside. NYPD's Hostage Negotiation Team has established contact.

Oh, and HNT has a special guest today. That's me. Hi. For most of my life I've been afraid of getting emails that read "From Detective Thompson, NYPD," but I wanted to write a book on dealing with people and this seemed like a fun way to learn. Now I'm *here*. "Fun" is not the first word that comes to mind. SWAT teams are mobilized, lives are on the line, and I'm wishing I had opted instead to spend the weekend at some new-agey relationship seminar where fewer guns are pointed at people. I do all my own stunts, folks. The next five minutes are going to be the most stressful ten years of my life.

Oddly, the guy on the other end of the phone seems pretty nice. But it's way too early to feel any kind of good about things. The first half hour of a hostage negotiation is the most dangerous. There's no rapport, no transference, no anything to act as a buffer if things go sideways. Just adrenaline and fear.

As the negotiator starts talking with him, I quiz myself on proper procedure: *Slow it down. Use active listening. Voice tone is important. Remember that your actions are contagious.* But the

## PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS

single most important thing right now is: *keep them talking*. Because if they're talking to you, they're not shooting people. Unfortunately, he's no longer talking to us. The line just went dead. Things cannot get worse . . .

So, of course, they do. He calls back. But it's not the same *he*. It's someone else. Someone who's speaking quickly and cursing a blue streak. I can't even follow everything this guy is saying. I do catch references to being an alum of the penal system, and killing two people years ago, along with a Whitman's Sampler of other felonies.

"Don't freak out," I tell myself, totally freaking out. At the end of movies they always say, "No animals were harmed in the making of this motion picture." My disclaimer might have to read, "Very *few* people were harmed in the writing of this book."

The negotiator responds to the suspect: "Sounds like you're frustrated." Yeah, that's an epic understatement, but it's also a fundamental active listening technique: labeling. Giving the hostage taker's emotion a name. Neuroscience research by Matthew Lieberman at UCLA has validated that labeling dampens powerful emotions. It also builds rapport by showing someone you're on their wavelength.

"I *am* frustrated! You got an entire SWAT team out there?!? My nephew's scared to death!"

"Nephew?" Mirroring. Another pillar of active listening. In the form of a question, repeat the last thing they said. Keep 'em talking. And all the while you're getting more information and building rapport.

"Yeah, you just talked to him . . . Look, I can't handle being out of prison. But I don't want that for him."

## INTRODUCTION

“Sounds like you’re concerned. For his future. You want him to get out of there safely.” More labeling. More rapport. And slowly inching him in the direction you want this to go.

As they keep talking, the tone gradually shifts. The hostility starts to dissolve, and it’s almost like they’re working together to solve this problem. It’s not long before the suspect sends the cashier out. Then his nephew. And soon after, he’s surrendering.

Seeing the power of active listening in action hits me like a Frisbee to the face. I feel like I just watched a magic act, but instead of the magician reaching into the hat and pulling out a rabbit, he pulled out a Lexus. This method not only changes minds, it gets people to drop guns and accept prison sentences. I’m thrilled. Thrilled that I have the key to my next book and thrilled that it wasn’t me on the phone.

The negotiator turns to me: “Eric, your turn to be on the phone.”

Oh, did I forget to mention that this was a training simulation? Oopsie. (Please don’t call me an “unreliable narrator”; it’ll make my mother think I’m an author who doesn’t pay his rent on time.) Despite this being “fake,” there’s a good reason my adrenaline was spiking. The NYPD’s training facility is spectacular. It’s the size of an airport terminal and reminiscent of a Hollywood studio backlot. There are realistic sets for the most common hostage incident locations: a bank lobby, a police intake unit, a rooftop jumper scenario, and a convenience store (complete with Oreos). Professional actors play the roles of perpetrators and hostages. They take this more seriously than I’ve ever taken anything. And rightfully so. (In fact, at the request of the NYPD, I altered some elements of the scenario to keep their training protocols confidential.)

## PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS

After a generous dose of simulated terror, I couldn't feel better. I climbed the mountaintop to study with the Zen masters of people skills and achieved relationship enlightenment. I'm still over the moon as we're hanging out after training. I found the skeleton key to human communication: active listening. Now I know what everyone needs to improve their relationships at home . . .

"By the way, this stuff doesn't work at home." It was one of the negotiators.

*Hub?* I think my heart just stopped.

"With your spouse. These techniques won't work at home with your spouse." Another negotiator nods and chuckles as if to say "Ain't that the truth." My jaw drops. Along with my will to live. So this incredible system for dealing with people won't work when your wife is angry or your husband is being a jerk? It can save a life but not a marriage? I want to scream at them: *Don't you realize I have a book to write and need answers that make for good sound-bites?*

But I don't. I take a deep breath. I may not know a lot about dealing with gun-toting bank robbers, but I know a fair amount about psychology. And pretty much every form of marriage therapy recommends active listening during conflict. I go back to my hotel and double-check. And I'm right. It *is* recommended by everyone . . .

It just doesn't work. Every marriage therapist (and me) is wrong. The hostage negotiators are right. John Gottman, professor emeritus of psychology at University of Washington, actually put it to the test. Active listening sounds great. And it works well in scenarios like hostage negotiation or therapy where the practitioner is a third party and has some distance from the problem. But marital arguments are different; they're about *you* not taking

## INTRODUCTION

out the trash. Mirroring, labeling, and accepting all emotions when you're being screamed at by your spouse are about as natural as telling someone not to run away or hit back when physically assaulted. Gottman found that people just couldn't do it in the heat of the moment. And in follow-up studies, with the few couples who actually could actively listen, it showed only short-term benefits. Couples quickly relapsed.

In hostage negotiation short-term benefits are fine. Works long enough to get the guy in handcuffs? Perfect. But in a marriage that will (hopefully) last longer than hours or days, it's a disaster. Therapists recommended it, but until Gottman, nobody had actually *tested* it. Except the hostage negotiators. Maybe that's why research shows that only 18–25 percent of couples report any improvements one year after marriage therapy.

Note to self: something designed for terrorists and emotionally disturbed people isn't perfect for your family. (Okay, maybe something designed for terrorists and emotionally disturbed people is perfect for *your* family, but I'm not going to assume.) Humans are complex. Three-dimensional chess complex. And it was naive of me to think that something so complex would have a simple skeleton key.

What I assumed about dealing with people was wrong. What all the marriage therapists believed was wrong. And a lot of what *you* think you know about relationships is wrong. Relax, it's not your fault. We've been getting conflicting information all our lives:

- Do “clothes make the man”? But they told me “don't judge a book by its cover”?
- Do “birds of a feather flock together”? Wait, I heard “opposites attract”?

## PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS

- You should “just be yourself.” Or is it “when in Rome, do as the Romans do”?

*Of course* we’re confused and believe silly things. How could we not? But this is vitally important stuff. And I don’t mean in some saccharine Hallmark card sorta way. Consider this: the Grant Study at Harvard Medical School has been following a group of 268 men for over eighty years. The amount of data accumulated on them could fill rooms, and the insights about what makes for a long, happy life are plentiful. Yet when George Vaillant, who led the study for much of his own life, was asked what he learned from decades of studying these men, he replied with one sentence:

*That the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people.*

It seems absurd that so much research could be reduced to a single sentence. But it rings true. We spend so much time chasing the shallow things in life. But when tragedy strikes, or late at night when your brain asks too many questions, we know it’s the relationships that matter most. *Whom can I trust? Does anyone really know me? Does anyone really care?* If you think of your happiest moments, they will be about people. The most painful moments will too. Our relationships to others make or break our lives.

So humans have been dealing with humans for thousands of years—and we still can’t get it right. How do we not have good answers to this stuff? The single most important thing in life is left to innate ability, hearsay, and the little insight we can slowly grind out learning brutally through pain and rejection. Some might say that there are plenty of texts on the subject, but the words *relationship book* are usually muttered in the same tone as

## INTRODUCTION

*infomercial*. We know full well that most of those are specious opinion at best, with a Magic-8-Ball-level of scientific accuracy. We need real answers.

Sigmund Freud said, “Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.” My first book was about work. I played *Myth-Busters* with the maxims of success we all grew up with to see if they were really true. (Luckily, that book was a bestseller, because if you write a book about success and it’s not successful, well, I can’t think of any greater proof that you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.) And now, here, we’re gonna cover the first half of Freud’s statement. Relationships.

This book is about what we get *wrong* when it comes to relationships and how we can be a bit more right. We’re gonna test those maxims we grew up with and see if they hold water, scientifically:

- Can you “judge a book by its cover”? Or is that something only Sherlock Holmes can do on TV?
- Is “a friend in need a friend indeed”? And what does that phrase really even *mean*?
- Does “love conquer all”? Or are divorce rates so high for a depressingly accurate reason?
- Is “no man an island”? (I have always felt that I was more of an archipelago, honestly.)

We’ll leverage the best evidence available—no platitudes or magical thinking. (I don’t believe in blowing on the dice for luck before you roll. I believe in card counting.) And we’ll look at *multiple* sides of the issue before we render a verdict. What we’ll find is surprising and counterintuitive. It’s gonna shake the Etch A Sketch on conventional wisdom. We’re gonna bust the myths, get

## PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS

the real answers, and then learn how we can use that information to live lives filled with love, warmth, and kindness—all without choking anyone in the process.

I've spent the past decade studying the science of human behavior on my blog, *Barking Up the Wrong Tree*. I've earned a bunch of fancy degrees, and I even survived growing up in New Jersey. But those aren't the reasons you should trust me to be your Virgil on this tour of the relationship Inferno.

I've been called a lot of things in this life, but “a people person” isn't one of them. Agreeableness is among the five fundamental traits that psychologists use to evaluate someone's personality. On that attribute I scored a four . . . out of one hundred. Oof. Relationship-wise I have been driving through life with the parking brake on. One reason I started studying social psychology is that I have never been good with people and I wanted to understand why. So this is not a *I'm a guru, do what I do* book. This is a *I had no idea what I was doing so I talked to a lot of people way smarter than both you and me to get some solid information* book. However much you may feel that you need these answers, however much you may have failed with relationships, been a loner, an outsider, or just someone for whom it all just never clicked—I am right there with you. We're going on this journey *together*.

We'll see that the fundamental core of relationships is the stories our brains weave to create identity, agency, and community—and how those stories not only bind us together but can tear us apart if we're not careful.

And then I'll explain the meaning of life. Seriously. (Let it never be said that Patricia Barker raised an unambitious son.)

Relationships bring us the highest of highs and the lowest of *oh-my-god-I-never-guessed-it-could-get-this-low* lows. We all fear being vulnerable or embarrassed. At times we wonder if we're



## INTRODUCTION

cursed or broken. We cannot stop the waves, but we can learn to surf. Whether you're already good with people or you're a socially anxious introvert, we can all build better friendships, find love, reignite love, and get closer to others in this age of increasing emotional distance and loneliness.

Often our problems with others start with our inaccurate perception of them. We've all gotten burned trying to judge people's character. Can we learn to size up people accurately? To know what's on their minds—scientifically? To detect lies? Read body language? (And cover it all in under sixty pages?)

Simply put: Can we “judge a book by its cover”?

Let's start there . . .