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# JUST LISTEN

Discover the Secret to Getting  
Through to Absolutely Anyone

MARK GOULSTON

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# 1

## WHO'S HOLDING YOU HOSTAGE?

Good management is the art of making problems so interesting and their solutions so constructive that everyone wants to get to work and deal with them.

—PAUL HAWKEN, AUTHOR,  
*NATURAL CAPITALISM*

**R**ight now, there's someone in your life you need to reach. But you can't, and it's driving you crazy. Maybe it's somebody at work: a subordinate, a team member, a client, your boss. Or maybe it's somebody at home: a partner, a parent, a defiant teen, an angry "ex."

You've tried everything—logic, persuasion, forcefulness, pleading, anger—but you've hit a wall every time. You're mad, scared, or frustrated. And you're thinking, "What now?"

Here's what I want you to do: Think of this as a hostage situation. Why? Because you can't get free. You're trapped by another person's resistance, fear, hostility, apathy, stubbornness, self-centeredness, or neediness—and by your own inability to take effective action.

And that's where I come in.

I'm just an average guy—husband, father, doctor—but a long time ago, I discovered that I had a special talent. You could drop me into just about any situation, and I could reach people. I could per-

suade defiant executives, angry employees, or self-destructing management teams to work cooperatively toward solutions. I could get through to families in turmoil and to married couples who hated each other's guts. I could even change the minds of hostage takers and desperate people contemplating suicide.

I wasn't sure what I was doing differently from everybody else, but I could tell it worked. I knew I wasn't smarter than everybody else, and I knew my success wasn't just luck because what I did worked consistently, and it worked with all kinds of people in every type of situation. But *why* did it work?

In analyzing my methods, I found the answer. It turned out I'd happened on a simple, quick set of techniques—some I'd discovered on my own, and others I'd learned from mentors and colleagues—that create traction. That is, they pull people toward me, even if those people are trying to pull away.

To understand this, picture yourself driving up a steep hill. Your tires slip and slide and can't grab hold. But downshift, and you get control. It's like pulling the road to meet you.

Most people upshift when they want to get through to other people. They persuade. They encourage. They argue. They push. And in the process, they create resistance. When you use the techniques I offer, you'll do exactly the opposite—you'll listen, ask, mirror, and reflect back to people what you've heard. When you do, they will feel seen, understood, and felt—and that unexpected downshift will draw them to you.

The powerful techniques you'll learn in this book can move people rapidly and easily, often within minutes, from "no" to "yes." I employ them every day to fix broken families and help warring couples fall in love again. I use them to save companies on the brink of meltdown, get feuding managers to work together effectively, and empower salespeople to make "impossible" sales. And I use them to help FBI agents and hostage negotiators succeed in the toughest situations possible, when life and death are on the line.

In fact, as you'll find out, you have a lot in common with hostage negotiators when it comes to reaching the people who don't want to listen to you. That's why this book starts with Frank's story.

Frank is sitting in his car in a large mall parking lot, and nobody is coming near him because he's holding a shotgun to his throat. The SWAT team and the hostage negotiation team are called in. The SWAT team takes positions behind other cars and vehicles, trying to not agitate the man.

As they wait, they fill in the background details. They're looking at a man in his early thirties who lost his customer service job at a large electronics store six months earlier for yelling at customers and coworkers. He'd interviewed for several jobs, but didn't get any of them. He was abusive verbally to his wife and two young children.

A month earlier, his wife and kids moved in with her parents in another city. She told him that she needed a break, and he needed to get his act together. The landlord of their apartment kicked him out at the same time because they hadn't paid the rent. He moved into a shabby room in a poor section of the city. He stopped bathing and shaving and ate next to nothing. The last straw was the restraining order he'd received the day before he ended up at the mall parking lot.

Now the lead negotiator is talking calmly to the man. "Frank, this is Lieutenant Evans, I'm going to be talking with you, because there is another way out of this besides hurting yourself. I know you don't think you have any choice, but you really do."

Frank exclaims: "You don't know s\*\*\*. You're just like everyone else. Leave me the f\*\*\* alone!"

Lieutenant Evans replies: "I don't think I can do that. You're here in the middle of a mall parking lot with a gun to your throat, and I need to help you find another way out of this situation."

"Go f\*\*\* yourself! I don't need anyone's help!" Frank replies.

And so the conversation proceeds for an hour, with stretches of silence lasting several minutes or more. As the information about Frank comes in, it becomes clear that he's not an evil person, just a very disturbed and angry one. The SWAT team is poised to "take him out" if he threatens anyone else with his gun, but everyone except Frank would like to end this peacefully. However, the odds of that don't look so good.

After an hour and a half, another negotiator, Detective Kramer, arrives. Kramer is a graduate of one of the hostage negotiation training sessions I've delivered to police and FBI hostage negotiators.

Detective Kramer's been briefed about Frank's background and the status of this negotiation and offers Lieutenant Evans a different suggestion: "Here's what I want you to say to the guy: 'I'll bet you feel that nobody knows what it's like to have tried everything else and be stuck with this as your only way out, isn't that true?'"

Evans replies, "Say what?"

Kramer repeats the suggestion: "Yeah, go on, say this to the guy: 'I'll bet you feel that nobody knows what it's like to have tried everything else and be stuck with this as your only way out, isn't that true?'"

Evans complies and when he says that to Frank, Frank too replies with: "Say what?"

Evans repeats it to Frank, who this time responds: "Yeah, you're right, nobody knows and nobody gives a f\*\*\*!"

Kramer tells Evans, "Good, you got a 'Yes'; now you're in. Let's build on that." He adds a second question for the lead negotiator to ask: "Yeah, and I'll bet you feel that nobody knows what it's like to start every day believing that there's more chance that something will go wrong than go right, isn't that true, too?"

To that, Frank replies: "Yeah, every f\*\*\*\*\* day! The same thing happens."

Kramer tells Evans to repeat what he's heard and get an additional confirmation: "And because nobody knows how bad it is and nobody cares and because nothing goes right and everything goes wrong, that's why you're in your car with a gun wanting to end it all. True?"

"True," Frank replied, his voice showing the earliest signs of calming down.

"Tell me more. What exactly has happened to you? When was your life last okay, and what's happened since then to turn it to crap?" Evans invites.

Frank starts to recount the events since he was fired from his job.

When he pauses, Evans responds with: "Really . . . tell me more."

Frank continues describing the problems he's had. At some point, with guidance from Kramer, Evans says: "And all of that's caused you to feel angry? Or frustrated? Or discouraged? Or

hopeless? Or what exactly?” Evans waits for Frank to pick the word that best fits how he feels.

Frank finally owns up to: “Fed up.”

Evans follows up with: “So you felt fed up and when you got that restraining order, that was the breaking point?”

“Yeah,” Frank confirms. His voice, once hostile, is quieter now.

In a few sentences, Frank’s gone from refusing to communicate to listening and beginning to have a conversation. What just happened? The most critical step in persuasion—the step I refer to as “buy-in”—has begun. That’s the step where a person goes from resisting to listening and then to considering what’s being said.

What caused Frank to start listening and begin to “buy in” to what Lieutenant Evans was saying? That shift was no accident. The secret lay in saying the words that Frank was thinking but not saying. When the lieutenant’s words matched what Frank was thinking, Frank leaned into the conversation and began to say, “Yes.”

## ■ THE PERSUASION CYCLE

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You probably don’t find yourself in the types of situations that hostage negotiators handle. But on any given day, who are *you* trying to persuade to do something?

The answer is: nearly everybody you meet. Almost all communication is an effort to get through to people and cause them to do something different than they were doing before. Maybe you’re trying to sell them something. Maybe you’re trying to talk sense into them. Or maybe you need to impress them that you’re the right person for a job, a promotion, or a relationship.

But here’s the challenge: People have their own needs, desires, and agendas. They have secrets they’re hiding from you. And they’re stressed, busy, and often feeling like they’re in over their heads. To cope with their stress and insecurity, they throw up mental barricades that make it difficult to reach them even if they share your goals, and nearly impossible if they’re hostile.

Approach these people armed solely with reason and facts, or resort to arguing or encouraging or pleading, and you'll expect to get through—but often you won't. Instead, you'll get smacked down, and you'll never have a clue why. (How often have you walked away from a sales pitch, an office meeting, or an argument with your partner or child, shaking your head and saying, "What the heck just happened?")

The good news is that you *can* get through, simply by changing your approach. The techniques I describe in this book work for hostage negotiators in the most desperate situations, and they're equally potent if you're trying to reach a boss, a coworker, a client, a lover, or even an angry teenager. They're easy, they're fast, and you can hit the ground running with them.

These techniques are powerful because they address the core of successful communication: what I call the "Persuasion Cycle" (see Figure 1-1). In developing the Persuasion Cycle, I was inspired by the ground-breaking work and ideas of James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente in their *Transtheoretical Model of Change* and by William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick in their creation of *Motivational Interviewing*.

All persuasion moves through the steps of this cycle. To take people from the beginning to the end of the Persuasion Cycle, you need to speak with them in a manner that moves them:

- From *resisting* to *listening*
- From *listening* to *considering*
- From *considering* to *willing to do*
- From *willing to do* to *doing*
- From *doing* to *glad they did* and *continuing to do*.

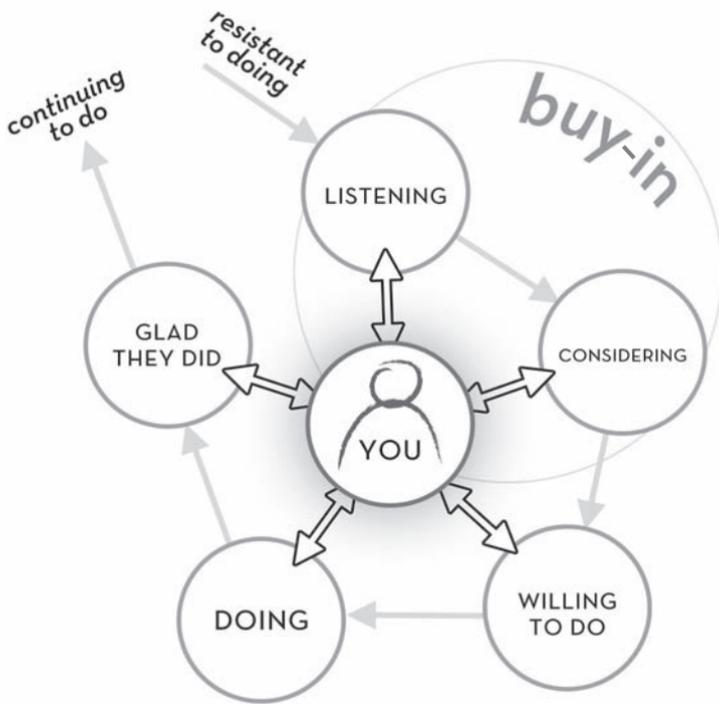
The focus, central tenet, *and* promise of this book, "the secret of getting through to absolutely anyone," is that you *get through* to people by having them "buy in." "Buy-in" occurs when people move from "resisting" to "listening" to "considering" what you're saying.

Ironically, the key to gaining "buy in" and then moving people through the rest of the cycle is not what *you* tell *them*, but what

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**FIGURE 1-1** The Persuasion Cycle
 

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you get *them* to tell *you*—and what happens in their minds in the process

In the following chapters, I'll lay out nine basic rules and twelve quick techniques you can use to move people through different points on the Persuasion Cycle. Master these rules and techniques, and you can put them to work wherever you go in your career or personal life. They're the same concepts I teach FBI agents and hostage negotiators for building empathy, de-escalating conflict, and gaining buy-in to a desired solution—and when you know them, you won't need to be held hostage by another person's anger, fear, lack of interest, or hidden agenda. That's because you'll have the tools you need to turn the situation to your advantage.

As you read this book, you'll find multiple options for handling any situation. That's because while we're all similar in many ways, we each have our own way of doing things. The rules I outline in Section II are universal, but feel free to hand-pick the techniques in Sections III and IV that suit your personality and your life.

## ■ THE SECRET: GETTING THROUGH IS SIMPLE

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There's nothing magic about the approaches you'll learn in these pages. In fact, one secret you'll discover is that reaching people is easier than it looks. To illustrate that point, I'll share the story of David, a CEO who used my techniques to turn his career around—and to save his family at the same time.

David was technically competent, but heavy handed and dictatorial. His CTO quit David's firm, saying he loved the company but couldn't handle the boss. Employees underperformed to retaliate for David's abuse. Investors found him brusque and condescending, and they passed on the chance to invest in his company.

I was called in by the board to see if David could be rehabilitated. I had strong doubts when I met with him, but I knew I had to make the effort to reach him.

As David and I talked about his management style, I asked him on a whim, "How does your style play at home?"

He replied, "Funny you should ask that." When I asked why, he responded, "I have a 15-year-old kid who's bright but lazy, and nothing I try works with him. He gets bad report cards, and my wife just coddles him. I love my kid but I'm almost disgusted by him. We had him evaluated, and he's got some kind of learning or attention problem. The teachers try to help him, but he just doesn't follow through with any of their suggestions. I think he's a good kid, but I just don't know what to make of it."

On a hunch, I taught David some quick communication techniques and told him to test them at work and at home. We

scheduled a time to speak again a week later, but after just three days I received a message from him. It said: "Dr. Goulston, please give me a call at your earliest convenience. There's something I've got to talk to you about."

I thought to myself, "Oh God, what the heck happened?," and called him back. I was surprised to hear the emotion in his voice when he answered.

"Doc," he said, "I think you might have saved my life."

"What happened?" I asked, and he replied, "I did exactly what you told me to."

"With your board and people?" I asked. "How did. . . ."

He interrupted me. "No I haven't spoken with them yet. It was with my son. I went home and went into his room and said I needed to talk to him. Then I said to him, 'I'll bet you feel that none of us know what it's like to be told you're smart and not be able to use your intelligence to perform well. Isn't that so?' And his eyes started to water—just as you predicted."

David continued, "I followed up with the next question you suggested: 'And I'll bet sometimes you wish you weren't so smart, so we wouldn't have all these expectations of you and be on your case all the time about not trying harder, isn't that true too?' He started to cry . . . and my eyes began to water up. Then I asked him, 'How bad does it get for you?'"

David went on in a choked voice, "He could hardly talk. He said, 'It's getting worse, and I don't know how much more of it I can take. I'm disappointing everyone, all the time.'"

By this point, David told me, he was crying himself. "Why didn't you tell me it was so bad?" he asked his son. David told me with pain in his voice what happened next: "My son stopped crying and looked back at me with the anger and resentment that he must have been feeling for years. And he said, 'Because you didn't want to know.' And he was right."

"What did you do next?" I asked.

"I couldn't let him be alone in this." David said. "So I told him, 'We're going to fix this. In the meantime I'm going to bring my laptop and work on your bed and keep you company when you're doing your homework. I can't let you be alone when you're feeling so awful.' We've been doing it each night now for a few days, and I think he *and* we are starting to turn a corner."

He paused, and said, “You helped me dodge a bullet, doc. What can I do in return for you?”

I replied, “Do unto your company as you just did unto your son.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You let your son exhale,” I said. “When you did, he told you what was really going on underneath—and to your credit you handled it superbly. You have a load of people—from board members to your management team—who view you exactly as your son did, and they also need to exhale about their frustration with you.”

David set up two meetings, one with his board and one with his executive team. He said the same thing to each group. He started off sternly: “I’ve got to tell you that I’m really very disappointed”—at which point both groups steeled themselves, preparing to take a tongue lashing—“I’m very disappointed in how I’ve jumped on all of you and then have been closed off to input from all of you, when you’ve steadfastly been trying to protect this company *and* me from *me*. I didn’t want to listen, but I’m listening now.”

David went on to share the story of his son. He concluded his remarks by saying, “I’m asking you to give me a second chance, because I think we can fix this. If you’ll give me your input one more time, I’ll listen and with your help find a way to implement your ideas.”

His board and his management team not only decided to give him a second chance, they gave him a standing ovation.

What’s the moral of this story? That the right words have tremendous power to heal. In David’s case, a few hundred words saved his job, his company, and his relationship with his son.

But there’s a second lesson here. Look at the two stories in this chapter, and you’ll see that Detective Kramer and David used some of the same approaches to achieve very different goals. Detective Kramer kept a troubled man from killing himself, while David kept his company from firing him and mended the fractures in his family. The power of these techniques, and the others you’ll learn, lies in the fact that they apply to nearly any person and any situation.

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Why does a single set of communication tools have such universal power? Because while our lives and our problems are very different, our brains work in similar ways. In the next chapter, we'll take a very quick look at why our minds “buy-in” or “buy-out”—and why reaching an unreachable person depends on talking to the brain.

# 2

## A LITTLE SCIENCE How the Brain Goes from “No” to “Yes”

What happens when two people talk? That is really the basic question here, because that’s the basic context in which all persuasion takes place.

—MALCOLM GLADWELL,  
AUTHOR, *THE TIPPING POINT*

I think like a doctor, so I loaded an earlier draft of this chapter with drawings of brain parts and discussions of how the brain works. When I finished, I showed it to Ellen, my editor, thinking she’d say, “Wow. That’s great.”

Ellen quickly glanced over all the brain stuff. And then she said, pointedly: “Ick.”

I got her point. Most people reading this book don’t care about neurons and neurotransmitters and gray matter and white matter. If you’re one of them, you just want to learn how to reach people. You don’t care what happens inside their brains when you do.

But here’s the thing: When you understand something about how the brain moves from resistance to buy-in, you’ll have a huge edge—because no matter what your message is, you need to talk to the brain. That’s why I teach a little brain science to hostage negotiators, CEOs, managers, parents, and anyone else who needs to reach difficult people.

However, I heeded Ellen's wise advice and took an axe to my first draft. Gone are the brain drawings and dry anatomy lectures. What's left? Three crucial concepts that will empower you to see what's happening behind another person's eyes when you're trying to get buy-in. Understand all three—the *three-part brain*, *amygdala hijack*, and *mirror neurons*—and you'll know all you need to know about the brain science behind reaching anyone.

## ■ THE THREE-PART BRAIN

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How many brains do you have? It's a trick question, because the answer (as you probably know, if you took college biology) isn't one but three.

Your brain has three layers that evolved over millions of years: a primitive *reptile* layer, a more evolved *mammal* layer, and a final *primate* layer. They all interconnect, but in effect they often act like three different brains—and they're often at war with each other. Here's how each of your three brains behaves:

- The lower reptilian brain is the “fight-or-flight” part of your brain. This region of your brain is all about acting and reacting, without a lot of thinking going on. It can also leave you frozen in a perceived crisis—the “deer-in-the-headlights” response.
- The middle mammal brain is the seat of your emotions. (Call it your inner drama queen.) It's where powerful feelings—love, joy, sadness, anger, grief, jealousy, pleasure—arise.
- The upper or primate brain is like *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock: It's the part that weighs a situation logically and rationally and generates a conscious plan of action. This brain collects data from the reptile and mammal brains, sifts it, analyzes it, and makes practical, smart, and ethical decisions.

As we evolved, the newer regions of our brains didn't vanquish the older parts. Instead, like the rings on a tree, each new region overlays the more primitive ones. The middle brain overlays the

lower brain; the upper brain overlays the middle brain. And all three have power over how you think and act every day.

To a small extent, these three brains work together. To a greater extent, however, they tend to pull apart and function independently — especially when we're under stress. When that happens and the reptile or mammal brain takes control, the human thinking brain is eclipsed, and we shift into primal brain functions.

What does all of this have to do with getting through to people? Simple: To reach someone, you need to talk to the human upper brain—not the snake brain or the rat brain. You're in trouble if you're trying to gain buy-in from someone who's feeling angry, defiant, upset, or threatened because, in these situations, the person's higher brain isn't calling the shots. If you're talking to a boss, a customer, a spouse, or a child whose lower brain or midbrain is in control, you're talking to a cornered snake or, at best, a hysterical rabbit.

In this situation, your success hinges entirely on talking the person up from reptile to mammal to human brain—a technique I'll teach you later. For now, however, let's look at why the primitive brain can take over, canceling out all those centuries of evolution. The key: a region of the brain called the *amygdala*.

## ■ AMYGDALA HIJACK AND THE DEATH OF RATIONAL THOUGHT

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Your amygdala, a small area deep in your brain, flies into action if it senses a threat to you—for instance, if a stranger approaches you in a dark parking lot. This threat doesn't always need to be physical; “fighting words,” a financial scare, or even a challenge to your ego can light it off as well.

Your frontal cortex, the logical part of your brain, also goes on alert in situations where you sense a threat. However, this higher brain region wants to analyze the threat, and you don't always have time for that. That's why your body gives the amygdala the power

to throw a switch, either directing impulses to or diverting impulses from the frontal cortex.

Sometimes when you're really scared, your amygdala instantly shuts out your higher brain, causing you to act on primitive instinct. Most of the time, however, the amygdala sizes up a situation before making its move. To understand this process, picture the amygdala as a full-to-the-brim pan of water on a stove. Heat this pan of water gently, and it can simmer gently for hours. Crank the heat up to high, however, and eventually the water will boil over catastrophically. Similarly, as long as your amygdala stays on "simmer" and isn't pushed into boiling over, you can continue to access your upper brain, which empowers you to pause, reflect, consider options, and make smart choices. When your amygdala hits the boiling point, however, it's all over.

We call this boiling-over point *amygdala hijack*—a term first coined by psychologist Daniel Goleman, the originator of the concept of emotional intelligence. The term "hijack" is appropriate because at that point (if you'll forgive me for detouring momentarily into another metaphor), your brain's intelligent and sensible pilot—the frontal cortex—is no longer in control. Instead, the snake is flying the plane. Your ability to reason drops drastically, your working memory falters, and stress hormones flood your system. Your adrenaline rush will keep you from thinking clearly in the next minutes, and it may take hours for the full effects to fade. Goleman no doubt was keen on this concept because when you undergo an amygdala hijack, your emotional intelligence goes out the window.

If you're trying to talk facts and reason with a person who's in full amygdala hijack, you're wasting your time. But intervene *before* the amygdala hits the boiling point, and the person's higher brain can stay in control. (Think of this as adding salt to water as you heat it. When you do that, you raise the water's boiling point, and it can take more heat while staying at a simmer.)

Many of the techniques I'll teach you for dealing with angry, fearful, or resistant people do just that: prevent an amygdala hijack. When you do that, you'll be talking to the human brain, and your words will get through.

One expert at preventing amygdala hijack was Earl Woods, the father of golf great Tiger Woods. Earl Woods might have been the best dad who ever lived, and he was certainly one of the greatest coaches.

As you know if you play golf, there's a huge mental component to performing well. When most golfers feel stressed, their amygdala starts to boil over—and as a result, they choke. But not Tiger. Watch him when he's under stress, and you'll see that instead of becoming distressed, he becomes determined and more focused. When other golfers go from stressed to distressed to choking, Tiger goes from stressed to alert to determined.

Even Tiger, however, can approach amygdala hijack on a bad day. One of my favorite sports stories of all time occurred after Tiger had shot a 40 on the opening nine holes of the first round of the 1997 Masters. It was his first time playing in a major tournament as a pro, and the wheels (and brain) appeared to begin to fall off. Apparently, he went over to his dad in a panic and said something like, "I don't know what's going on."

His dad paused, looked into his eyes as Tiger looked back, and said: "Tiger, you've been here before. Just do what you need to do."

At that point, not only did the wheels go back on, but Tiger went on to win the tournament by a 12-stroke margin, shooting 18 under par, two records that have never been equaled. A few simple words by his father at just the right time prevented an amygdala hijack—and turned a potential disaster into one of the greatest sports victories in history.

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## ■ MIRROR NEURONS

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You cringe when a coworker gets a paper cut and cheer when a movie hero gets the girl. That's because for an instant, it's just as if these events are happening to you—and, in a way, they are.

Years ago, scientists studying specific nerve cells in macaque monkeys' prefrontal cortices found that the cells fired when the monkeys threw a ball or ate a banana. But here's the surprise: these same cells fired *when the monkeys watched another monkey performing these acts*. In other words, when Monkey #1 watched Monkey

#2 toss a ball, the brain of the first monkey reacted just as if it had tossed the ball itself.

Scientists initially nicknamed these cells “monkey see, monkey do” neurons. Later they changed the name to *mirror neurons*, because these cells allow monkeys to mirror another being’s actions in their own minds.

The new name is more accurate, because we’re finding that humans, just like macaques, have neurons that act as mirrors. In fact, studies suggest that these remarkable cells may form the basis for human empathy. That’s because, in effect, they transport us into another person’s mind, briefly making us feel what the person is feeling. In a 2007 article titled “The Neurology of Self-Awareness” in *Edge*, V. S. Ramachandran, a pioneer in mirror neuron research, commented, “I call these ‘empathy neurons,’ or ‘Dalai Lama neurons,’ for they are dissolving the barrier between self and others.”

In short, these cells may prove to be one way nature causes us to care about other people. But look at mirror neurons from another angle, and new questions emerge. Why is it that we often tear up when someone is kind to us? Why is it that we get a warm feeling when someone understands us? Why is it that a simple caring “Are you okay?” can so move us?

My theory, which my clinical findings support, is that we constantly mirror the world, conforming to its needs, trying to win its love and approval. And each time we mirror the world, it creates a little reciprocal hunger to be mirrored back. If that hunger isn’t filled, we develop what I refer to as “mirror neuron receptor deficit.”

In today’s world, it’s easy to imagine that deficit growing into a deep ache. Many of the people I work with—from CEOs and managers to unhappy spouses to clinically depressed patients—feel that they give their best, only to be met day after day with apathy, hostility, or (possibly worst of all) no response at all. In my belief, this deficit explains why we feel so overwhelmed when someone acknowledges either our pain or our triumphs. That’s why many of the most powerful techniques I’ll teach you involve mirroring another person’s feelings—even if you don’t agree with them.

Here’s an example from my own practice that illustrates the surprising power of this approach. It involves Jack, a highly intelligent

paranoid patient I saw several years ago. Before coming to me, Jack had seen four other psychiatrists.

“Before we start talking,” Jack said right off the bat, “I need to tell you that the people living above me keep making noise all night long, and it’s driving me crazy.” He said this with a wry grin that seemed odd at the time.

“That must be exasperating to you,” I responded empathetically.

Smiling mischievously as if he’d caught me in a trap, Jack added: “Oh, I neglected to tell you that I live on the top floor of my apartment building and there’s no access to the roof.” Then he looked at me with a smirk reminiscent of a comic looking to get a rise out of an audience.

I thought to myself: “Hmm. I could say ‘and so?’ and trigger a confrontation. I could say ‘tell me more,’ and have him go into even greater detail about his paranoid delusion. I could say ‘I’m sure that the sound appears quite real to you, but a part of you knows it isn’t’ . . . , but that’s probably what the other four psychiatrists said.”

Then I asked myself, “What’s more important to me? To be a calm, objective professional giving him yet another of the reality checks that he’s already received from my profession? Or, to try to help him, even if it means letting go of reality?”

I decided on the latter. And with that conclusion, I let go of what I knew to be the truth and said with full sincerity: “Jack, I *believe* you.”

With that, he looked at me and paused for a moment. Then, startling me. He started crying, making the sound of a starving feral cat out in the night. I thought I’d opened up a real can of worms and questioned my judgment, but I just let him cry. As the minutes went by, his crying lessened, sounding less animal and more human. Finally, he stopped, blotting his eyes with his sleeve and wiping his nose with a tissue. Then he looked at me again, seeming ten pounds lighter as if he’d just relieved himself of a tremendous burden, and offered me a wide, knowing grin. “It does sound crazy, doesn’t it?”

We smiled together at the insight he’d just gained, and he took his first step toward getting better.

What happened to allow Jack to begin to give up his craziness? He felt *mirrored* by me. In his experience, the world required him to mirror and agree with *it*, whether it was a doctor saying, “You need this medication,” or a psychiatrist saying, “You realize that these are delusions, don’t you?” In that scenario, the world was always sane and right, and Jack was always insane and wrong. And “insane and wrong” is a heck of a lonely place to be.

My accurate mirroring helped Jack to feel less alone. As he felt less alone, he was able to feel some relief. And as he felt that relief, he was mentally able to relax. As a result, he felt grateful and, with that gratitude, came a willingness to open his mind to me and to work with me rather than fight me.

Now, you’re not likely to deal with many paranoid schizophrenics in the course of your daily life unless you’re a psychiatrist. But you will deal, every day, with people who have “mirror neuron receptor deficits” because the world isn’t giving back to them what they’re putting out. (My guess, in fact, is that this is a nearly universal condition of humankind.) Understanding a person’s hunger and responding to it is one of the most potent tools you’ll ever discover for getting through to anyone you meet in business or your personal life.

The hunger to be mirrored can go well beyond one-on-one conversations. I’m reminded of an incident 20 years ago. In it, I watched an unassuming and even bland speaker not only get through to an audience of 300 people, but be more effective at it than his charismatic copresenter who possessed a much more powerful personality.

I was attending a two-day conference on an intensive and highly effective form of brief psychotherapy. The meeting featured two speakers, a Canadian psychiatrist and a British psychiatrist who were copioneers in that field. Each would speak, present videotapes of sessions with patients, and then elicit comments, questions, and discussions.

Right out of the gate, it was clear that the Canadian speaker was powerful, focused, hard driving, and easy to listen to. In contrast, the second psychiatrist, although equally clear, was calmer, low key, and British, and it took more effort to pay attention to him.

But over the two days, a curious thing happened. The Canadian speaker launched into his presentations like a 747 zooming down the runway to takeoff. The British guy was more like a twin-engine Piper Cub making its way down the runway at a more leisurely clip. The Canadian's enthusiasm caused him to always exceed the allotted times for his presentations, running well into the times allotted for breaks. This caused the meeting staff to shorten breaks and urge us to get back in time for the next presentation. The fact that a significant number of members of the audience were becoming restless, looking at their watches, and rushing through snack breaks had little impact on the Canadian. He was going to finish what he had to say, whether or not anyone listened or cared.

In contrast, the British psychiatrist began his talks by tapping on the microphone and asking if everyone could hear him in the back of the room. He was also acutely attuned to any clues that the audience's attention span was drifting significantly. At those moments, he demonstrated one of the most dramatic instances of mirroring I can remember—and he did it with a large audience, no less. He would literally be in mid-sentence, stop himself, and say: “You’ve heard enough for now. Let’s take a break and resume in ten minutes.”

At first these episodes seemed a bit off the wall, but by the end of the conference, the audience had clearly shifted from being wowed by the charismatic but rather full-of-himself Canadian to deeply appreciating *and* listening to the Brit who’d taken the effort to accurately mirror them. The British doctor had won over a whole roomful of people, and he’d done it effortlessly.

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## ■ FROM THEORY TO ACTION

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The brain science I’ve outlined in this chapter comes with an asterisk attached: it doesn’t apply to everyone. On rare occasions, you’ll meet people who are stuck in their reptile or mammal brains and can’t think logically no matter how much you try to help them. (Many, but not all, fall into the category of “mentally ill.”) And you’ll meet some people who don’t give a damn if you mirror their feel-

ings or not, because they're sociopaths or narcissists who only care about you doing what they want—which is why this book also includes techniques for dealing with bullies and jerks.

In almost every case, however, the people you'll meet are willing to be touched if you can just break through the walls they've erected to keep from being hurt or controlled. In the following chapters, I'll tell you how to effectively mirror the emotions of these people, redirect them to their higher thought processes, and keep them from undergoing an amygdala hijack—all by putting a few simple rules and techniques into play. And I'll tell you how to keep your *own* brain under control, so you can stay cool and say the right thing instead of melting down under pressure.

When you can do all of these things, you'll be amazed at how easy it is to reach people—and you'll be amazed at the difference it will make to your job, your relationships, and your life.