


# HOSTAGE AT THE TABLE

How Leaders Can Overcome  
Conflict, Influence Others,  
and Raise Performance

George Kohlrieser

*Foreword by Joe W. Forehand, President, Accenture*

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# ***Warren Bennis***

## **A WARREN BENNIS BOOK**

This collection of books is devoted exclusively to new and exemplary contributions to management thought and practice. The books in this series are addressed to thoughtful leaders, executives, and managers of all organizations who are struggling with and committed to responsible change. My hope and goal is to spark new intellectual capital by sharing ideas positioned at an angle to conventional thought—in short, to publish books that disturb the present in the service of a better future.

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Glen	<i>Leading Geeks</i>
Cloke, Goldsmith	<i>The Art of Waking People Up</i>
George	<i>Authentic Leadership</i>
Kohlrieser	<i>Hostage at the Table</i>



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# FOREWORD

*Hostage at the Table* is different from other leadership books you will read. George Kohlrieser has created a powerful metaphor born out of years of personal experience and insight as a hostage negotiator. He takes an original approach, drawing on emotional, and at times frightening, situations to underscore his thesis. The result is powerful, and the themes he presents—which guide the reader on a journey to a “hostage-free” state of mind—are relevant in both business and life.

I met George for the first time many years ago. He has been a core contributor to the Accenture Leadership Development Program, which has helped develop more than three thousand of Accenture’s future leaders.

Through our program, I have had the privilege of seeing George in action. Over the years, I have realized the power of his hostage negotiation framework—which emphasizes areas such as conflict resolution, bonding, and dialogue—in helping people break through many of the roadblocks to effective leadership.

There are two things our people always remember from their time with George. The first is what he calls the “mind’s eye”—that our state of mind can propel us or limit us; it is an entirely individual choice. As George points out, in life, as in business, if we set the stage in our mind’s eye with the outcome we want to achieve, we set the stage for success.

In my more than thirty years in business—working directly with hundreds of different enterprises—I have become a firm believer that the highest performers (whether individuals or organizations) see possibilities, not

limitations. That said, everyone experiences some very high points and some very low ones. In my view, the low points tend to separate the best leaders from the rest. Those who emerge from tough times are winners who make no excuses. They refuse to be seen as victims.

In fact, this way of thinking has had a profound impact on my own experience. Leaders have the power to influence, motivate, and inspire people to achieve extraordinary things. If there is one quality that defines an exceptional leader it is optimism and a “can do” spirit. To me that is a key element of living “hostage free.”

The second thing our people remember so vividly is how George approaches conflict resolution. As he demonstrates in our courses, leaders need to “put the fish on the table”: instead of dancing around a tough issue, one should acknowledge it, communicate honestly, and show mutual respect.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many leaders struggle to develop this behavior. George offers help by encouraging leaders to view dialogue as a means to a greater truth. Most of us would agree that leaders need to excel at listening and at dialogue. However, George shows that leaders actually can block dialogue without even realizing it or become a hostage when others block the dialogue. This is a critical point because when managed well, dialogue and conflict resolution can build stronger teams and help people feel a much greater sense of engagement.

Overall, the themes in this book echo a constant theme at Accenture about what it takes to achieve and sustain high performance. We believe that the highest-performing organizations have exceptional leaders who know how to get the best from their teams. They also have a “secret sauce” that is the essence of the organization and its people that cannot be copied by competitors.

I believe George would agree. He also recognizes that the ongoing challenge for organizations of all sizes is how to get people to feel empowered, see beyond obstacles, and act like winners—not be held hostage. George offers an answer: leaders can infuse their workforces with powerful mind-sets. They can help people step up and “will” themselves to what and where they want to be.

George’s stories remind us that we are not victims of circumstance—we have the power to react. Our actions will always determine the outcome. That makes all the difference.

This book is certain to make a positive difference in leadership and business, and I want to thank George for making his experiences available to all of us. His insights are truly relevant to anyone or any organization seeking to perform at the highest level. This book will inspire you to raise your game.

*April 2006*

JOE W. FOREHAND PRESIDENT, ACCENTURE

*To my wife, Cinzia, and our four children—  
Doug (deceased), Paul, Giulia, and Andrew—  
for their energy, their inspiration, and the great  
learning opportunities they have provided me with  
over the years*

# PREFACE

The seeds of this book were sown after a defining moment in my life in a hospital emergency room in Dayton, Ohio. As a young psychologist working for the Dayton Police Department, I accompanied the police to the hospital to deal with an agitated, violent man who was brought to the hospital with injuries resulting from a stabbing wound inflicted by a girlfriend. While I talked with this man in a treatment room, he suddenly grabbed a large pair of scissors and took a nurse and me hostage, saying he would kill both of us. For two hours we pursued a dialogue focused on him, his life-threatening injuries, and the care required to keep him alive. The turning point in the crisis came when I asked, "Do you want to live, or do you want to die?" "I don't care," was his answer. I then asked, "What about your children losing their father?" He visibly changed mental states and began to talk about his children rather than his anger at his girlfriend and the police. In the end, he agreed to put the scissors down voluntarily and allowed the nurse and a surgical team to treat him. In an even more surprising moment after putting the scissors down, this very "violent" man then approached me, with tears in his eyes, gave me a hug, and said, "Thank you, George. I forgot how much I love my kids." His words of gratitude wired my brain forever to believe in the power of emotional bonding, dialogue, and negotiation with even the most dangerous person. I also surprised myself with the power I had to regulate my own emotion from sudden terror to calm, focused resolve.

The lessons I learned on that evening in 1968 are just as valuable to me now as a professor of leadership and organizational behavior as they were in my earlier careers



as a clinical psychologist, a police psychologist, a hostage negotiator, an organizational psychologist, and radio talk-show host. I discovered that my learnings as a hostage negotiator could be applied successfully to situations of powerlessness and entrapment in which a person is a metaphorical hostage rather than a physical hostage. In fact such potential “hostage” situations occur everyday professionally and personally.

My goal in this book is to offer what I have learned as a hostage negotiator for you to apply to situations in which you may be a metaphorical “hostage” in your life. Any time you feel entrapped, powerless, and helpless, you are, in fact, a “hostage.” While this book especially addresses leaders in organizations, it can be helpful to everyone in all walks of life.

Throughout my life, working with individuals, leaders, teams, and organizations, I have found many people held hostage by others, by situations, or even by their own emotions. They responded similarly to someone physically held hostage when there was no real “gun to their head.” They behaved like hostages even though they didn’t realize it and, in fact, had the power to do something about it. I also discovered people who could easily have been held “hostage” by a person or situation and yet were not. In fact, the hostage metaphor is a powerful model to understand behavior, and the hostage negotiation framework can help anyone who is a metaphorical hostage.

The story of my life is closely entwined with how this thinking came together. I was born into a family of five brothers and sisters on a farm in Ohio. My parents owned and worked the land as farmers as well as running a poultry business. As the eldest male child, it was a great honor for me to enter a Catholic seminary at age thirteen with the goal of becoming a priest. This experience brought with it

many benefits: learning to live in a community; periods of intense study, education, and play; the forming of values and character; and learning about meditation and spirituality. One negative aspect was the loss of a “normal” adolescence. After some eight years, what had been a positive experience slowly became a negative ordeal when I could not face the truth that I wanted to leave. I had, in fact, become what I now understand to be a hostage to my own conflicting emotions about being in the seminary. I was fortunate enough to know a wise, extraordinary man, Father Edward Maziarz, who became a confidant. During one earthshaking dialogue, he looked right into my eyes and, with the wisdom of ages, calmly said, “George, you are free. You have the right to choose to do whatever you want.” It was like a lightning bolt coming out of the sky that forever changed my destiny. His words and his authenticity touched the depths of my soul. The ensuing silence was sweet as my mind reorganized itself to accept that as a fundamental truth. As I burst into tears of relief, I asked him to repeat those beautiful words. They unlocked a prison door that I myself had created. At that moment, I understood one of the basic truths of life—what Warren Bennis calls the “crucibles of leadership”—those defining moments in one’s life that are a severe test of patience and beliefs, a trial that influences, shapes, and changes one’s life forever. I was twenty-one at the time. It took another year to complete the process for me to actually leave the seminary.

In thinking back to that time, I realized that in becoming a hostage to my emotions, I had stayed in that situation long after it was time to leave. I was hostage to my grief about leaving what was familiar and all the benefits and security it brought. I also felt sad about not meeting the expectations of myself and others. I am eternally grateful to Father Ed, whose words rewired my brain and influenced my mind’s eye (a concept you will read more about), thus reshaping

my focus. Father Ed also represents another concept you will learn about in this book—that of secure bases, which are the anchors and supports you have in life in the form of people or goals that become major sources of empowerment. You will have the opportunity to see how important secure bases are for all of us.

While finishing my psychology degree, I worked on a federal-government-sponsored program, the first to place psychologists side-by-side on the street with police. The purpose of the program was to reduce homicides in domestic violence situations by offering immediate help. It was crisis intervention aimed at helping the most violent people and most vulnerable victims and then linking them to the community mental health system. I became involved thanks to the trust of a wonderful psychologist, Dr. John Davis, who asked me if I was interested in the project. After saying yes, I asked him why he had asked me. He responded, “You are one of a few people I know who like challenge to this degree, and you have the caring and skill to deal with violent people and the resilience to survive whatever happens on the street.” I was honored by his confidence in me. For my part, I never carried a gun, despite being advised and encouraged to do so. I knew that my best weapon was words: talking, listening, dialogue, and negotiating.

During the time I worked with that project, I personally was taken hostage four times—once in a hospital emergency room, and three times in homes during domestic violence disputes. It was those experiences that convinced me so deeply of the power of the hostage metaphor. You have the power never to be a metaphorical hostage and the power to influence and persuade others to make constructive choices even in extreme emotional states.

In 1972 I was asked by the chief of police to teach in the Dayton Police Academy in programs for police leadership development and to help establish two hostage negotiation teams—one for the Dayton, Ohio, Police Department and one for the Montgomery County, Ohio, Sheriff's Department. Since then, and for the past thirty-five years, I have been involved in hostage negotiations in many forms, including direct negotiating, and training and debriefing hostage interventions throughout the world.

At the same time, I worked in a psychiatric hospital teaching mental health specialists to work with chronic schizophrenics. I witnessed horribly inhumane treatment of patients and became a part of a change initiative to transform the way the psychiatric hospital staff dealt with patients, moving from use of force and seclusion to the concept of creating bonds with people held hostage by the most severe psychiatric disorders. I already knew from working with the police what emotional bonding could accomplish. I now discovered that the same was possible with individuals who had extreme mental disorders. I will always be grateful to Dr. Carl Rogers, who personally helped me understand the power of "unconditional positive regard"—a fundamental aspect of authentic bonding. He was convinced of the importance of this concept for every human being, regardless of circumstances. That idea remains a fundamental part of how hostage negotiators create the bond to convince the hostage taker to release his hostages.

Over time, I expanded from the world of clinical psychology to the world of executive education with business leaders. In the clinical world, dialogue and conflict resolution were a central focus of my work. Simultaneously, my work in organizations involved a similar focus in a different context. Dialogue and conflict resolution build strong teams, and great leaders must be able to deal

effectively with people. In my work, the hostage metaphor was a recurring theme for both individuals, teams, and organizations that were blocked, lacking empowerment, or trapped in internal or external conflicts. The resolution always came when personal power, team power, and organizational power brought an escape from the hostage mentality and the establishing of a mind-set of choice and freedom.

For many years I have taught workshops, made presentations, and given speeches to leaders across many organizations, industries, and businesses in some eighty-five countries. Time and again, I have found that even “high potential” leaders and chief executives can make enormous strides when they understand the fundamental need in humans to create attachments, to bond, and to grieve losses. This is the same understanding every hostage negotiator uses to be successful.

In this book, I have chosen powerful hostage scenarios and other violent encounters in my effort to demonstrate the ideas presented. I have found that the emotional immediacy of such stories can provide great insight into why individuals create positive or negative outcomes in business or life. I think you will find you can easily apply these ideas to your own work and life.

All the stories in this book are from real people facing real-life situations. They are taken from my own experiences: when I was a hostage negotiator or when I worked with senior business executives in companies and consulted with organizations, or from colleagues, or from the media. With the exception of the news stories, names have been changed to protect people’s identities.

Can we understand what it means to be taken hostage? And how does it feel to be a hostage in a metaphorical sense—the hostage in our heads? If we understand how the

mind works, and the incredible power we all possess to determine how we feel about our own lives, we can learn how to free ourselves from the limitations and mental “chains” that may stop us from reaching our full potential. We can all become better leaders, managers, employees—and better people—by doing this.

The chapters in this book are designed to take you on a journey that leads to a place where you can live and work in a hostage-free state of mind. First, it is important to understand what I mean when I use terminology related to hostage situations. The word *hostage* was taken from Old French (circa 1275) and used in relation to a person being given as security. For example, a landlord might hold a lodger as security for payment of rent or for services. The use of the word *hostage* in relation to acts of terrorism is as recent as the 1970s. Finally, in a metaphorical sense, every day we allow ourselves to be taken hostage by ourselves or others.

To overcome this metaphorical hostage mind-set, it is important to understand the concept of the “mind’s eye” and how that determines the way we think, focus, and achieve results. We also need to look at the tremendous power of the bonding cycle—forming attachments, bonding, separating, grieving, and rebonding—and discover the ways the mind’s eye is formed. We must appreciate how critical it is to go through the grief that results from broken and lost bonds because unresolved grief can block people from moving on in life.

Special forms of attachment and bonding are the secure bases in our lives. Secure bases are the most influential sources of what shapes our mind’s eye, teaching us how to deal with the painful side of life.

In the course of this book, we will explore skills and techniques that can help resolve conflicts, even though

most people naturally fear dealing with conflict. Through understanding the mind's eye and secure bases, we can learn to apply the skills for managing conflict, and to reach greater truth through a powerful dialogue. The richness of discovery when two people, or a group, enter into a true dialogue with open hearts and minds should not be underestimated in its ability to build bonds and resolve conflicts. An extension of dialogue is negotiation. We will examine the power of negotiation, encompassing influence and persuasion, and the ability it has to change the destiny of destructive processes. Recently, the Dalai Lama was quoted as saying that war is an outdated idea. Imagine using the power of talking, dialogue, and negotiation as a primary way of solving disputes.

Understanding how our emotions work is a vital aspect of self-awareness that enables us never to be a metaphorical hostage. How we master our emotions affects the amount of pain or joy we feel. There are many people who suffer deep losses and yet come back to finding joy in their life. By being master of our own selves, we increase the likelihood that we will never be held hostage by ourselves or anyone else. If we can understand the beliefs and values that shape our thinking, and recognize and respect the intrinsic dignity of the individual, we can act in ways that ensure we stay empowered even if we are a physical hostage.

The essence of these ideas is based on what I know to be true about being a person, including how to be a husband, a father, a friend, a leader, a teacher. The core concepts described here are like pieces of a puzzle. If one or more pieces are missing, then a person can easily start acting like a hostage, finding himself or herself powerless and trapped. The result is a state in which a person is not living up to his or her full potential. When all the puzzle pieces fit together, they create a beautiful picture of a place where the person has a sense of real freedom and satisfaction and can learn

to live an empowered life. This is something every leader must do and model.

The twenty-first century has begun with a number of disturbing trends, including the upsurge in terrorism; the swing toward political and religious fundamentalism; widespread natural disasters, possibly caused or exacerbated by global climate change; and the phenomenon of globalization. To handle these and the stresses they cause, we need to be able to manage our emotions so that we can still find joy in life over and over again. It is my personal vision and mission that, one day, every woman, man, and child in every country around the world can live their lives with a hostage-free state of mind and appreciate the greatest gift of all—experiencing the joy of being alive. It is my hope that reading this book will be much more than an intellectual exercise for you. Through engaging in a dialogue with me and yourself, I hope that you will have an emotional experience that will stimulate your heart, mind, and spirit to take you to new places in your personal and professional life.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour

*Excerpt from Auguries of Innocence, William Blake*



# CHAPTER ONE

## ARE YOU BEING HELD HOSTAGE WITHOUT KNOWING IT?

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

*At about 10 A.M., the police arrived with a canine unit that had followed the man's scent to the house. They were shocked to find the grandmother and granddaughter still*

*alive. The man was a psychopathic murderer who had escaped from prison the night before and had brutally slaughtered the family who were the nearest neighbors.*

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

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

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

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

- While you are in your car on your way to work, another driver cuts you off. Immediately you feel angry and hostile toward the “jerk” in the other vehicle. This feeling can linger, keeping you in a negative frame of mind for a good part of the day.

- Your boss criticizes you, and in response, you defend yourself or even attack her, causing the situation to escalate. The conflict stays in your mind, resulting in a feeling of distrust between the two of you.
- You are going on a business trip and, because you are leaving, your child cries. You then rush out the door feeling guilty and telling yourself that you are a terrible parent. For the remainder of the trip, you feel down and even depressed.
- You say hello to a colleague as you walk by, but he does not respond. You begin complaining to others about your colleague, your work, and the company. Soon you start thinking, “Nobody cares about people around here.”

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

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

Employees can also take their bosses hostage, minimizing success and making work a misery.

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

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

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

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (4th ed.) definition of a hostage is “one that is manipulated by the demands of another.” In the workplace, managers and/or staff can sometimes feel like hostages caught in the cross fire between the boss, the customers, and colleagues. Entrepreneurs who must, for example, fire twenty-five employees can be held hostage to their own emotions and feelings of pain at the action they know they must take. In today’s business world, the global accessibility created by

technology can intrude on family and personal lives to the extent that people feel hostage to their jobs, causing profound pain to others and themselves. Bosses who face employees who are not motivated or colleagues who are cynical may begin to feel their work has no value. The result is they become hostage to their staff's low motivation and the cynicism of colleagues.

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

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

## **CONTROLLING OUR BRAIN IS ESSENTIAL**

According to neurologist Paul MacLean, the human brain consists of three separate, though interconnected, brains.<sup>2</sup> They are the reptilian brain, the limbic system (sometimes referred to as the "Paleomammalian brain"), and the neocortex.

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

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

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