

**Excerpt from Professor George Kohlrieser's book, Hostage at the Table: How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance, (Jossey-Bass, Warren Bennis Series, 2006).**

Recipient of the "Best Business Book Award 2007" from DCF (French Association of Business Leaders) and "Best Management Book 2008" in Germany by Managementbuch.de.

**[www.hostageatthetable.com](http://www.hostageatthetable.com)**

**Copyright 2006 by George Kohlrieser. All rights reserved.**

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE POTENTIAL OF THE BONDING CYCLE

*I first met Frank when he was ninety. From the moment we shook hands, I knew this gentle soul was a special human being. He had the spirit of a young man plus the laugh and smile of a truly happy person. What struck me most was his appreciation of the beauty and joy of life and his interest and curiosity about everything around him. On first impression, Frank showed such a lack of victimization and such profound joy in living that he seemed not to have suffered any loss or pain in his life.*

*As I got to know Frank, I discovered the immensity of the loss and pain he actually had overcome. When he was only ten, his mother had died, a factor that put him at high risk for later problems. As a young adult, he fought in World War I; as an elderly man, he still cried over friends lost in that horrible conflict.*

*Although he was too old to fight in World War II, he again suffered the loss of friends to armed conflict. Then, after fifty-four years of marriage, his beloved wife, Caroline, died; another loss that in itself put him at high risk for premature death. And there were many other less dramatic but stressful losses, all of which Frank bore with grace and determination to stay bonded to life and “enjoy the party.”*

*In the autumn of 1993, approximately three months after the accidental death of my twenty-three-year-old son Doug, I was at the home of our mutual friend, Alice. As Frank entered the room where I was, he came tearfully toward me with open arms. We embraced, and after recovering enough to speak, he looked me in the eyes. What followed is etched forever in my heart and mind.*

*Quietly, he spoke: "George, I understand what you are going through. I never told you, but I also lost my son." We two fathers held each other in an embrace for life as the grief uncontrollably poured from our hearts. No words were necessary to convey what we both knew and understood about each other.*

*Frank's life was not complex. Born in 1896 to a working-class family in England, he was educated privately by the Quakers after his mother's death. When grown, he worked as a carpenter, a surveyor, and a member of the Royal Engineers until starting his own construction business at forty-nine. His willingness to take risks and his pride in his work made him successful. Involved in village life, he participated in the community theater group and ran for a local political office, but he did not garner any particular recognition or fame until after his hundredth birthday.*

*At that point, he was honored with a flight on the Concorde for his service to his country. Frank also began connecting with young people as he visited primary schools to teach youngsters what life was like at the beginning of the twentieth century. He also appeared in several BBC television shows about centenarians, gave speeches for veterans, delivered prayers on memorial days in Europe, and acted as the ceremonial leader in laying many memorial wreaths. He even visited 10 Downing Street and met Cherie Blair. Frank did not seek celebrity status, but when the world came to him, he was ready to share his story and his enthusiasm for life.*

*This synopsis of Frank's story does not reveal what made him special, however; nor does it indicate the substance that gave his life resilience, meaning, and joy.*

*One way Frank made his life meaningful was that he always lived with goals. For example, he was eager to reach his 104th birthday so that he would have lived in three centuries. Unfortunately, on the way to that goal, Frank suffered a stroke in the summer of 1999. This stroke left him unable either to speak or see. Despite the stroke, however, and with the support of many family members and friends, he achieved his goal of living into the twenty-first century.*

*In a conversation with me after he had regained his ability to speak, he wept as he spoke of the losses he had experienced since his stroke: his eyesight, his home, his ability to live independently and to watch TV. Yet*

*Frank's zest for living continued, as revealed in something he said to me: "I am rediscovering how wonderful it is just to listen to music or to the songs of birds."*

*This is another of the lessons Frank can teach us, another of the ways he had to make life consequential and fulfilling: he remained determined to reconnect continually to the joy of life, no matter how deep the pain and grief he suffered. His intention was to find new attachments and the emotional connection that drives a neverending search for the joy beneath the pain. Frank's motto for life remained "The party isn't over yet."*

*When I last spoke to him, I asked him if he felt that life was finally over.*

*"Oh my goodness, George, no!" he responded. "I enjoy living and life so much that 104 just isn't going to be long enough. Besides, I have so many recorded books to listen to. I have so many friends around me and so much to enjoy. After all, I am blessed with such good health; I have nothing to complain about." And with a spirited laugh he continued, "The party is over only when the band stops playing—and the band is still going strong!"*

*Frank died peacefully in his sleep in 2001 at the age of 105.*

Frank's life is a model of the power of the bonding cycle and the ability to turn sorrow back into joy. I speak about Frank in almost every workshop or training that I conduct. With so much pain and suffering in life, people often use Frank's inspiring story as an anchor to hold onto in times of trouble in their own lives.

Frank's story has some important lessons for all of us. He provides us, as individuals, with a model of how to avoid victimization by living in a healthy, vibrant, energetic way. Rather than using our energy longing for the past, we need to find the will and determination to create new goals for the future and to "keep the party going," as Frank would say.

It is up to us to honor our own legacies, even to grieve for some of what we have lost, and then to reconnect with what is ultimately important. It is up to us to hear the band still playing, to respond by sharing what we have and what we know, to connect with others. Just like Frank, we can try to live our lives with the motto, "The party's not over!"

## THE BONDING CYCLE

The bonding cycle is a powerful and fundamental concept that explains much about human motivation. Every relationship we have follows the pattern of the bonding cycle. Even in business, our interactions with others follow the stages of attachment, bonding, separation, and grieving. A person who is not bonded remains detached, and this can then manifest itself into physical and psychological problems for an individual and, ultimately, through this have a negative impact on the person's professional life as well.

*Andreas was a senior vice president responsible for a substantial business with two thousand employees around the world. One day, his boss called him in and told him that even though he was getting good business results, he had a problem. People felt intimidated by him and he had created too many enemies.*

*Andreas responded: "Isn't that what I'm paid for—to get results, not to have people like me?"*

*His boss gave him six weeks to change his behavior. Sadly, Andreas was not successful in altering his conduct, so six weeks later he lost his job.*

*Now here was a man targeted to be on the shortlist as the next CEO of the company, a man with dreams of succeeding, a man who had never encountered failure. Andreas collapsed in total disbelief and went into a deep depression.*

*I spoke to him about creating bonds with those with whom he dealt. At that time, he ridiculed the idea, saying, "Doesn't bonding only happen in a chemistry lab?"*

*Eventually, however, he came to understand how his whole personality had been built on avoiding bonding and on avoiding grief. His mother had been very anxious; his father had been totally focused on work. Andreas had become an independent loner who did not know how to create bonds, and he now found himself in a situation in which he was out of a job.*

*Over the next eighteen months, Andreas grew to understand the importance of bonding and the methods of creating positive relationships. He was shocked and hurt, though, not to get a job immediately. In fact,*

*he did not find another for eighteen months. He eventually became the CEO of a much smaller company.*

*Because of this experience, Andreas made a profound change to his identity. He came to terms with the fact he had never learned how to bond and had avoided grief his whole life—just like his father. The turning point came when he had a heart-to-heart discussion with his father. They talked about what had happened in their lives and the implications of what had happened to each of them and with each other. It was the first time the father had shared his pain about leaving his motherland and his family of origin along with the deep loneliness of being in a new country where after some thirty years, Andreas's father always felt a longing in his heart to return to his homeland. For the first time, they could cry together. Andreas never remembered his father hugging him or saying, "I love you." After that discussion, Andreas's father did just that.*

Now Andreas feels that losing his job was one of the best events he has ever endured, despite all the pain. He was on the way to a heart attack, a divorce, and the loss of contact with his three children. He views being fired as a blessing, because he discovered another aspect of life: how to create bonds with people. He developed a renewed and profoundly different relationship with his wife, his children, his father, and all his friends, and he now has a job he loves. Further, both in and out of the workplace, he is dealing with people in a constructive way. Andreas has become a true high-performing leader creating a real high-performing organization by how he builds bonds to people and goals.

Bill George in his book *Authentic Leadership* has this to say: "The capacity to develop close and enduring relationships is one mark of a leader. Unfortunately, many leaders of major companies believe their job is to create the strategy, organization structure and organizational processes. Then they just delegate the work to be done, remaining aloof from the people doing the work."<sup>1</sup>

Leaders who understand and create bonding are able to establish trust and engage in highly productive behavior. When we know how to bond, we are better equipped to avoid being taken hostage.

Every relationship we have—to another human being, to a goal, to a pet, or even to an object—follows the bonding cycle. Joseph

Chilton Pearce, author of *Magical Child*, understood bonding as a psychobiological form of communication, beyond ordinary consciousness and fundamental to healthy human functioning. “Bonding is a vital physical link that coordinates and unifies the entire biological system. Bonding seals a primary knowing that it is the basis for rational thought. We are never conscious of being bonded; we are conscious only of our acute *dis-ease* when we are not bonded or when we are bonded to compulsion and material things. The un-bonded person (and bonding to objects is to be very much un-bonded in a functional sense) will spend his life in a search for what bonding was designed to give.”<sup>2</sup>

As Figure 3.1 illustrates, the bonding cycle is composed of four stages: attachment, bonding, separation, and grieving:

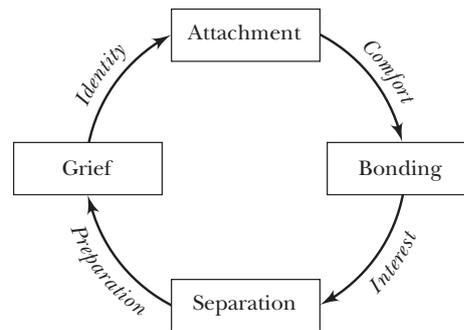
*Attachment* is a process of creating nearness and making a connection. This is what John Bowlby, founder of modern attachment theory, terms the “drive for proximity.”<sup>3</sup> When there is proximity, we have the potential to experience a sense of comfort.

*Bonding* is the emotional exchange that follows proximity and attachment. Bonding creates a synergy whereby a mutual impact on emotions is created. It is an exchange of energy. Bonding has endurance, a depth that involves the emotions. It is possible to be attached without being bonded. Successful people are able to make attachments, bond, and rebond, and in doing so, they are able to inspire and motivate others. All things pass and, at some stage, there will be a separation.

*Separation* is an interruption to bonding and the attachment process. It can come in the form of change, loss, disappointment, or frustration. Separation results from the natural evolution of a relationship, (growing up, growing older, or graduating), or it can be unexpected (death, accident, or sudden loss). Separation can lead to powerful emotions and can be a fundamental driver of destructive behavior because it leads to the fourth stage, grieving.

*Grieving* involves going through the mental and emotional stages of letting go and saying goodbye. Whether over small things or profound things, grieving is essential if human beings are to be resilient, to go on, to recover, and to find their own personal power. Feeling our personal power, coming back to the joy of life, reflects that we have come through a grieving process.

FIGURE 3.1. THE BONDING CYCLE



Many people experience the fullness of the bonding cycle in relation to a pet. A puppy is brought home, and everyone attaches to it because it is so cute. As the puppy grows and becomes a member of the household, bonding occurs. When the dog dies, separation occurs. To be able to bond to another puppy, the family must go through a grieving period. Those who cannot often say they could never own another dog. They are unable to live through the loss and reexperience the joy of owning another pet.

I think it is accurate to say that everyone in a hostage state is in some form of unresolved grief. The grief that follows loss and separation is for some people the most difficult part of life. Not facing it has profound consequences. The task of a hostage negotiator is to create a bond with the hostage taker. Through this bond, the conflict can be resolved in a peaceful manner. It is a myth that bonding occurs only with people we like. In fact, it is crucial that we learn to form and maintain bonds in ways that allow a relationship to exist even in the face of profound differences or serious conflict. Hostage negotiators are able to negotiate with desperate people because they are able to form bonds with them, irrespective of the acts that such individuals may have committed. Without a bond, there will not be a negotiation. Every act of violence involves a break or disruption in the bonding process. People who commit crimes or who act aggressively are in some state of detachment. Bonding interrupts the detachment process, and

so the ability to bond and rebond is the key skill that all hostage negotiators need.

## ATTACHMENT AND BONDING

Attachment behavior is considered a basic, inborn, biologically adaptive “motivational system” that drives an infant to create a few selective attachments in his or her early life.<sup>4</sup> Research shows that attachments provide a relationship in which infants will (1) seek proximity to the attachment figure; (2) have a sense of a safe haven—where their distress will be soothed by an attachment figure; and (3) develop an internal working model of a secure base that will provide them with the security that will enable them to explore the world, to have a sense of well-being, and to soothe themselves in times of distress in the future.<sup>5</sup>

All mammals have a basic need to seek proximity—that is, to be near or to be in the physical presence of another mammal. In addition, people’s physical proximity to goals, homes, pets, or countries also can lead to attachment, and for some, attachments to these are stronger than their attachments to people.

*A television news item told the story of a young boy who was in a coma for several months. When the boy’s pet golden retriever was brought to him, the dog started to lick his face and make sounds in his ears. In a short time, the boy miraculously came out of his coma. Soon after, much to the surprise of all the doctors and nurses, he was able to go home. The doctors could only say that what happened was “unexplainable.”*

Attachment behavior biologically activates many hormones in the body and provides us with a sense of comfort. We are a walking pharmacy that is activated by proximity with other beings or things that are important to us. Bonding is all about how we hold the proximity and how we give and take emotional energy when we are in the state of attachment. The body, the emotions, the mind, and the spirit are all involved in the bonding process.

When attachment leads to the formation of a bond, our emotions are always involved. Expressing these emotions is part of the bonding process. People who are not aware of their emotions or who block their emotions are going to be limited in their ability to

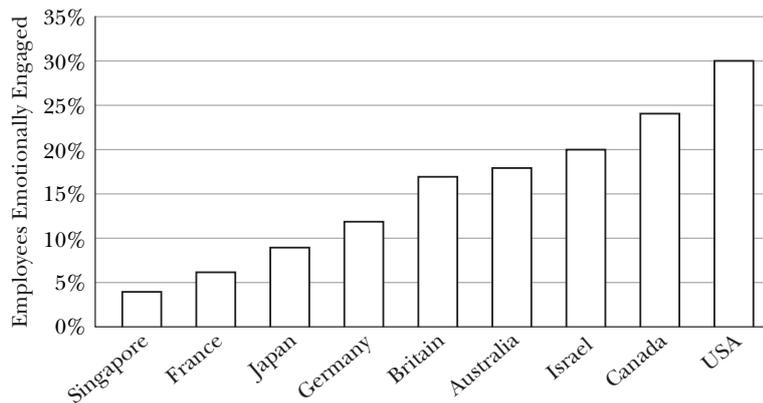
bond. Bonding requires having an open body, being flexible, and being able to express energy and warmth. A cold, detached person whose body is closed and who is rigid and inflexible, or who cannot look at or touch people will have difficulty in forming bonds. What is in our minds, what we think, and what we believe affect our ability to bond. A person who is not bonded remains detached. When people are either unable to bond or have unresolved broken bonds, they are more likely to be taken hostage by others.

In essence, the state of exclusion, of feeling isolated or disconnected, often results in people who look for what is wrong in themselves and others, as exemplified by the negative self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, a manager who stays in his office and refuses to engage in social bonding behavior is likely to drift toward a negative perception of others, and employees and colleagues, in turn, will perceive him as negative.

When people are detached they are not engaged in what they are doing. A lack of engagement can have serious consequences for a leader and an organization. A thirty-year international study by the Gallup organization on emotional engagement at work (released in 2004) showed that the majority of people do not feel emotionally attached to their jobs.<sup>6</sup> According to Gerald Wood, executive director of Gallup, Germany, “The level of emotional attachment to the job has a direct correlation to productivity, customer satisfaction, lost workdays, and turnover—key economic factors directly linked to state of mind.”<sup>7</sup> A less engaged workforce results in reduced profitability for companies. This study demonstrates the level of broken bonding that exists in our work environments. The results included the engagement levels shown in Figure 3.2.

This means that in the best-scoring country, 70 percent of employees do *not* feel emotionally attached! Rather than being the work that puts employees off, the lack of attachment tends to be driven by the relationships with colleagues and, particularly, immediate managers. Says Wood, “What we have found is that the relationship with the direct managers is very important. That is where emotional attachment either happens or doesn’t happen.” Sadly, the research showed that “the majority of people who are unhappy with their jobs do not do anything to change the situation,” according to Wood. People who feel powerless to change any situation in

FIGURE 3.2. INTERNATIONAL EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT LEVELS AT WORK



Source: Gallup Study, "Poll Reveals Germans Are Just Working to Live," 2004. Available at [www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,1564,1094681,00.html](http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,1564,1094681,00.html).

effect have become hostages. When we feel like hostages, we are more stressed and less positive and, therefore, we have less energy for what we are doing.

Bonding has the potential to produce tremendous energy. Mother Theresa could look at a flower, see God's presence, and be moved to tears. When she saw a child dying in the streets of Calcutta, she would be moved with deep compassion, taking the child to her orphanage knowing that he or she would die the next day. In her mind, no child should die alone. Most of us would burn out being around so much pain and suffering in children. However, Mother Theresa's work gave her great energy. She was able to achieve so much and give so much because of her ability to bond and rebond continuously.

The power of bonding should not be underestimated. Bonding can happen instantaneously or occur over time. It can include words or it can be nonverbal.

*One of the most profound examples of bonding without words is the story of a man who was on an airplane leaving Denver airport. The wings*

*were not de-iced correctly and, as a result, the plane crashed. During the forty-five seconds before the crash, the passenger never took his eyes off the flight attendant who was sitting at the front of the plane and looking into his eyes. After the crash, mud, snow, and rocks flew into the plane. The man suffered a punctured lung, a broken leg, and a concussion, but he was still able to pull one or two other people to safety before he drifted into a coma. A day or two later, when he awoke in the hospital, his first question was, "Where is the stewardess?" Told that she had died in the crash, he began to weep. What he said was that, next to his mother, he had never experienced having a person give him so much in such a short space of time. And he said, "You know, I felt no fear. I was prepared to die." Afterward, he suffered a deep grief reaction. For many years, he would take flowers to the stewardess's grave, explaining, "I never want her to be forgotten because she gave me so much in those few moments."*

We know that, for many people, when they are bonded, they feel no fear. In fact, fear can be a manifestation of broken bonding at that moment.

## SEPARATION AND GRIEF

Attachment and bonding always lead to separation. Separation is a transition or a change in attachment that can have a profound negative impact if not handled well. Separation can also be a positive experience at the right time and if dealt with in the right way. Separation opens the grieving process, which, in turn, opens the heart for new attachment. In some ways, separation is as natural as attachment. It can occur after one minute, one year, or even eighty years. Death itself—even if you believe in renewal after death—leads to a disruption of the physical level and the psychological level of bonding. When we go through separation, it leads us to the grieving process. Grieving is essential in all mammals in order for them to let go of an earlier bond and allow the heart to open and make a new attachment or, in some cases, to experience a renewal if it is to the same attachment. It is a continuous cycle.

*In 1981, I was asked to present a workshop for pediatricians in a hospital in South Germany. One of the doctors approached me afterward to seek advice on one of her patients. Nine-year-old Hannah was unable*

*to eat due to a large lump that had appeared in her throat. Doctors could find no medical reason for her condition. More than a month had passed since she had consumed any solid food.*

*The doctor wondered whether grief could be a factor. When I discussed the case with her, there were no obvious losses in Hannah's life. However, on going through the files, we found a note about her "pet pig." The doctor and I worked out a strategy together. She then spoke to the girl about her pet pig. Hannah's parents were farmers, and her father had given her one piglet, the runt, from a litter. She nurtured this animal and enabled it to survive and thrive. It was, in a sense, her "baby."*

*One day, she came home from school and discovered that her pig, "Squeaky," had been slaughtered. This was a profound shock for her. Furthermore, every day she had to pass the carcass hanging in the barn on her way to school. Five days later, her father tried to force her to eat the meat from Squeaky while her older brothers laughed and her mother sat passively. The next day, Hannah was hospitalized.*

*After the doctor discovered this trauma, the plan became to help Hannah grieve the loss of Squeaky. When the doctor first brought the subject up, Hannah turned away and refused to speak. With bonding and gentle persistence, the doctor continued to speak to Hannah, who responded with rage and anger, fists pounding her. The doctor kept the bond, and after some forty-five seconds, Hannah embraced the doctor and cried her heart out for nearly thirty minutes. Following this catharsis, she was able to eat some solid food for the first time in a month. The lump immediately reduced in size and vanished after two days. Her sobbing represented a major breakthrough, and, for the first time since her separation from the pig, she began the grieving process—her first step on the road to recovery. The support the doctor gave Hannah with the grieving process helped Hannah progress far more than medication did.*

When people cannot deal with separation and grieving, they are unable to reattach and rebond. This unresolved separation and grief is at the root of victimization and feeling like a hostage. Sometimes guilt is a part of the situation. As long as people have guilt, they keep the bond in some destructive way, thus blocking the process of moving on to a new attachment. Despair is another possible outcome: it is the ultimate detachment. Despair takes root when people will only be comforted by that which they have lost:

the woman who has lost a child, the man who has lost a job, someone whose home burns down. If such individuals can only be comforted by that which they have lost, they are doomed to despair. That is why “I cannot live without you or without this” is a powerful destructive statement. To avoid grief, some people go to the opposite extreme: they never attach or bond. Thus, there are two poles: people who are afraid to attach because they do not want to feel grief, and people who are grieving and are afraid of making a new attachment.

## THE EIGHT STAGES OF GRIEF

Much excellent work has been done on grieving by scholars such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Stephen Levine, and others.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, there are eight stages involved in the grieving process: denial; protest and anger; sadness, missing, or longing; fear or feeling of terror; mental and emotional acceptance; forming new attachments or making a renewal; forgiveness; and finally gratitude.

1. *Denial.* When people are in denial, they are experiencing grief and actually protecting themselves. There is a moment after certain losses in which denial is healthy, but it becomes destructive or a problem if it goes on for too long. Research into children sent to boarding schools at a young age shows that, for many of them, the pain of separating from their parents is great, and yet they feel unable to express it because they do not want their parents to feel bad. They thus suppress the emotion and “deny” their own feelings. By suppressing emotion they—and many people—“deny” their feelings and enter into a subconscious grief phase that results in them being unable to attach or make new bonds.

2. *Protest and anger.* After denial comes protest and anger. We see many acts of violence and aggression occurring as people act out their protests. Most people do not actually act out the violence, but they want to protest, and that is natural. People do not want to give up that which is comforting to them or to which they are biologically and psychologically anchored. It can feel like ripping your heart out when you face the loss of an attachment, whether it involves a person, pet, promotion, goal, or home.

*I knew a grandmother who stood in front of her house as it burned to the ground. Tears ran down her face, and she begged the firefighters to put out the fire. She cried out, "I can build another house but it's the pictures, the pictures." She was referring to photos of her three-year-old child who had died over forty years earlier. As the house burned and she faced the loss of the pictures, it reactivated the whole grief process of losing her son again.*

We can never be sure what people attach to as a source of comfort and bonding. I have grown to deeply respect why people form attachments to different things. What you find comforting, what I find comforting, those people or things become our anchors, our secure bases. Any one of us can lose our physical health, a person, a job, or a feeling of security when our house is robbed; if we lose too many attachments too fast, we may be unable to rebond and establish new ones.

*Ken was a team member working closely with a colleague. The colleague was in an automobile accident and died. The shock was so deep that Ken began underperforming to the point that his job was threatened. Not only did he lose a good friend who was a secure base, but he also developed anxiety for the future related to the fact that he could die suddenly and leave his children without a father as his friend had. This is similar to what happens with firefighters and police officers who can have grief reactions to the loss of lives they encounter in the line of duty.*

Protest is a natural and healthy part of expressing grief. Violence can emerge due to losses and can activate the grief. It is important that we are able to express our anger in a healthy way in order to ventilate it.

3. *Sadness, missing, or longing.* When people are truly grieving, the sadness comes from deep inside; they want to cry, to express their feelings with tears. It starts in the stomach and moves up, as a pain over the chest, then becomes a lump in the throat and pressure behind the eyes. The act of crying is essential in completing this process. One reason men die between seven and twelve years earlier than women do may be that many men are unable to cry, and to express their grief as part of the grieving process. As a

result, they detach and stay in a chronic state of loneliness, unable to form new bonds.

4. *Fear or feeling of terror.* When people feel fear it is a kind of contraction, and it means that they are retreating within themselves; they are facing the fact that they are separate and in danger. Attachment is not an escape from the fact that we are separate. However, although we are alone on this journey through life, we do not have to be lonely. Some people are hostages to loneliness because they fear grieving and rebonding. The fact that we are separate is brought to our attention every time we go through a grieving process. We actually see who we are at these times. Our identities actually build in the ability to handle a crisis, to handle separation, because the crisis brings us back to ourselves, the essence of who we are. Bonding itself does not build identity. In fact, if we use bonding as our primary form of identification, it becomes a form of codependency. When some people face a loss they feel a deep fear, which can be healed in many ways. When we are able to reach out, to take someone's hand, to speak about what we feel, we are able to use the bonding process to facilitate grief. We know that grieving cannot happen alone. It is a process that must occur with another person in a family, group, or tribe. One dramatic example of this phenomenon is war veterans who return from battle, often traumatized by the experience and suffering from posttraumatic stress disorders. The major problem for these veterans is the rebonding process. They must go through special grieving processes in order to be able to open their hearts again. Many veterans carry deep emotional scars because they never worked through their grief. In reality, unexpressed grief is likely to shorten your life.

5. *Mental and emotional acceptance.* This stage is the step of being able to accept the loss mentally and emotionally. This is important because it means that deep inside we have come to terms with the loss, accept it, and believe that we can continue to go on or even exist. To say we cannot live without somebody or something is an unhealthy and desperate statement, a kind of suicide. We must be willing to let go of everything—even our children, even those things we consider deeply important to us. That does not mean we want losses to happen, but if we can let go, go through the grieving process, and then rebond, we are more likely

to have fuller and even longer lives. In fact, we know that the same hormones that are involved in the longevity process are also connected to social bonding. George Burns, the famous comedian who died at one hundred years old and who always liked to bond with others, was deeply moved when his wife, Gracie, died. He visited her grave frequently and spoke to her every day. However, he did not stay detached, getting locked into despair or depression. He was able to maintain his connection with Gracie, but he also went through the grieving process, said goodbye, found new attachments, and eventually found the “joy of life” again.

6. *Forming new attachments or making a renewal.* When we can make new attachments, it brings comfort and anchoring and contributes to our physiological and psychological well-being. Many people remain stuck in the grief phase of the bonding cycle and cannot make new attachments after the loss of a job, or a divorce, or the change of a home. They want back that which they have lost. We know that second marriages have a higher divorce rate than first marriages. In part, it appears that people who marry on the rebound do not really marry the new person. They are marrying a substitute, and when there is a conflict, all the old grief is triggered and the grief process is activated. People who wait a year before they remarry have a far greater chance of not divorcing; in fact, only 35 percent get a divorce. In every new attachment, it is important to let go of the grief and accept the new person as he or she is rather than try to substitute for the loss.

*Perhaps one of the most moving stories I have witnessed involves a couple who were married for over fifty years. Though they celebrated their golden wedding anniversary, their marriage suddenly fell apart. She became sick and they started fighting. Fifty-three years into a marriage, they wanted a divorce. They actually moved into separate living spaces. The daughter dragged them to my office, saying, “Please help. It doesn’t make sense for people who have been married for this long to get a divorce.” Here’s the story: The couple had never really faced the fact that one day, the marriage would have to come to an end. They really thought they were going to live happily ever after. They got through both their twenty-fifth and fortieth wedding anniversaries. However the fiftieth anniversary brought home feelings of how long they had been together and thoughts that their time might be “running out,” and they started discussing who was going to die first.*

*They argued so much about who should die first that they actually made suicide pacts and came within seconds of carrying them out. One time they tried carbon monoxide, another time with a gun, and yet another time with medication. That is how much they could not stand the thought of saying goodbye to each other.*

*The wife became so upset in the process that she had to be put into a hospital for treatment. They had not told anyone about this situation, which they carried like a secret burden, until they shared it with me and finally got some relief. As they started grieving, I asked the wife, "How many years do you think you need to say goodbye to your husband?" Tearfully, she responded, "At least another fifty-three years." So I said, "You better get started."*

*They were then able to reconcile the fact that one day they would be separated and that they were not going to live forever. The couple had been locked into anticipatory grief. If we cannot accept the separation that will eventually happen, then every moment becomes an anticipated loss and a constant stress. What happened with this couple was that they were able to change their mind's eye and their whole frame of reference when they were able to grieve. Each additional minute of their marriage then became a gift rather than a loss. They were then able to experience the joy of bonding again.*

People who are afraid to die, to fail, or to go through a loss cannot really live. The moment we accept that we are going to die, then we can really live. The moment we can accept that, we can be separate, and then we can really attach because attachment becomes a true choice and we become grateful for every moment. The same process is true for our children. From the moment they are born, we have to watch them grow up and leave us. With each developmental stage, there is a grief reaction that some parents cannot handle. The child is not allowed to grow up individual and separate. As a result, the children leave home unable to handle the separation and grief and, often, there will be major conflicts and fights because one or both parents cannot really say goodbye to this stage of life. Therefore, the child has to fight or use aggression or anger as a way to become separate. Once we are able to say goodbye, form a new attachment, renew, and find a new source of comfort, then we are ready for the next stage, which is forgiveness.

7. *Forgiveness*. This stage is one of the deepest healing experiences. Forgiveness literally means being able to give again—in other words, it means that we put out our energy to be able to “give for” others. People who are not able to forgive tend to become victims or persecutors. They are unhappy and they suffer, and so they become hostages or take others hostage. The victim and the victim-turned-persecutor tend not to be able to experience real joy, real love, or real gratitude.

8. *Gratitude*. The final stage of grieving is gratitude, which is the signal that we really have completed the bonding cycle. Gratitude is what we experience when we are in a fully bonded state, to people, to pets, to places, to goals, to objects, to life itself. Some people have so many losses that they may actually break the bond to life and give up. Such individuals are either actively suicidal or—due to their despair, the depression, lack of bonding, or loneliness—they are moved into feelings of being alone and suffer physiological and psychological consequences. Gratitude comes from the feeling of connectivity that we get from bonding. If we cannot bond, we cannot be connected and then we cannot experience the exchange of energy. The root of the word *happiness* is the word *happens*. Happiness can be found in things that happen. Happiness is not an elusive goal chased externally; rather, it is found in the part of the world that is happening now. Out of a sense of what happens—even if it is painful—there comes a “goodness.” Moreover, in the goodness there is gratitude—a feeling of “thank you.” Out of the sense of “thank you” comes the sense that we are not the center of the universe. There is something beyond us. We are not the cause. Victims, however, take themselves hostage because they block the process of gratitude. Victims feel sorry for themselves; they are passive and feel “helpless” to participate in getting what they want.

Loss of a job has caused a number of otherwise “normal” citizens to return to the workplace with a weapon and shoot innocent colleagues. These people exhibit an inability to get on with their lives; they are stuck in separation or grief. Yet loss and grief can be felt on a smaller scale, as, for example, when someone finds himself or herself in a reduced office space or loses special parking privileges or is angry with a neighbor who cut down a much loved

tree. The inability to cope with these changes can lead people to feel resentful and then to act in ways that damage themselves personally and professionally.

*After many years with the company, Mary had been hoping for a promotion. However, an outsider with general management skills but no specific expertise in her area was brought in, and she was demoted. Mary had a choice: to accept the situation but be bitter about what had happened, or to let go, move on, and find another job. Mary wisely chose to move on, landing a fabulous job at a more senior level and gaining the respect of her old colleagues at the same time.*

It is often the fear and pain of loss that stops people from acting in a rational and healthy way. Research studies have shown that most people are motivated by the avoidance of pain, fear, and loss. However, by avoiding pain, people stop themselves from being able to go through the grief process and move on. This can even happen in positive situations, as when people experience a sense of loss caused by the end of a project. It is important that they recognize this, celebrate the project, acknowledge its end, and go through a debriefing process in helping employees move on.

*For six months, four colleagues had been working together on a strategic project for the company. They were all different personalities but they were united behind a single goal—to lead the project to create a new slogan for their company.*

*During the process, they had their differences and did not always agree. However, as they deeply shared a common goal, they truly bonded as a team. When the project was successfully completed, the team was disbanded, and they each returned to their normal roles. However, for several weeks, they experienced a period of “grief” as they no longer needed to talk together on a regular basis. They kept in touch by e-mail, and whenever one was visiting the offices of another, both experienced an immediate sense of connection. This contact gradually declined over time, although the sense of bonding remained. This was an effective and powerful exercise both for the company (which got the best out of a high-performing team) and for the individuals (who were able to learn and develop through the experience as well as create lasting bonds with each other).*

As already mentioned, all bonds will create a grief reaction when they end. Unfortunately, the grief reaction can stimulate the most violent force in the human being. If an individual cannot cope with the loss from a forced separation, then he or she may turn to violence or aggression as a coping mechanism to deal with the pain. There are numerous examples of people becoming violent after learning, for example, that their spouse wants a divorce or they have lost a job, or when they are facing arrest by the police, loss of custody of children, or being expelled from home.

Grieving is a necessary part of healthy development. The loss and pain we work through become part of our identities, and this is why being able to deal with separations in our lives is vital for our own growth. There is a kind of wound that is created during the grieving process—"the dark moments of the soul." Often, those individuals who make the deepest attachments to people or goals, who are the most successful or happy, are those who have known deep moments of struggle. When we bond, we merge our identities somewhat with the person or thing we are bonded to. During a separation, we again feel our own identities more strongly.

## THE SEVEN MANIFESTATIONS OF BROKEN BONDING

Bonding is often broken, and, as a result, many people become hostages to others or to themselves. They avoid or they refuse bonding, or they stay stuck in separation, or they stay blocked in the grieving process. Any break in the bonding cycle can lead to problems. The seven manifestations of broken bonding are psychosomatic illness, violence and aggression, addiction, depression, burnout, stress reaction, and organizational conflict.

1. *Psychosomatic illness.* Researchers are discovering that premature death has roots in broken bonding. In 1977, James Lynch published a book called *The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness* describing that connection.<sup>9</sup> Since the 1977 book was released, literally thousands more research articles have been published demonstrating a strong link between our health and our social bonding systems.

That is why, for example, when people live with someone for several decades and then lose that companion, a high percentage of the survivors are dead within two months—some within hours or days after the loss. These people were in a deep state of grief and, even though their deaths may be attributed to a heart attack or some other cause, it is in fact a grief reaction to the disrupted bond. One study looked at people who have heart attacks and then go home and live alone. Eighty percent die within six months, while only 25 percent of those who live with someone else die.<sup>10</sup> Married people also live longer. If a person goes through open-heart surgery and has a pet at home, his or her chance of survival increases by 75 percent. Studies repeatedly show how important bonding is to our health.

Men are at greater risk than women. On average, men die seven to twelve years earlier than women, and the only variable that holds up in research is the social network. Men do not bond as deeply as women do, nor do they grieve as well. If you have a daughter, you live longer. If you have a lifelong friend, you live longer. In a ten-year study of death rates, there was a clear connection between the health of people's social networks and their physical health. Our relationships form one of the strongest buffers we have against stress and its negative impacts.

2. *Violence and aggression.* Violence begins when bonding ends. One of the most overlooked factors behind the violence and aggression we are experiencing every day, particularly in the Western world, is the number of people who are going through losses, have broken bonds, or remain unattached.

The rise in youth gang violence can be attributed to children who grow into adolescence in a high state of exclusion and loneliness and then turn to the gang as their source of social bonding. They will then commit any act of violence to remain a member of that gang, to continue to belong. This is driven by the need for attachment.

Violence, then, is a form of failed grieving or grief avoidance. It can be connected to present losses, to those from the past, or even to those of past generations that are carried into the present by way of resentment, a sense of injustice, or lack of forgiveness. Violence-prone people live on the edge of chronic loneliness or masked depression, lacking the power to get what they want in a

constructive way. In the end, violence becomes an act of power to deal with whatever emotional volcano is inside. It gives temporary relief to the feeling of victimization and powerlessness. However, violence is not a solution. Healthy grieving has always been a social process occurring in a tribe, clan, or group in which other protecting, dependable persons help the individual who suffered the loss to fully rebound to life, whatever the loss or injustice might have been. Western culture, in many ways, has a grief aversion—we feel that after a loss, we should quickly move on. The cycle of bonding includes grieving. Those who are hostages to violence and aggression must learn to grieve and learn to bond, which includes feeling empathy and compassion.

3. *Addiction.* Arieti saw addiction as “a pathological attachment to a mood altering drug, person or experience.”<sup>11</sup> A person who cannot effectively bond may substitute alcohol, food, drugs, gambling, sex, work, or shopping for the comfort that normally comes from interacting with people. At the root of addiction is the fact that other people are seen as a source of pain and frustration. Therefore, the desire to avoid pain in the mind’s eye causes the person to seek comfort in something else. Ultimately, addictive behavior leads to a detachment from others that can inhibit effective bonding in relationships.

A study asked young adults, “When you are under stress or you need to change your mood, what do you do?” “Listen to music” was number one on the list of responses. It was not until number eight that “people” were mentioned. The inability to turn to people as a source of comfort is indicative of attachment problems and may lead to addiction problems. The absence of bonding is an increasing problem in today’s culture. There was a time when families ate together, sat and talked together around the fireplace, and did other kinds of bonding activities together. In today’s world, we see more and more children attaching to television or computers or being unattached completely, unable to turn to other people as a source of comfort. An addictive personality will often say “people are a pain” and then turn to something other than people as a substitute for human bonding. Alcoholics Anonymous remains one of the most effective systems for treating addiction of all kinds because it is fundamentally a grieving and rebonding process. When an addictive behavior is resolved, there is always one major change; the person begins to turn to other people as a source of

comfort. Addiction is clearly a form of being a hostage. In the end, the resolution involves finding our own power.

4. *Depression.* Depression can be described as a biological and psychological mechanism in all mammals that often results when there is a disruption in attachment systems, past, present, or anticipated. Depression has physiological, metabolic, and genetic components that must be recognized. The social and psychological components of depression have to do with loss, unresolved grief, and not getting enough positive bonding from their present attachment system. It can be because they lost something in the past or because they are anticipating the loss of something in the future. The fact that there are many chemical changes in depression is connected to the fact that when we come out of the social bond, or we remain outside of a social bond, our physiology is reacting strongly to those changes.

Depression at its worst becomes despair. Despair says, "I will only be comforted by that which I have lost, and since that which I have lost will never come back, I am doomed never to be totally comforted again." So when people lose something important to them—a house, a job, a child, a pet, money—this loss can actually trigger a state of despair in which they will say, "I will never bond again, I will never be comforted again." This reaction is another example of how the mind's eye searches for the negative. Separation or disruption in the bonding cycle—past, present, and anticipated—creates a reaction in all mammals. However, treating the symptoms does not necessarily treat the cause. Antidepressants may stop people from feeling depressed, but they may still be dying of loneliness. The next step is to help them find the joy of life again. We must remember that depression can be a signal that something is not working correctly in the attachment process. Broken bonding can easily take people hostage in the form of depression.

5. *Burnout.* Next to food, oxygen, and water, bonding is our greatest source of energy. If the inability to bond persists, people can burn out. Burnout can be defined as a kind of exhaustion that leads to cynicism and emotional detachment. People who cannot recharge when they sleep remain physically and emotionally exhausted and may be suffering from burnout. They feel negative about everything around them, which in turn stops them from bonding. They stay emotionally detached and can prove to be major energy drainers. Everything they do seems pointless or useless, and they then experience all the people around them

negatively. They also feel badly about themselves, and this leads to an inability to feel positive emotion.

People who are burned out take others as hostages through their negativity. For example, a doctor or nurse who can no longer feel empathy toward a sick patient eventually starts to dislike sick patients. The same is true for a teacher who begins to believe every student is trying to take advantage of him, the police officer who believes everyone is a thief, or a childcare worker who actually becomes hostile and aggressive toward the children in her care. Anyone who is dealing with people in an environment of conflict can suffer from burnout.

6. *Stress reaction.* Four stressors are deeply connected to broken bonding. The first is *loss*. Sometimes the losses are obvious—someone dies, something precious is lost, or there is a divorce. While separation puts a physical and emotional strain on us, bonding protects and immunizes us against the negative impacts of stress. Stress has to do with demands on us from either external or internal sources. The key factor is not the “stressor” but the individual reaction to the stressor. Someone can go through a major loss and have a limited stress reaction. Another person can go through a small loss and have a major stress reaction. How the mind’s eye responds to a loss determines how much stress people feel and whether or not they become hostage to it.

Second, in addition to loss, another powerful stressor has to do with *conflict and negative relationships*. If we are around people with whom we have an ongoing conflict, there will be extensive and destructive stress. This is because we are hostage to those people and stay in a negative state. Through positive bonding, our relationships can improve with those around us—partners, family members, friends, colleagues—and thereby reduce the stress we are placing on ourselves.

A third major stressor is *loss of direction and purpose in life*. If you do not have a purpose or goal in life and feel directionless, this can lead to feeling valueless and powerless, which will put you in a state of mind in which you can easily be taken hostage. The absence of direction and purpose ultimately leads to broken bonding.

The fourth major stressor is *loneliness*. According to author and psychologist James Lynch, loneliness is now one of the major predictors of who will suffer from major stress-related diseases.<sup>12</sup> We

can get tremendous power over our stress reactions by understanding where we are suffering from broken bonding and are failing to maintain or renew bonds. When we go through change, even a positive change, it can put great demands on the system and bring about a need for rebonding that activates the grief process.

7. *Organizational conflict.* The difference between low and high rates of organizational conflict can be attributed to the level of bonding that exists—with managers, team members, or the organization as a whole. A healthy measure of conflict is conducive to enhanced creativity as long as the bonds remain strong or easily renewed. Can you think of a time when you were on a high-performing team or worked with a high-performing leader? Did you feel high levels of bonding? High-performing organizations and teams have high-performing leaders who create strong emotional bonds. When organizations have strong bonding, as outlined in the following list, there is the possibility of achieving exceptional results.

#### *Ingredients for Effective Organizational Bonding*

- Members who want to belong
- Emotional commitment to goals
- Dialogue with mutual respect
- Creative leadership
- Maximum self-regulation

Broken bonding disrupts organizational effectiveness in five ways:

1. A high-performing team has *members who want to belong* and are strongly bonded together. If there is fear, threat, or negativity in the team, members will struggle to feel bonded, thus generating conflict or causing avoidance of conflict.
2. A high-performing team has *emotional commitment to goals* as well as commitment to each other. If each team member is not fully bonded to the goal, the team will not achieve a high result. Failure to commit to goals can occur when goals are not clear or the person is not engaged with the goals.
3. High-performing team members use *dialogue driven by mutual respect*. This is the ability to have difficult conversations with thoughtfulness and consideration. When people can speak the

truth and keep the bond, then team members can handle the “pain” of hearing an unwelcome message because of the respect. The bonding remains intact or is quickly renewed if broken.

4. High-performing teams have *creative leadership*. When leaders only micromanage or control processes, then the workforce will not be inspired and the team will not perform at its best. Creative leadership is all about how people are brought together to create the synergy, the desire to bring out their best and achieve the goals of the team.
5. High-performing team members are given opportunities for *maximum self-regulation*. People need to and want to feel their own personal power and feel that what they are doing is worthwhile. They need to have choice in what they are doing and feel that what they are doing is making a significant contribution. When choice is taken away, that automatically brings the possibility of people feeling like hostages.

Bonding that is broken will produce organizational conflicts and ineffectiveness. Why does this have such an impact? Because, ultimately, bonding is the best vehicle leading to customer loyalty and success.

*Rushing up to the airport counter, a woman anxiously tells the check-in clerk that she has to get on the next plane home because her son has been hospitalized and may be dying. The clerk looks at her ticket and says it is impossible to change, as she had purchased a prepaid apex ticket that is not exchangeable. She repeats her demand to be let on the plane, and the clerk repeats his refusal and rudely asks her to step out of the way so he can serve other passengers. She then promptly grabs an umbrella and strikes the clerk on the side of the head.*

How could this situation have been avoided? If the detached check-in clerk had felt part of a team whose mission was to serve its customers as best it could, he would have responded to the woman with bonding. First, he could have made the simple step of empathizing with her problem. “Madame, I am really sorry to hear your son is in the hospital and I hope he’ll be okay. You have a prepaid ticket that I am not authorized to change, but let me get you to a supervisor who can help you while I get other passengers on

board. I know we can solve this problem.” The woman would then hug him and forever be loyal to the airline.

Those people who have a good balance between attachment to people (ability to bond) and attachment to goals (drive to succeed) will have higher self-esteem and therefore be greater contributors to the success of a team, group, family, or organization. It is a combination of the attachment to both people (relationship-driven) and goals (task- and result-driven) that makes a well-balanced manager. Many business leaders have high attachment to goals but low and weak attachments to people. Those people with high bonding and higher self-esteem are also better equipped to manage and cope with change. Andreas’s story, earlier in the chapter, demonstrates this.

## BONDING AND CHANGE

With the amount of change taking place in the world today, it is hardly surprising that people are increasingly stressed and finding themselves in conflict. The initial reaction to change by the vast majority of the population is fear. Change brings with it uncertainty and doubt, leading to many questions—What will happen to me? What will happen to my friends or colleagues? When will I know the effects of the change for sure?

William Bridges created a model of personal transition that has three sections: during a change, there is an ending that will involve a sense of loss and grieving, a goodbye, then there is a period when people feel they are in a neutral zone or wilderness, and finally, they look to reaching the new beginning or new possibility.<sup>13</sup>

This change model reinforces the power of the bonding cycle—people have to learn to cope with separation and grieving before they can move to a new attachment and bond. One thing is clear: just as change is constant, so we are spiraling through different phases of the cycle on different levels and with different relationships.

I work with many organizations undergoing change, and the managers driving the change process share a common characteristic; they generally feel guilt and stress about what is happening and how it will affect their colleagues. These feelings lead to “the ostrich effect,” when the change is announced and then management “puts their heads in the sand” hoping that everything

will be fine. They hardly communicate with staff and expect everyone to “get on with it.” Taking this approach creates bitterness and negativity among the staff, who feel that management “does not care” about their people.

Once managers understand the change process and take time to reflect on its impact, they are in a better position to empathize with the employees in relation to how the impact will affect them. Helping themselves and their employees to understand the bonding cycle assists both those people leaving the organization and those who remain with the organization. During mergers and acquisitions, I often hear employees complain that they have not been told what is happening. People can usually deal with negative news; what they cannot deal with is an extended period of “not knowing.” It is the uncertainty that creates such stress within people. If they do not know what the change means to them personally, they are unable to progress through the stages of the bonding cycle, find resolution, and seek new attachments.

## SUMMARY

The bonding cycle is a powerful tool to help us understand motivation in ourselves and others. It helps explain why we do what we do when we are in the different stages of the cycle. When we become stuck in any stage we can easily be taken hostage, and this can lead to destructive behavior. By being aware of the bonding cycle, and the effects on individuals when they are stuck in one of the various stages, we can avoid being taken hostage. Awareness of the cycle can help team members move on and lead healthier, happier, and more productive lives.

Attachment and bonding are essential emotional components of a happy and productive personal and professional life. Creating emotional bonds with people is essential to physical and psychological well-being. Furthermore, successful leadership is based on the ability of the leader to create bonds throughout the organization. We also have to accept that all bonds come to an end and that taking into account the ensuing grief reactions in ourselves or others is essential. Working through the pain of loss contributes to building our identity and fosters the possibility of further development. Failure to grieve effectively can lead to detachment, the

consequences of which we can observe in psychosomatic symptoms, violence, and burnout, and the absence of emotional engagement. For leaders to reach levels of individual, team, and organizational excellence, it is necessary to use the emotional skills in the bonding cycle. Organizations can use the bonding cycle to successfully navigate through change initiatives, both small and large transitions.

Bonding enables us to engage with the people and the world around us. Bonding is also a powerful process that lays the foundation for a successful outcome to any dispute or confrontation.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- How easily do I create bonds appropriate to the person and situation?
- How do I handle separation, disappointment, rejection, and failure?
- Am I aware of grief? Can I express it? Do I make an appropriate recovery from loss depending on the type of loss?
- How easily do I rebond after a loss?

### **Key Points to Remember**

1. Bonding is a primary need just like air, food, and water. It is the foundation of enduring success for people and organizations. The cycle of bonding (attachment, bonding, separation, grieving) is a natural part of life that we all repeatedly go through.
2. When people become stuck in separation and grief, they can become hostages to themselves and to others. Saying goodbye is a necessary path to making new bonds and finding the joy of life again.
3. It is crucial that we learn to form, maintain, and renew bonds even in the face of profound differences or serious conflict. When appropriate, we must be capable of breaking an existing bond and finding a new one.
4. Successful leaders must help themselves as well as others go through the bonding cycle to inspire and motivate.

Excerpt from Professor George Kohlrieser's book, *Hostage at the Table: How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance*, (Jossey-Bass, Warren Bennis Series, 2006).

Recipient of the "Best Business Book Award 2007" from DCF (French Association of Business Leaders) and "Best Management Book 2008" in Germany by Managementbuch.de.

[www.hostageatthetable.com](http://www.hostageatthetable.com)

Copyright 2006 by George Kohlrieser. All rights reserved.