

***Hostage at the Table : How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict,  
Influence Others, and Raise Performance.***

**By George Kohlrieser  
Jossey-Bass, 2006, 272 pages.**

What a gem of a book! In *Hostage at the Table*, George Kohlrieser creatively uses his background as a hostage negotiator to show how we can apply conflict management techniques in our everyday professional and personal lives and thereby keep ourselves from becoming metaphorical hostages.

This is an innovative organizational book because Kohlrieser takes what would ordinarily be viewed as clinical or developmental concepts (e.g., the bonding cycle, secure base, emotional intelligence, self-esteem, the stages of grief, etc.) and shows how important they can be in organizational settings. He writes, "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" (p. xvii). The chapters include "The Art of Conflict Management," "Effective Dialogue," and "The Power of Negotiation," among others.

Kohlrieser writes in an easy-to-read style with many illuminating vignettes to emphasize his points. The book structured, with clear headings throughout. I found the "Summary and Key Points to Remember" at the end of each chapter particularly helpful. There is a useful index and the references, including research to back up claims made by the author, are also adequate. There are also some interesting diagrams; I particularly appreciated the one on "Authentically Engaged Transactions" (p. 127), which shows authentic dialogue as involving the whole self (i.e., the body, emotions, intellect, and spirit). Kohlrieser succeeds in his wish to invite his reader into a dialogue with both themselves and with him. Reading his book is an emotional, as well as an intellectual, experience. I kept thinking, "There's a gem on every page."

The subtitle of this book indicates that it was written primarily for business/organizational leaders. It is an excellent example of its genre (i.e., motivational organizational books), and I believe it will be an important addition to the business and organizational field. However, Kohlrieser's clinical experience is also clearly apparent, which brings depth and breadth to his subject matter and makes it of potential benefit to a much wider audience (e.g., counselors, psychotherapists, teachers, social workers, clients, and, in fact, people from all walks of life). Kohlrieser's training in transactional analysis is also evident throughout, which makes this book of particular interest to transactional analysts.

In terms of weaknesses, I found *Hostage at the Table* repetitive in places. I think this was due to the interrelationship of topics and to the fact that as a clinician I was already familiar with much of the subject matter. In addition, learning how to manage conflict,

our emotions, attachment and bonding, separation and grieving, and negotiation and dialogue is not easy and can take years of dedicated personal growth. I finished the book wanting more about how to make the changes Kohlrieser suggests. A practical manual or workbook could provide a useful guide to go with this book.

Furthermore, Cornell (2006) has criticized Kohlrieser's use of the concept of secure bases (i.e., people, goals, or things to which we bond in a special way). Cornell writes: "It can be quite seductive and gratifying to the mental health professional to be seen as the good and understanding parent, the provider of the "secure base" (Bowlby, 1979; Kohlrieser, 2006). . . . I think the ideal of a secure base needs to be changed to that of a "vital base," within which the therapist offers a challenging, experimental, often conflicted and rather uncomfortable relationship through which both people must shift their familiar frames of reference."

Cornell makes an important clinical point. However, Kohlrieser's stake on the idea of a secure base may, in fact, not be that different from Cornell's view of the vital base. For example, Kohlrieser stresses the importance of secure bases as major sources of empowerment: The purpose of a secure base is to create a sense of security and protection so that the mind's eye can be focused on possibility, exploration, creativity, and doing the things that give pleasure or satisfaction. Without secure bases, we become prone to anxiety or fear, thus limiting our potential, hindering success, and making us liable to become a hostage. (p. 70) He goes on to write that relationships with secure bases impact on both parties, including "the complexity of give and take, compromise, and the subtle nature of mutuality" (p. 76).

Kohlrieser's emphasis on the importance of secure bases is particularly pertinent given the current trend of coaching and mentoring within organizational settings. I personally found the chapter on "The Strength of a Secure Base" moving and affirming of my own choices of secure bases and how important they are and have been on my own growthful journey.

There are a number of aspects of this book that I particularly appreciate, as they affirm my work as a psychotherapist and my personal beliefs. For example, Kohlrieser's hopefulness: We can be taken hostage by the fight-or-flight mechanism in the reptilian brain or by the emotions in the limbic system. When taken hostage in this way, we succumb to what Daniel Goleman calls an "amygdala hijack." . . . This occurs when someone overreacts in an impulsive, instinctive way, producing a negative outcome. The neocortex can override the emotions from the other two brains and make it possible for us to choose whether or not we become hostage to automatic emotional reactions. (pp. 5-6)

I also liked his concept of the "mind's eye": All high performers have a secret—they use their mind's eye to focus on the benefits and not the pain. . . . The mind's eye is both a system of selective attention and a system of interpretation and is one of the most powerful mechanisms in our brain. It forms the way we view a particular situation and determines how we will act or react. (p. 21)

And I appreciated how he links the concept of the mind's eye with choice: Using the mind's eye, we can make the choice to focus on the positive or negative aspects of any event. In that sense, being negative is a choice, being positive is a choice, and being happy is a choice. (p. 35)

Kohlrieser's emphasis on the importance of bonding and the bonding cycle are also useful: Bonding is a primary need just like air, food and water. . . . The cycle of bonding (attachment, bonding, separation, grieving) is a natural part of life that we all repeatedly go through. (p. 65) The antidote to powerlessness is emotional bonding. By connecting to people or goals, we can create bonds that enable us to feel empowered. (p. 17)

He also comments on the importance of grieving: 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. (p. 42)

I enjoyed Kohlrieser's metaphor of "putting the fish on the table" (p. 108), which means tackling problems and confronting the people involved in a direct, engaging, and respectful way in order to reach resolution. He writes : If you leave a fish under the table, it starts to rot and smell. Unfortunately, many people leave a lot of fish—conflicts and issues—under their table. . . . What every person needs to do is reach under the table, grab the fish, put it on the table, and go through the mess of cleaning the fish (the conflict) to have a great fish dinner (the solution) at the end of the day. (pp. 108-109)

I am still smiling at his note of caution: "To those people who tend to be adversarial: 'Put the fish on the table' is not permission to slap the person in the face with the fish!" (p. 110)

There is a fascinating section in the book on "The Impact of Dialogue on Health" (p. 142) and "the person effect" (p. 143), which I intuitively knew but had never seen written about in this way. For example: Lynch made the . . . discovery that blood pressure and heart rate go up when we speak and go down when we listen. . . . Lynch developed a highly effective program to treat hypertension by helping the affected person change how he or she spoke and listened. (p. 144)

By asking people to talk about traumatizing events in their lives, he [Pennebaker] has shown that people who are high "disclosers" show a pattern in which many stress hormones are lowered after the person has disclosed a painful event. However, it should be noted that the person effect demands that the person being confided in be a positive secure base. (pp. 145-146)

In conclusion, I can highly recommend this book. It is a hopeful and motivational book, full of what look like simple psychological truths and common sense and that disguise Kohlrieser's hard-won wisdom.

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TAJ, 37 (2007), p. 82-85

#### REFERENCE

Cornell, W. F. (2006, 27 July). *The inevitability of uncertainty, the necessity of doubt, and the development of trust*. Keynote speech presented at World TA Conference, Istanbul, Turkey.