

BOOK SUMMARY

Never Split the Difference

by Chris Voss

A former FBI hostage negotiator on why empathy, not logic, wins negotiations — from salaries to car deals.

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Key ideas

1. **Tactical empathy.** Understanding the other side's feelings gives you influence — agreement is not required.
2. **Mirroring.** Repeat the last few words someone said. It builds rapport and gets them to keep talking.
3. **Label emotions.** “It seems like...” defuses negative feelings and reinforces positive ones.
4. **Calibrated questions.** Ask “how” and “what” questions so the other side solves your problem for you.
5. **Don't split the difference.** Meeting in the middle often leaves both sides unhappy. Aim for the best deal, not a compromise.



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The New Rules

Chris Voss opens the book at Harvard Law School, where he was ambushed into a role-play hostage negotiation by two of the field's top academics. Robert Mnookin, director of the Harvard Negotiation Research Project, played a kidnapper demanding one million dollars for the life of Voss's son. Gabriella Blum, who had spent eight years negotiating for the Israeli National Security Council and the Israel Defense Forces, joined in. Voss beat them both with a single tool: the calibrated question, an open-ended query with no fixed answer, such as "How am I supposed to do that?" The question bought time, gave his counterpart the feeling of control and left the kidnapper solving Voss's problem instead of making demands. Blum finally told Mnookin, "Don't let him do that to you," and Mnookin conceded that "the FBI might have something to teach us."

Voss later enrolled in Harvard's Winter Negotiation Course in 2006 as the only outsider among 144 students from Harvard, MIT and Tufts. In mock negotiations he dominated his partners, including one student he calls Andy, from whom he extracted "literally every dime he had," even a reserve budget Andy was told to protect. When his instructor Sheila Heen asked how he did it, Voss said he simply asked the same three or four open-ended questions over and over until his counterparts got worn out and gave him everything he wanted. His core argument follows from this: negotiation is an emotional, psychological and irrational activity, not a rational or mathematical one. Harvard's framework leans on logic and acronyms like BATNA and ZOPA. The FBI's methods were built in the field, where failure meant death, and they start from the fact that people are driven by fears, needs and desires they often cannot see themselves.

The chapter traces how American hostage negotiation grew out of disaster. Before the Nixon era the standard response was to send in troops. The 1971 Attica prison riot, the 1972 Munich Olympics and the 1971 George Giffe Jr. hijacking in Jacksonville, where FBI impatience pushed Giffe to kill his estranged wife and the pilot, changed that. The lawsuit *Downs v. United States* (1975) established that a reasonable attempt at negotiation must come before a tactical intervention. Meanwhile two intellectual traditions developed. *Getting to Yes* by Fisher and Ury (1981) systematized rational problem solving. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky proved people are irrational, identifying more than 150 cognitive biases. Kahneman's System 1, fast and emotional, actually guides System 2, slow and logical, so shaping someone's emotional reaction shapes the conclusions they reach.

After Ruby Ridge and Waco, the FBI created its Critical Incident Response Group in 1994. When veteran negotiators Fred Lanceley and Gary Noesner asked 35 experienced officers how many had faced classic bargaining situations, not one hand went up. When asked how many had dealt with people in emotional crisis with no clear demands, every hand rose. The FBI turned to techniques from counseling, built on the idea that people want to be understood and that listening is the cheapest yet most effective concession. Voss calls the result Tactical Empathy: listening as a martial art that combines emotional intelligence with assertive influence.

Voss defines negotiation as “communication with results” and argues that life itself is negotiation, from million-dollar contracts to getting a child to bed at 9 p.m. A hostage negotiator cannot split the difference by accepting two of four hostages. He must get everything he asks for without giving anything of substance back, and still leave the other side feeling good about the relationship. He then maps the book like a house built from the foundation up, one technique per chapter, ending with Black Swans, the hidden pieces of information that change everything and the concept behind his company, The Black Swan Group. He describes himself as a regular, hardworking guy who learned these skills over thirty years, and he presents negotiation as the heart of collaboration.

Be a Mirror

Voss's first real hostage case was a September 30, 1993 robbery at a Chase Manhattan Bank in Brooklyn, New York's first standoff of its kind in nearly twenty years. Two masked robbers took hostages and pistol-whipped a guard and a teller. The ringleader ran his own counterintelligence operation: he disguised his voice, refused to give his name, claimed co-conspirators from several countries and kept saying decisions belonged to "the other guys." Voss later learned that heavy use of third-person pronouns is revealing, because the less important someone makes himself sound, the more important he probably is. In fact there were only two robbers inside, and the second one had been tricked into thinking they were only robbing an ATM.

From the case Voss draws a key principle. Good negotiators are ready for surprises, while great negotiators use their skills to reveal the surprises they are sure exist. That means treating assumptions as hypotheses to test, not positions to defend. It also means real listening, which is hard. The FBI puts three to five people on a single call because extra ears catch extra details, and George A. Miller's research suggests the conscious mind can hold only about seven pieces of information at once. Most negotiations feel like four people talking when only two are present, since each side is busy rehearsing its own arguments. The fix is to make the other person and what they say your only focus. Voss also separates wants, which are easy to talk about, from needs, the bare minimum for a deal, which people rarely state. Letting someone talk freely about wants eventually reveals needs.

Slowing down is the next lesson. Rushing makes people feel unheard, and time is one of a negotiator's best tools, since "if someone is talking, they're not shooting." While negotiators kept the robber busy talking about food, investigators ran car registrations and identified him as Chris Watts. Voss also explains the power of voice. The late-night FM DJ voice is deep, soft, slow and reassuring, with a downward inflection that signals control. The positive, playful voice, delivered with an audible smile, should be the default. The direct, assertive voice should be used rarely because it triggers pushback. An instructor's girlfriend in Istanbul's spice markets got better deals than he did by treating haggling as a fun game.

Mirroring means repeating the last three words, or the critical one to three words, of what someone just said. Because people fear what is different and are drawn to what is similar, mirrors build rapport and prompt the other person to keep talking. Psychologist Richard Wiseman found that waiters who simply repeated orders back earned 70 percent higher tips

than waiters who used positive phrases. When Watts said police had “chased my driver away,” Voss mirrored, “We chased your driver away?” and Watts revealed an accomplice the FBI had not known about, leading to the getaway driver’s capture. Voss also admits a blunder: asking “Are you Chris Watts?” gave Watts an easy denial. A mirror only works if you let it sit in silence.

Once Voss slowed down and mirrored properly, Watts went quiet and his accomplice, Bobby Goodwin, came on the line. Using the calm DJ voice, Voss had Bobby saying “I trust you” within ninety seconds and guided him out, though the team nearly failed because it forgot the bank door had been barricaded. Watts later surrendered and nobody was hurt. The chapter ends with a five-step method for confronting forceful people without confrontation: use the DJ voice, start with “I’m sorry,” mirror, stay silent for at least four seconds, and repeat. One student used “I’m sorry, two copies?” and a few more mirrors to talk an impulsive boss out of a week of pointless printing. Voss holds up Oprah Winfrey as a model of these skills.

Don't Feel Their Pain, Label It

In 1998, as head of the New York FBI Crisis Negotiation Team, Voss stood outside a Harlem apartment on the twenty-seventh floor where at least three armed fugitives were hiding. There was no phone, so he spoke through the door for six hours in his DJ voice, saying things like “It looks like you don’t want to come out” and “It looks like you don’t want to go back to jail.” After six hours of silence all three came out. They told him, “You calmed us down. We finally believed you wouldn’t go away.” The lesson is that emotions are not obstacles to negotiation. They are the means. Voss rejects the academic advice to separate the people from the problem and keep a poker face.

Tactical empathy is understanding another person’s feelings and mindset in the moment, and what lies behind them, so you can increase your influence afterward. It is different from sympathy, which means agreeing or offering comfort. Research backs the approach. A Princeton fMRI study found that the brains of good communicators align, and UCLA’s Matthew Lieberman showed that naming an emotion shifts brain activity away from the fear-generating amygdala toward areas of rational thought. Labeling, then, is validating someone’s emotion by saying it out loud. To label, watch their words, tone and body language, then phrase the label as “It seems like...,” “It sounds like...” or “It looks like...” rather than starting with “I.” After a label, stay silent and let it work.

Voss distinguishes the presenting behavior on the surface from the underlying emotion. A grumpy grandfather at a holiday dinner may really be lonely. Label the underlying feeling: labeling negatives defuses them, and labeling positives reinforces them. When Voss angered the FBI’s top official in Canada by arriving without clearance, he opened with a joking confession and got the clearance. A student named TJ, working for the Washington Redskins, rewrote an aggressive collections script to acknowledge fans’ hardship and set up payment plans with all forty delinquent ticket holders without discounts. A Girl Scouts fund-raiser labeled a donor’s hesitation and passion, and the donor wrote a check without even choosing a project, saying, “You understand me.”

The accusation audit takes labeling further. You list every terrible thing the other side could say about you and say it first. Voss’s student Anna needed to cut a subcontractor’s pay from 5.5 people to three while improving a broken relationship. She and her partner Mark listed every accusation, rehearsed their labels and opened the meeting by naming the gripes. When she said, “It sounds like you think we are the big, bad prime contractor trying to push out the small

business,” the other side answered, “No, no, we don’t think that.” The contract was cut, her company netted \$1 million, and the subcontractor said it appreciated being acknowledged.

The chapter closes with Ryan, a student stranded in Dallas after a lightning storm who needed the last flight to Austin to sign a big contract. He followed an angry couple to the gate, labeled the agent’s rough day, mirrored her replies and only then asked whether a seat might open. After thirty seconds of silence she printed him a boarding pass in Economy Plus. The key lessons: imagine yourself in the other person’s situation, clear the barriers to agreement first, pause after labels and mirrors, label fears to calm them, perform an accusation audit, and remember that the person across the table wants to be appreciated and understood.

Beware “Yes”—Master “No”

Voss argues that we have “Yes” and “No” backward. A telemarketer’s script funnels you toward “Yes,” and you feel so trapped that you would rather say something absurd than agree. “No” feels like safety and control. For a negotiator it is pure gold, because it protects the status quo, gives both sides a moment of control and clarifies what people want by removing what they don’t. “Yes” and “Maybe” are often worthless, but “No” always moves the conversation.

He learned this from Amy Bonderow of the FBI’s New York Crisis Negotiation Team, who repeatedly rejected his request to become a negotiator because he had no training or credentials. Her “No”s led to the one “Yes” that mattered: a suggestion that he volunteer at a suicide hotline. “No” is usually a statement of perception, not fact, and often means “I am not yet ready to agree,” “I do not understand,” “I need more information” or “I want to talk it over with someone else.” Citing Jim Camp’s *Start with NO*, Voss recommends giving the other side the right to say “No” from the start, then asking solution-based questions such as “What about this doesn’t work for you?”

There are three kinds of “Yes”: counterfeit, where the person plans to say no later; confirmation, a reflexive answer with no promise of action; and commitment, the real one that ends in a signature. At HelpLine, a crisis hotline founded by Norman Vincent Peale, Voss thought he had handled a frequent caller named Daryl beautifully, even getting thanked for “doing such a great job.” His supervisor Jim called it one of the worst calls he had heard. If the caller congratulates you, he never took ownership of the solution. That lesson later helped Voss win a slot in FBI hostage training at Quantico ahead of candidates with psychology degrees.

Everyone has two primal needs: to feel safe and to feel in control. Logic and fake niceness do not satisfy them, but asking for “No” does. Instead of “Do you have a few minutes to talk?” ask “Is now a bad time to talk?” Marti Eversizer, facing dismissal from a jealous FBI supervisor, asked, “Do you want the FBI to be embarrassed?” and then, “What do you want me to do?” She kept her position. Political fund-raiser Ben Ottenhoff rewrote his script around questions that invited “No,” and it produced a 23 percent better rate of return, though fund-raising orthodoxy stopped him from rolling it out widely.

To force a “No” from someone who isn’t listening, mislabel their feelings or ask what they would say no to. If a counterpart will never say “No,” they are confused or hiding something, and you should walk away. When someone ignores you, send a one-line email: “Have you given up on

this project?” It plays on loss aversion and offers the safety of a “No,” and Voss says it works even in cultures known for avoiding the word. The lessons: stop pushing for “Yes,” treat “No” as the start, make your counterpart feel safe and in control, and let them believe the solution is their own idea.

Trigger the Two Words That Immediately Transform Any Negotiation

In 2000 the militant group Abu Sayyaf kidnapped Jeffrey Schilling, a twenty-four-year-old American, in the southern Philippines and demanded \$10 million. Voss, then a Supervisory Special Agent in the FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit, led strategy against the rebel leader Abu Sabaya, a violent man who craved media attention. Sabaya framed his demand as "war damages" for centuries of oppression of Muslims in the Philippines and refused to haggle.

The FBI's Behavioral Change Stairway Model has five stages: active listening, empathy, rapport, influence and behavioral change. Its roots go back to psychologist Carl Rogers and his idea of unconditional positive regard, the belief that real change happens only when a person feels accepted as they are. Voss notes that more than 90 percent of heart surgery patients fail to change their lifestyle two years later even when told their lives depend on it, which shows how rare real change is.

The breakthrough phrase is "That's right." When Voss told Benjie, the Filipino police commander talking to Sabaya, "You hate Sabaya, don't you?" Benjie poured out his anger and then became a skilled negotiator. After four months of stalemate, Voss wrote a script using effective pauses, minimal encouragers, mirrors, labels, paraphrasing and summaries. A summary is paraphrasing plus labeling: restating what someone means and acknowledging the emotion behind it. Benjie laid out "the world according to Abu Sabaya," and after almost a minute of silence Sabaya said, "That's right." He never demanded money again, and Schilling later escaped before commandos rescued him.

"That's right" feels like a victory to the person saying it because they judged your statement correct of their own free will. "You're right" is a disaster, because people say it to make you stop talking. Voss's son Brandon, a linebacker, kept saying "You're right" when told to dodge blockers, then kept smashing into them. When Voss said, "You think it's cowardly to get out of someone's way that's trying to hit you," Brandon said, "That's right," changed his play and his team won every game.

The technique works in business too. A pharmaceutical rep stopped pitching a hostile doctor and summarized his passion for tailoring treatments, and he eventually asked to try her product. A Korean MBA student summarized his ex-boss's motives, got a "That's right" and discovered the boss needed an ally at headquarters and wanted a promotion, then won the

transfer he wanted. The lessons: unconditional positive regard opens the door to change, “That’s right” beats “Yes,” and a good summary triggers it.

Bend Their Reality

In 2004 Haiti passed Colombia as the kidnap capital of the Americas, with eight to ten people taken daily. Voss, the FBI's lead international kidnapping negotiator, handled a \$150,000 demand for the aunt of a prominent Haitian political figure. The case frames his point that negotiation happens in a hidden world of unspoken needs and blind spots. Once you understand those, you can use deadlines, odd numbers and fairness to bend your counterpart's sense of what they deserve.

Voss rejects compromise. Splitting the difference is like a couple arguing over black or brown shoes and the husband ending up in one of each. People compromise because it feels safe, not because it works, and no deal is better than a bad deal. Deadlines are mostly arbitrary; of hundreds of executives Voss asked, only one had seen a missed deadline cause real harm. The Haitian kidnappers wanted money by Friday to party through the weekend, so negotiators stalled until Thursday or Friday and offered little. Citing research by Don A. Moore, Voss argues against hiding your own deadline, since that pushes you to concede while the other side waits.

Fairness is an emotional trigger. In the Ultimatum Game, where one person splits \$10 with another and a refusal leaves both with nothing, no split wins consensus, and people reject \$1 even though it beats zero. Antonio Damasio found that patients with damage to emotional brain regions could reason but could not decide. Robin Williams voiced the genie in *Aladdin* for \$75,000 instead of his usual \$8 million, then was furious when the film grossed \$504 million, so Disney sent him a Picasso reportedly worth \$1 million. When someone says "We just want what's fair," don't concede; offer to go back and fix where you treated them unfairly. When they say "We've given you a fair offer," mirror "Fair?" and label. Voss's own positive use is inviting the other side to stop him any time they feel treated unfairly.

Value depends on vantage point. People would pay about \$3.50 for Voss's used mug but ask \$5 to \$7 once they own it. Prospect Theory shows people prefer certainty and take bigger risks to avoid losses than to reach gains, so you must show your counterpart what they stand to lose. Voss lists techniques: anchor emotions with an accusation audit before bad news, as when he cut UAE contractors from \$2,000 to \$500 a day and all accepted; let the other side go first on price, since Raymond Chandler asked Billy Wilder for \$150 a week when the studio planned \$750; use a range; pivot to nonmonetary terms, as when he took a discount from the Memphis Bar Association for a magazine cover story; use odd numbers like \$37,263; and surprise with a gift.

In Haiti, the nephew questioned how the family could pay if the aunt were hurt, and the demand fell from \$150,000 to \$25,000. He anchored at \$3,000, answered a \$10,000 counter with \$4,751, added a portable CD stereo and got her home safe. For salaries, Voss advises being pleasantly persistent on nonsalary terms, negotiating success metrics for the next raise and asking “What does it take to be successful here?” so your boss becomes a mentor. Angel Prado used these moves, anchoring early, asking for a new title first and presenting a range of \$134.5k to \$143k, and ended at \$134,500. The key lessons: look beneath the surface, never split the difference, beware deadlines, don’t concede to “fair,” anchor, and use loss aversion.

Create the Illusion of Control

The Dos Palmas kidnapping in the Philippines (2001 to 2002) was the biggest failure of Voss's career. Abu Sayyaf took twenty hostages, including missionaries Martin and Gracia Burnham and businessman Guillermo Sobero. The president declared "all-out war," Philippine forces fought turf battles, American agencies squabbled, and hostages were raped and killed. A \$300,000 ransom deal collapsed when the new lead kidnapper claimed it was \$600 short. In June 2002 a botched rescue killed Martin Burnham and nurse Ediborah Yap. Voss learned that a change of negotiator on the other side signals a harder line, and that you must influence the team behind your counterpart, because hope is not a strategy.

Worse, a crooked Philippine politician running a parallel negotiation had spoken to Martin Burnham by phone for free. The FBI had treated every ask as a debt and relied on closed-ended proof-of-life questions like the name of a first dog, which yielded nothing and triggered the expectation of something in return. The answer came from a Pittsburgh case where one drug dealer had kidnapped another's girlfriend. On the tapes, the uncoached victim blurted, "How do I know she's all right?" The kidnapper paused and offered to put her on the phone. The secret to the upper hand is giving the other side the illusion of control.

Drawing on Kevin Dutton, Voss says the goal is not to make others believe you but to stop them from unbelieving. A doctor faced a patient leaving the hospital, asked what was so important about leaving, offered help with the errands, and the patient chose to stay. A PR consultant owed money asked her client, "How am I supposed to do that?" and was paid within forty-eight hours. Calibrated questions start with "What" or "How," avoid yes/no verbs like "can" or "is," and avoid "Why," which sounds accusatory. Useful standbys include "What is the biggest challenge you face?," "How can we solve this problem?" and "How am I supposed to do that?" When a boss questioned his approved Harvard trip, Voss asked what he had in mind when he approved it, and the boss relaxed.

Self-control comes first. A freelance marketing strategist owed about \$7,000 by a new CEO built an eight-step script with Voss, from a "No"-oriented email to calibrated questions and a flattering label. The CEO called within ten minutes, but his patronizing tone made her angry, and she lost even the half payment he had offered. When people feel out of control they adopt a hostage mentality and lash out. Bite your tongue, never counterattack, and answer attacks with a calibrated question. The listener, not the talker, controls the conversation.

Voss calls this listener's judo. The chapter's lessons: never try to force an opponent to admit you are right; avoid questions that can be answered with "Yes" or a tiny fact; ask "How" and "What" questions that give the other side an illusion of control while they reveal information; calibrate those questions so the counterpart spends energy solving your problem; pause and answer attacks with a question; and remember there is always a team behind the table. Calibrated questions appeal especially to aggressive or egotistical counterparts, who end up treating your obstacles as their own.

Guarantee Execution

During a prison siege in St. Martin Parish, Louisiana, inmates agreed to surrender one at a time, with each calling back on a walkie-talkie to confirm he wasn't beaten. A SWAT officer confiscated the walkie-talkie and the plan nearly collapsed. The lesson: "Yes" is nothing without "How." Negotiators must be decision architects who design for execution, since profits come on implementation, not agreement.

In 2003 José, an American ecotourism guide, was kidnapped in the Ecuadoran jungle by a Colombia-based rebel group demanding \$5 million. His wife Julie answered every demand with questions like "How can we raise that much?" The ransom fell to \$16,500, the constant internal consultations wore down the group until one teenager guarded José, and he escaped in a rainstorm. "How am I supposed to do that?" is a graceful way to say "No," creating what Voss calls forced empathy. An accounting consultant named Kelly used it when a client who owed her asked for more work, and she got paid. Ask "How will we know we're on track?" and treat "You're right" and "I'll try" as warning signs.

Look for Level II players behind the table, who can block deals. Voss lost a training deal in Florida because the division head receiving the training killed it. Ask questions like "How on board are the people not on this call?" In the 2004 Manila kidnapping of Alastair Onglingswan, Voss coached his brother Aaron to slow everything down and ask calibrated questions. When Aaron asked, "When we run out of money, what will happen?" the kidnapper said, "It will be all right," unknowingly promising not to harm him. Police later tracked the phone and freed Alastair.

To read people, Voss uses Albert Mehrabian's 7-38-55 Rule: 7 percent of a message comes from words, 38 percent from tone and 55 percent from body language. Label mismatches. Use the Rule of Three, getting agreement three times in varied ways. Deepak Malhotra's research on the Pinocchio Effect finds liars use more words and more third-person pronouns, and real decision makers tend to avoid "I." Using your own name humanizes you; Voss once got a ten percent discount by asking, "What's the Chris discount?"

To get people to bid against themselves, say "No" gently four ways: "How am I supposed to do that?," "Your offer is very generous, I'm sorry, that just doesn't work for me," "I'm sorry but I'm afraid I just can't do that," and "I'm sorry, no." Joaquin, buying out his partner Bruno's 46 percent of a Spanish grow shop, learned Bruno's bank was demanding repayment. Using this

sequence over three emails, Joaquin and Jesus brought a €30,812 demand down to €23,567, and Jesus kept Joaquin from settling at €25,000. Closing, Voss notes, takes discipline right to the end. The chapter's lessons: keep counterparts engaged with "How" questions, find the players behind the table, watch for incongruence, use the Rule of Three, notice pronouns and humanize yourself.

Bargain Hard

Voss wanted a Salsa Red Pearl Toyota 4Runner, and the only dealer in the Washington, D.C. area with one in that color had it stickered at \$36,000. He offered \$30,000 cash, paid up front, framed with apology and deference: “I’m sorry, I’m afraid I just can’t pay any more.” He kept praising the truck while insisting he couldn’t afford it. The salesman went back to his manager again and again, dropping to \$34,000, then \$32,500 on a sheet with “YOU WIN” written in big letters and surrounded by smiley faces, and finally accepted \$30,000. The lesson is that any response short of outright rejection means you have the edge, and letting silence linger is powerful. Bargaining is where most people fumble, because it triggers the most anxiety and unfocused aggression.

Voss and his son Brandon at The Black Swan Group sort negotiators into three styles. Analysts are methodical and unhurried, hate surprises, want time to think and lose trust if they give information and get nothing back. With them, bring clear data and give them silence. Accommodators value the relationship and the free flow of talk above everything. They may build great rapport without getting anything done or agree to things they can’t deliver, so use calibrated questions about implementation. Assertives believe time is money, love winning, tell rather than ask and cannot listen until they know they have been heard, so mirrors, labels and summaries work well. Voss, an Assertive, once sat through forty-five minutes of an employee named Keenon mirroring him and never noticed until Brandon burst out laughing.

Silence means different things to each style: anger to Accommodators, thinking to Analysts and an invitation to talk to Assertives. A study of lawyer-negotiators found that more than 75 percent of those graded effective used a cooperative style and only 12 percent were Assertive, so bluntness usually backfires. The biggest obstacle to reading others is the “I am normal” paradox. With three styles, there is a 66 percent chance your counterpart differs from you. Voss’s Black Swan rule rewrites the Golden Rule: treat people the way they need to be treated. Be yourself at the table, and add to your strengths rather than replacing them.

Real bargaining is not the calm process academics describe with the ZOPA. Experienced negotiators open with extreme anchors, and “everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” Let the other side name a number first, then deflect with “How am I supposed to accept that?,” “What are we trying to accomplish here?” or a pivot to nonmonetary terms. Farouq, a Georgetown MBA student who needed \$600 from his dean for an alumni event, answered her \$300 with a \$1,000 anchor, moved to \$850 and \$775, asked for \$737.50 and received \$750.

Research shows anger can raise your take but drains the other side's thinking, and faked anger destroys trust. Voss prefers strategic umbrage aimed at the proposal, not the person, poised statements like "I'm sorry, that just doesn't work for me," and a ready-to-walk mindset.

The Ackerman model, learned from ex-CIA operative Mike Ackerman, has six steps: set a target price, open at 65 percent of it, plan three raises to 85, 95 and 100 percent, use empathy and different ways of saying "No" between raises, make the final number precise and odd, and add a nonmonetary item to show you are at your limit. Shrinking raises convince the other side they have squeezed you dry, which makes them feel good. In Haiti, where ransoms ran \$15,000 to \$75,000, Voss got hostages out for under \$5,000, once for \$4,751. Mishary, facing a rent rise from \$1,850 to \$2,100, researched comparables, set a \$1,830 target, opened at \$1,730, pointed out the cost of a vacant unit and closed a twelve-month lease at \$1,829. Under pressure, you fall to your highest level of preparation.

Find the Black Swan

On June 17, 1981, William Griffin murdered his mother and a handyman, shot several people and took nine employees hostage at the Security Trust Company in Rochester, New York. The FBI worked from an assumption treated as permanent truth: no hostage-taker in U.S. history had ever killed a hostage on deadline. At exactly 3 p.m. Griffin shot hostage Margaret Moore, a twenty-nine-year-old single mother, then exposed himself to a sniper. Voss counts at least three missed signs: the employees kept hanging up on police, a nearby double homicide was never connected, and Griffin's note, never read in full, said "after the police take my life." When facts don't add up, the frame of reference is usually wrong, so keep a beginner's mind.

The term comes from Nassim Taleb and from the old belief that black swans were impossible, until Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh saw them in western Australia in 1697. Every negotiation holds known knowns, known unknowns and unknown unknowns, the Black Swans that would change everything if uncovered. Voss believes each side has at least three. Standard research only confirms what you already know, so ask many questions, read nonverbal cues and ask why the other side is saying what it is saying right now. Black Swans are leverage multipliers. Leverage is the ability to inflict loss and withhold gain, and what matters is the leverage the other side believes you have. Positive leverage comes from what they want, negative leverage from threats, which Voss compares to nuclear bombs and says should be labeled subtly, and normative leverage from their own rules and standards.

In March 2003 tobacco farmer Dwight Watson drove a tractor into a pond between the Washington Monument and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, claimed to have bombs and put the capital into an eight-block lockdown. By listening closely, negotiators learned his five-generation family farm was failing and that he was an 82nd Airborne veteran. He would surrender only after three days, citing a military rule about withdrawing with honor. FBI agent Winnie Miller caught hints that he was a devout Christian and suggested telling him the next morning was the "Dawn of the Third Day." After a long silence Watson said, "I'll come out," and no explosives were found. Framing a request inside someone's worldview shows respect and carries authority.

Knowing someone's "religion" helps in three ways. People trust those who seem similar: Voss won a deal by telling a born-again CEO who felt misunderstood, "This is really stewardship for you, isn't it?" People follow those who share their hopes and dreams. And people respond to reasons: in Ellen Langer's copy machine study, 60 percent let someone cut the line with no

reason, but over 90 percent did when given one, even a meaningless one. Counterparts who seem crazy are usually ill-informed, constrained or pursuing other interests. An ex-employee demanding \$130,000 dropped his suit once an outside audit showed he owed \$25,000. A Coca-Cola contact who went silent had lost all influence and only admitted it over a steak dinner with no business discussed. Get face time and watch the unguarded moments at the edges of meetings.

An MBA student eyeing a Charleston building listed at \$4.3 million used calibrated questions and labels to learn it was a fully occupied student dormitory that couldn't be replicated. Selling made no sense, so he mislabeled the seller as doubting the market, and the broker revealed the seller needed cash for mortgages on properties in Atlanta and Savannah. The deal closed at \$3.6 million, though Voss says he could have done better. The book ends by asking readers to embrace thoughtful conflict. People fear conflict itself, which produces wimp-win deals and bitter marriages. The adversary is the situation, not the person. Voss notes that even in his 4Runner deal the salesman made his quota, and every negotiation, well handled, can rise to creative beauty.

Appendix: Prepare a Negotiation One Sheet

Voss closes with a one-page preparation tool modeled on the single-page summaries used in the entertainment industry. “When the pressure is on, you don’t rise to the occasion; you fall to your highest level of preparation.” His company finds good preparation returns at least 7:1 in time saved renegotiating or clarifying implementation, but over-scripting makes you rigid and easy prey for more creative counterparts.

The first section is the goal. Voss argues that BATNA, the concept from *Getting to Yes*, tricks negotiators into aiming low, because under stress it becomes a target and caps what you ask for. People set modest goals to protect their self-esteem, which leads to a “wimp-win” mentality. Think through best and worst cases, but write down only a specific, optimistic, realistic goal, discuss it with a colleague and carry it into the room. If you need \$100 for used speakers that sell for \$140, aim for \$150. “Never be so sure of what you want that you wouldn’t take something better.”

The second section summarizes the known facts in a couple of sentences, well enough that the other side would say “That’s right.” The third lists three to five labels forming an accusation audit, using templates like “It seems like ____ is valuable to you.” The fourth holds calibrated questions: general ones like “What’s the biggest challenge you face?,” ones that find deal killers behind the table like “How on board are the people not on this call?,” and ones like “What happens if you do nothing?” Many deals hinge on status, self-esteem and autonomy; one accounting-system buyer feared failure before his annual review, so a guaranteed ninety-day installation mattered more than a discount. The fifth section lists noncash items the other side could offer, asking what they could give that would almost get you to do it for free.

About Chris Voss

Chris Voss is a former FBI hostage negotiator. Over a twenty-four-year career with the Bureau he became the FBI's lead international kidnapping negotiator, a role given to him by his mentor Gary Noesner of the Crisis Negotiation Unit. He worked kidnappings and standoffs in the United States and abroad, including cases in the Philippines, Haiti and Ecuador, and served on the New York City FBI Crisis Negotiation Team and the Joint Terrorism Task Force.

Voss got his start by volunteering at a suicide hotline before being admitted to hostage negotiation training at the FBI Academy in Quantico. His move into business teaching began at Harvard Law School, where Sheila Heen and John Richardson helped bring his ideas to business audiences. He went on to teach negotiation at Georgetown University and the University of Southern California, and spent about a decade teaching at business schools and corporations.

After leaving the FBI, Voss founded The Black Swan Group, a negotiation training and consulting firm named after the book's concept of hidden, game-changing information. His son Brandon works with him and helped develop the book's framework of negotiator styles.

Never Split the Difference was published in 2016 and written with Tahl Raz, a journalist and business writer whom Voss calls a true business-writing artist. Raz is also known as the co-author, with Keith Ferrazzi, of Never Eat Alone.

Listen to this summary, or turn the book into a podcast or course, at webapp.sunapp.ai/books/never-split-the-difference-by-chris-voss

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