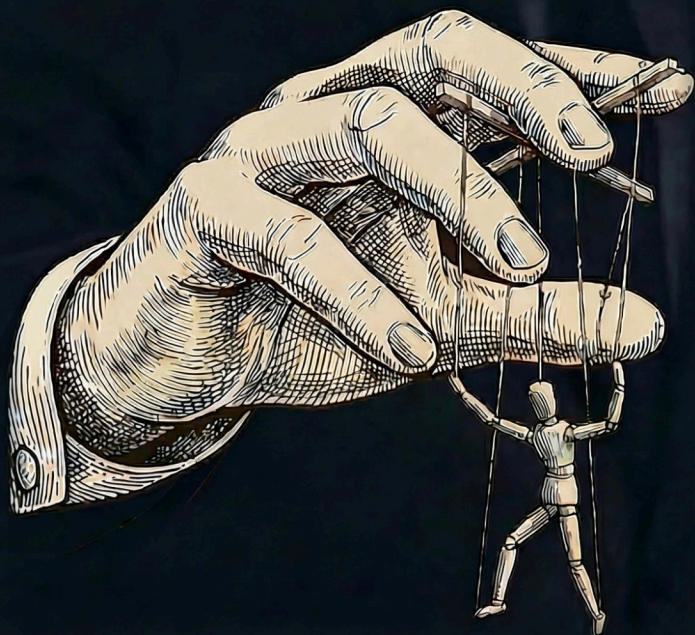


DOMINA MENTIS



THE **500** TECHNIQUES OF MENTAL MASTERY

SPOT MANIPULATION,
DEFEND YOUR MIND,
AND COMMAND RESPECT

DOMINA MENTIS

The 500 Techniques of Mental Mastery

*Spot Manipulation,
Defend Your Mind, and Command Respect:
one technique per page*

500 TECHNIQUES · 20 CHAPTERS · 5 PARTS

The 500 Techniques of Mental Mastery. Spot Manipulation, Defend Your Mind, and Command Respect.

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The names and people in the examples are fictitious: any resemblance to real people is coincidental. The studies and experiments cited are real and are given with their authors and year.

BEFORE YOU READ

This book explains how persuasion and manipulation work: the levers that move our decisions, often without our noticing. Knowing them is useful for two things: making yourself heard when you have something worth saying, and recognizing the people who use them against you so you can defend yourself in time.

The fair techniques are presented together with their limit: where persuasion ends and deception begins. The unfair, abusive, or dangerous techniques are not explained so that anyone will use them, but so that the people on the receiving end can recognize them. That's why you won't find instructions for carrying them out. You'll find the signs that let you see them coming and the moves that stop them.

This book is not a substitute for the advice of a psychologist, a doctor, or a lawyer. If you are living with violence, abuse, or danger, ask for help: in the United States, the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233) is free and open day and night for anyone experiencing abuse or stalking. In an emergency, call 911.

The author and the publisher are not responsible for the use readers make of this information. This book has only one rule: use what you learn to understand, to protect yourself, and to persuade honestly. Never to take advantage of anyone.

Why a New Edition

The 500 Techniques started out as a massive archive: everything you need to understand how people influence one another. Thousands of readers have used it, and many of them asked us for the same thing: a book that's easier to navigate, more practical, and closer to everyday life.

This edition has been rewritten from scratch. Every technique takes up a single page, and every page has the same structure, so you can open the book anywhere and immediately find what you're looking for. There are 500 techniques, and they're all different. The studies cited are real, with authors and year, and the examples are everyday scenes, at home, at work, in a store.

How Each Technique Page Works

Every technique has four parts.

What It Is. The mechanism in plain words, and the study or the story that made it known.

How to Use It or How to Spot It. This is where the most important distinction in the book lies. The fair techniques, the ones you can use to get heard without deceiving anyone, have the *How to Use It* section. It explains how to apply them, and where the line is. The unfair or abusive techniques have the *How to Spot It* section and carry the RED FLAG mark. It doesn't tell you how to do them; it shows you how to recognize them when someone uses them on you.

Example. A concrete scene, with people and places you know.

How to Defend Yourself. What to do when the technique comes from the wrong side, often with the exact words to say.

How to Read This Book

You can read it from beginning to end: the five parts go from the basics, how we perceive and decide, all the way to the most serious forms of control in relationships and groups. But you can also use it as a manual. When a situation makes you uncomfortable (a negotiation, an argument, a person who always makes you feel in the wrong), look up the name of the technique in the index at the back of the book, or leaf through the chapter that covers it.

One piece of advice: read one technique a day, and try to spot it during your day. After a few weeks, you'll never look at an ad, a meeting, or a fight the same way again.

The Five Parts

- **Part I. The Foundations of Control.** How the mind perceives, decides, and makes mistakes, and how to stay clear-headed.
- **Part II. The Weapons of Communication.** Words, the body, connecting with others, and stories.
- **Part III. The Principles of Social Influence.** Scarcity, authority, social proof, reciprocity, and time used as a lever.
- **Part IV. Advanced and Defensive Techniques.** Space, groups, logical traps, and countermoves.
- **Part V. Dominion over the Mind.** Control in relationships, money, and intimacy, the masks, and the traps of debate.

FIRST AID

When you're in the middle of a difficult situation, you don't need to know the name of the technique being used on you. Find the situation below that resembles yours and read the techniques listed, in order.

The number before each title is the technique number (no. 7 is the seventh technique in the book); the page where you'll find it is in parentheses.

You're About to Sign a Contract or an Estimate

Before you sign, especially if the other person is in a hurry for you to do it.

- | | |
|---|--|
| no. 377 The 24-Hour Rule (p. 400) | no. 7 The First-Number Anchor (p. 9) |
| no. 378 Put It in Writing (p. 401) | no. 271 The Lowball (p. 287) |
| no. 393 The Exit Test (p. 416) | no. 211 The Bonus for Deciding Now (p. 225) |

Someone Is Rushing You

Offers that expire tonight, last items in stock, "I need to know right now."

- | | |
|---|--|
| no. 208 The Invented Deadline (p. 222) | no. 217 "I Only Have Five Minutes" (p. 231) |
| no. 219 The Exploding Offer (p. 233) | |
| no. 202 Only a Few Left (p. 216) | no. 394 The Ulysses Contract (p. 417) |

The Salesperson Is Too Likable

You're getting along great, you have so much in common, and meanwhile money is on the table.

- | | |
|---|---|
| no. 251 The Liking Effect (p. 267) | no. 275 The "We" Out of Nowhere (p. 291) |
| no. 155 Common Ground (p. 165) | |
| no. 258 The Small Unexpected Gift (p. 274) | no. 385 Separate the Person from the Proposal (p. 408) |

You Need to Say No

To your boss, a relative, a client who won't take no for an answer.

- | | |
|--|---|
| no. 376 The No Without Explanations (p. 399) | no. 398 The Short, Firm Answer (p. 421) |
| no. 117 "I Don't" Instead of "I Can't" (p. 125) | no. 399 The Boundary with a Consequence (p. 422) |
| no. 78 The Broken Record (p. 83) | |

A Fight That Goes Around in Circles

As a couple or in the family, the same arguments that never end.

- | | |
|---|---|
| no. 70 Ask for a Break When Your Heart Is Racing (p. 74) | no. 278 The Endless Monologue (p. 295) |
| no. 72 Answer the Content, Not the Tone (p. 76) | no. 471 Deny, Attack, Play the Victim (p. 499) |
| no. 75 The I-Message (p. 79) | |

Someone Makes You Doubt Your Memory

"That never happened," "You made it up," "You're too sensitive."

- | | |
|---|--|
| no. 418 Gaslighting (p. 444) | no. 319 Environmental Sabotage (p. 339) |
| no. 342 Group Gaslighting (p. 363) | no. 378 Put It in Writing (p. 401) |
| no. 293 Selective Memory (p. 310) | |

You Always Feel Guilty or Not Good Enough

With someone who makes you pay for everything, or keeps comparing you with others.

- | | |
|--|---|
| no. 404 The False Martyr (p. 430) | no. 430 The Debt of Gratitude (p. 457) |
| no. 403 False Existential Guilt (p. 429) | no. 291 Time as Debt (p. 308) |
| no. 401 The Humiliating Comparison (p. 427) | |

In Meetings, You're Made to Look Like the One in the Wrong

They put words in your mouth, change the subject, isolate you.

- | | |
|---|---|
| no. 351 The Straw Man (p. 373) | no. 98 Claiming the High Ground (p. 103) |
| no. 352 The Personal Attack (p. 374) | no. 331 Pressure to Conform (p. 352) |
| no. 353 The Red Herring (p. 375) | no. 387 Go to the Balcony (p. 410) |

A Suspicious Call or Message

A relative in trouble, a fake official, an urgent order “from the boss.”

- | | |
|--|--|
| no. 380 Hang Up and Call Back Yourself (p. 403) | no. 246 The Order in the Boss’s Name (p. 261) |
| no. 381 The Family Password (p. 404) | no. 222 First Fear, Then Relief (p. 236) |
| no. 247 The Fake Official (p. 262) | no. 433 The Romance Scam (p. 460) |

A Relationship That Keeps You Hanging

Overwhelming affection, then coldness, then affection again, like a seesaw.

- | | |
|--|--|
| no. 415 Love Bombing (p. 441) | no. 410 The Silent Treatment (p. 436) |
| no. 416 Devaluation and Discard (p. 442) | no. 422 The Sudden Return (p. 448) |
| no. 417 Intermittent Reinforcement (p. 443) | no. 400 No Contact (p. 423) |

Money Becomes Control

At home, someone decides how you spend, checks your receipts, or puts you in debt.

- | | |
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| no. 426 Financial Control (p. 453) | no. 429 The Unfair Split of Expenses (p. 456) |
| no. 428 “I Pay, I Decide” (p. 455) | no. 434 Forced Debt (p. 461) |
| no. 427 Policing Spending as Humiliation (p. 454) | |

A Group That Closes In on You

A setting, a course, or a community that keeps asking for more and pulls you away from others.

- | | |
|---|---|
| no. 345 Elite Group Identity (p. 366) | no. 347 The Demand for a Sacrifice (p. 368) |
| no. 346 The Cult of Personality (p. 367) | no. 341 Controlling the Social Calendar (p. 362) |
| no. 274 The Initiation Ritual (p. 290) | no. 350 Creating Phobias (p. 371) |

A News Story or an “Expert” That Alarms You

A post, a video, a headline that frightens you or promises you miracles.

- | | |
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| no. 384 Lateral Reading (p. 407) | no. 244 The Fake Expert (p. 259) |
| no. 480 The Wrong Authority (p. 509) | no. 229 “As Seen On...” (p. 244) |

You Want to Convince Someone Honestly

A proposal at work, an idea in the family, a client to win over.

- | | | | |
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| no. 157 | Warmth First, Then Competence (p. 167) | no. 165 | The Summary That Gets a “That’s Right” (p. 175) |
| no. 176 | The Story Before the Number (p. 187) | no. 266 | Ask When and Where (p. 282) |

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PART I

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CONTROL

CHAPTER 1 Foundations of Perception

CHAPTER 2 Cognitive Biases and Heuristics

CHAPTER 3 The Power of a Cool Head

CHAPTER 4 Strategic Thinking and Reading People

CHAPTER 01

Foundations of Perception

Perception is the first filter: before we reason about something, we've already seen it a certain way. These 25 techniques show how attention, comparison, expectation, and memory change what we think we see. We start with the eyes and end with the stories we tell ourselves.

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TECHNIQUE 1

The Invisible Gorilla

◆ WHAT IT IS

We only see what we're looking for. When our attention is busy with a task, the rest of the scene disappears, even when it passes right in front of our eyes. In 1999, Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris, at Harvard, asked a group of people to count how many times a ball was passed in a short video. Halfway through, someone in a gorilla suit walked across the scene, thumping their chest. Many people never saw it at all.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you want something to be noticed, don't put it next to a task that soaks up attention: give it a moment of its own. First wrap up the part that takes concentration (the math, the signature, the instructions), then stop and present the important point by itself, out loud, looking the other person in the eye. And remember the flip side: whatever you say while the other person is busy with something else simply doesn't land.

◆ EXAMPLE

A bank teller explains the terms of a new checking account to a customer while he fills out three forms. He nods, signs, and leaves. A month later he complains about the monthly fee: "Nobody told me." They had told him. But his attention was on the boxes he had to fill in.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to slip an inconvenient detail past you will fill your hands and your head with something else: forms, small talk, hurry. When you sign or decide, do one thing only. Ask: "Let me stop for a second. Can you go over the terms that matter one more time?" And reread everything from the top, with a clear head, before you sign.

TECHNIQUE 2

The Frequency Illusion

➤ WHAT IT IS

Once we notice something for the first time, we start seeing it everywhere. The thing itself hasn't changed at all, but now our attention is looking for it. It's also called the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon. The brain throws out almost everything it sees and lets through only what has become important to us. After that, every new sighting feels like confirmation that "it's everywhere."

➤ HOW TO USE IT

If you want someone to notice an idea in their everyday life, first make it important to them, with a specific name and a clear image. From that moment on, the world does the work for you: every time they run into it, they think of you and your proposal. It works with a product, a problem that needs solving, or a project you want to get off the ground.

➤ EXAMPLE

A mechanic tells Jessica that her compact car "has the belt problem that model is known for." From that day on, Jessica hears people talking about belts at the coffee shop, at the office, on the radio. Two weeks later she goes back to the shop convinced it's an incredibly common problem, and has everything replaced, including the parts that were fine.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you get the feeling that something is "suddenly everywhere," ask yourself: "Has it really increased, or am I just noticing it more?" Look for real data, not your impressions. And ask yourself who put that word in your head in the first place, and what's in it for them.

TECHNIQUE 3

Change Blindness

◆ WHAT IT IS

We notice changes far less than we think we do. If something changes while our attention is interrupted, even for a moment, we often miss it. In 1998, Daniel Simons and Daniel Levin had someone stop pedestrians to ask for directions. During the conversation, two workers carrying a door walked between them, and behind the door the person asking was swapped for someone else. Many pedestrians kept on talking without noticing a thing.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you present a new version of something (a price list, a contract, a set of rules), point out every change yourself, explicitly: highlighted, said out loud, one by one. Don't assume the other person will spot it on their own. The people who work with you learn to trust you, and nobody will ever be able to say you hid something from them.

◆ EXAMPLE

The property manager sends out the new quote for cleaning the building. It's identical to the old one except for one line: washing the stairwell windows goes from monthly to quarterly, at the same price. At the condo board meeting, nobody catches it. Mrs. Miller on the second floor catches it six months later, looking at the cloudy windows on the landing.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you receive the "new version" of a document you already know, don't reread it from memory: compare it line by line with the old one. Always ask: "What's changed since last time?" Ask for a summary with the changes marked in the margin.

TECHNIQUE 4

The Contrast Principle

➤ WHAT IT IS

We don't judge things in absolute terms but by comparison with what we've just seen. A bucket of lukewarm water feels hot if you've just had your hand in ice, and cold if you've had it in very hot water. The same thing happens with prices, houses, people, and proposals: whatever comes first changes the way we see whatever comes next.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Decide the order in which you show things. First the most expensive or most demanding option, then the one you really want to propose: by comparison, it looks reasonable. The first point of comparison has to be real and believable, not invented, or the other person will feel played and stop trusting you. It works with estimates, apartments, menus, and job offers.

➤ EXAMPLE

A real estate agent first takes a couple to see a dark two-bedroom on the ground floor, at a high price. Right after that, a bright one-bedroom on the fourth floor, at a price just a little lower. The one-bedroom, which on its own would have seemed small, now looks like a steal. The couple puts in an offer that same day.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Evaluate each option on its own, as if it were the only one. Ask yourself: "Would I like this house, at this price, if I hadn't seen the other one?" And when someone shows you things in a particular order, ask yourself why they chose that order in particular.

TECHNIQUE 5

The Threshold Nobody Notices

◆ WHAT IT IS

We only notice a difference when it crosses a certain threshold, and that threshold grows with the size of what we started with. The German physiologist Ernst Weber described it in the 1800s: you can feel an extra ounce on a letter, but not on a suitcase. Below the threshold, as far as we're concerned, the change doesn't exist. It's the principle behind packages that shrink while the price stays the same.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you need to bring in a hard change (a new schedule, a stricter rule, a price increase), break it into small steps and let some time pass between one and the next: each step stays below the alarm threshold. When you want an improvement to be noticed, on the other hand, make it all at once and big enough to cross the threshold. Nobody notices ten small improvements spread out over time.

◆ EXAMPLE

Mike's favorite package of cookies always costs the same, with the same design and the same color. Except that, compared with a year ago, there are two fewer cookies inside, and then two fewer again. Mike doesn't notice until one day he reads the weight printed in small type on the back and compares it with an old package still sitting in the pantry.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't trust the feeling: look at the number. At the grocery store, compare the unit price, not the price of the package. For bills and subscriptions, write down today's amounts somewhere and compare them every six months: small steps, added together, become visible.

TECHNIQUE 6

The Priming Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

A stimulus we encounter first (a word, an image, a piece of music) gets the brain ready to respond a certain way to whatever comes next. It's called priming, as in priming a pump. The first stimulus switches on a network of related ideas, and those ideas become the ones most ready to use. In 1971, psychologists David Meyer and Roger Schvaneveldt measured it with words. People who had just read "doctor" recognized the word "nurse" faster than people who had read "butter." The brain had already laid the groundwork, without the person realizing it.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before the real request, lay the groundwork with words. If you want cooperation, spend the minutes beforehand talking about "together," "team," and "pitching in." If you want a cautious decision, talk about safety and stability. There's no need to push: a few words in the right place, ahead of time, are enough.

➤ EXAMPLE

Before asking her boss for two days off during a busy stretch, Sarah brings up how the department pulled together to cover shifts during the February flu. The conversation turns to helping each other out. When the request comes, the boss answers: "We'll figure it out, like always."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before an important decision, ask yourself: "What did I just see, hear, or read?" Change rooms, let a few minutes go by, then decide. If they want an answer on the spot, say: "Let me look at one other option first, and I'll get back to you." Priming doesn't last long: time is its enemy.

TECHNIQUE 7

The First-Number Anchor

♦ WHAT IT IS

The first number we hear becomes the starting point for all our estimates, even when it has nothing to do with anything. We move away from it, but never far enough. In 1987, Gregory Northcraft and Margaret Neale had experienced real estate agents tour the same house, giving each of them a fact sheet with a different asking price: their appraisals followed the price on the sheet, and almost none of them admitted being influenced by it. This is different from Emotional Anchoring in Chapter 5: here the anchor is a number.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

In a negotiation, if you can, name the first figure yourself, high but defensible: “For a job like this, we usually charge \$4,200.” From then on, the discussion revolves around your number, and every discount looks like a concession. Have the reasons behind it ready, because someone will ask for them. An absurd anchor doesn’t work: it blows up the negotiation, and the trust along with it.

♦ EXAMPLE

At the antiques fair in Brimfield, Massachusetts, Diane stops in front of an old blanket chest. The dealer gets there first: “I’d normally let this go for twelve hundred, but for you, I’ll make it nine hundred.” Diane, who wanted to spend four hundred dollars at the most, goes home with the chest for eight hundred, convinced she got a great deal.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before you hear any figure, decide on your own: what it’s worth to you, the most you’d spend, what it costs elsewhere. Write it down on your phone. If the other person opens with an inflated number, don’t negotiate from there: set it aside and start over from yours. “I’m not considering that figure. To me it’s worth four hundred dollars, so let’s start there.”

TECHNIQUE 8**The Price That Changes the Taste****➤ WHAT IT IS**

What we expect changes what we actually experience. Price, brand, and packaging don't just change our opinion: they change the experience itself. In 2008, a Caltech team led by Hilke Plassmann had people taste the same wine, presenting it once as cheap and once as expensive. People preferred the "expensive" one, and MRI scans showed more activity in a brain area linked to pleasure.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Shape expectations before the first contact: how you present, where you serve, what you package it in. Coffee in a china cup, an estimate on letterhead, a dish described with care: people experience all of them as better. But the substance has to live up to the expectation. If the letdown is bigger than the buildup, it hits twice as hard.

➤ EXAMPLE

A neighborhood bakery puts the same cinnamon rolls in a sturdy cream-colored box with the name written by hand, and sells them at a higher price. Regular customers swear that "the ones in the box taste better." The recipe and the oven are the same.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you can, test it blind: taste, use, or compare without the label, the price, or the brand. Ask yourself: "Do I really like it, or do I like the idea of what it costs?" And when you're faced with luxury packaging, ask to see the product out of the box.

TECHNIQUE 9

Easy to Read, Easy to Believe

◆ WHAT IT IS

Whatever we can read and understand without effort seems truer, safer, and more pleasant to us. Psychologists call this processing fluency: the brain mistakes ease for familiarity, and familiarity for truth. In 2006, Adam Alter and Daniel Oppenheimer, at Princeton, observed that shares of companies with easy-to-pronounce names did better in their first days on the stock market than shares of companies with hard-to-pronounce names.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Make your message easy to process: short sentences, common words, a readable font, good contrast, one idea at a time. If you need to name a product, a project, or a business, pick a name people can say right the first time. Effortful reading is experienced as a signal of risk, even when it isn't one.

◆ EXAMPLE

Two contractors submit estimates for redoing a bathroom. The first hands over three dense pages full of abbreviations. The second, a single page with clear line items and the total in bold. The prices are almost the same, but the Parkers pick the second one: "It looks more professional." Neither estimate said who would haul away the debris.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Easy reading is not proof. When something strikes you as "clear and convincing," ask yourself whether it's true or just well written. With important documents, do the opposite: read them slowly, maybe out loud, so you think about every line. And to anyone who hands you a page "already summarized for your convenience," say: "Thank you, but please give me the full text too. I'll read it on my own time."

TECHNIQUE 10**The Mere Exposure Effect****➤ WHAT IT IS**

The more we see something, the more we like it, even if we've never really had anything to do with it. A person, a logo, a song: familiarity breeds liking. In 1968, psychologist Robert Zajonc demonstrated it with made-up words and Chinese characters. People rated the ones they had seen more often as more positive, without knowing what they meant. What's familiar takes less effort for the brain, and it gets filed as safe.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Show up often, and keep it light. A repeated, low-key presence works better than one long, isolated meeting: a hello in the office elevator, a birthday text, turning up at the same events. Keep a recognizable look: same logo, same color, same signature. Don't overdo it, though: past a certain point, repetition wears people out.

➤ EXAMPLE

A plumber who's new to the area leaves a little calendar with his name on it at every door in the building, every month. Nobody calls him. Then one evening the Johnsons' kitchen drain breaks, and Mrs. Johnson grabs the little calendar: she "knows" that name. In reality, she has never seen his face.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself: "Do I trust this because I know something about this person or this product, or just because I've seen it so many times?" Before you choose, compare at least one alternative you don't know, using the same criteria. And to anyone who says "you know me by now," answer: "I see you around a lot, but give me an estimate anyway so I can compare."

TECHNIQUE 11

The Serial Position Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

In any list, we remember the beginning and the end best, while whatever is in the middle gets lost. The first items have time to move into long-term memory (the primacy effect), while the last ones are still fresh in short-term memory (the recency effect). It applies to a grocery list, a presentation, a meeting, or a day of job interviews.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Put the most important point at the beginning and repeat it at the end. In the middle, put whatever can afford to be forgotten. If you get to choose your turn, avoid the middle: it's better to speak first or last. If you have no choice but to be in the middle, create a break that works as a fresh start: a pause, a question, an object to show.

◆ EXAMPLE

The neighborhood association has to choose among six proposals for the summer block party. Megan asks to present hers last and closes with a single sentence: "A party where the kids play in the street and the grown-ups have dinner together." When it's time to vote, it's the only proposal everyone remembers word for word.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you're weighing a list of options, offers, or candidates, don't rely on memory: take notes on each one, using the same criteria. Go back over the options in a different order from the one they were presented in. And keep an eye on whoever decides the order in which you see them.

TECHNIQUE 12

The Spotlight Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

We believe other people notice our appearance and our mistakes much more than they really do, as if we were standing in a *spotlight*. Each of us is the center of our own world, and we imagine we're the center of everyone else's too. In 2000, Thomas Gilovich and his colleagues at Cornell University had some students walk into a classroom wearing an embarrassing T-shirt. The students wearing it were sure lots of people would notice, but far fewer did.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Use it on yourself first: when embarrassment freezes you, remember that the audience is busy thinking about themselves. Use it to help others too: to a coworker who's anxious before a presentation, you can honestly say, "Nobody's counting your stumbles. They're listening to what you say." It takes a weight off them, and they do better work.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the lunch after his niece's christening, Brian knocks a glass of red wine over onto the tablecloth. He spends the rest of the meal feeling everyone's eyes on him. That evening, on the phone, he apologizes to his sister. She doesn't even remember it happening.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Someone who wants to put you on the spot may blow up a small mistake of yours in front of others, to make you feel like you're under the spotlight. Ask yourself: "How much attention do I pay to other people's mistakes?" Almost always, very little. Respond to the facts, not to the feeling that all eyes are on you, and move on.

TECHNIQUE 13

The Peacock Bias

✦ WHAT IT IS

We see ourselves as more capable, more honest, and smarter than average. We can't all be, and yet almost all of us believe it. Psychologists call it illusory superiority. In 1981, the Swedish psychologist Ola Svenson asked a group of drivers to rate their own driving: the vast majority put themselves above average. The bias protects our self-esteem, but it blinds us to our own limits, and makes us easy to flatter.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Use it first of all to keep from overrating yourself. Before a decision or a negotiation, don't go by how confident you feel: check yourself against real data and get an outside opinion from someone who has no interest in pleasing you. Measuring your skill by your past numbers, rather than by how sure you feel in the moment, keeps you from making missteps.

✦ EXAMPLE

A financial advisor tells Mr. Reynolds: "You read the business section every morning, so you already know how these products work. I don't need to explain the risks to you." So as not to contradict that image, Mr. Reynolds signs without asking a single question.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of compliments that arrive right before a request. When someone says "a smart person like you gets this right away," answer: "That's exactly why I want to understand it properly. Can you walk me through it?" And look for outside assessments of your abilities, not just your own impressions.

TECHNIQUE 14

The Positivity Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

Over time, we remember the past as better than it was: in 1997, psychologist Terence Mitchell called it “rosy view.” Small annoyances fade, and the good moments stay. It’s a mechanism that protects our well-being, but it skews our judgment: a job, a house, or a relationship from a few years back seems better than it really was.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you want to strengthen a bond or motivate a group, bring up a shared, happy memory with concrete details: the day, the place, the joke from that moment. “Remember when we moved the office and finished at midnight, eating pizza on the floor?” The hard work back then has turned into a good memory, and that memory carries over to today’s project.

➤ EXAMPLE

Rachel’s former boss at the store calls to get her back behind the counter: “Remember what a great team we were?” Rachel remembers the laughs and the holiday parties. She no longer remembers the unpaid overtime, which was the reason she left. She remembers it a week after saying yes.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before going back to something you left, go back over the facts: the emails, the texts, your notes from that time. Ask yourself: “What was the reason I walked away?” Write it down before you answer. If you have no notes, ask someone who was there and who will tell you the truth.

TECHNIQUE 15

Present Bias

◆ WHAT IT IS

We prefer a small reward now to a big one later. In our heads, the future is worth less than it really is, and the pleasure of right now feels almost irresistible. That's why we put off the gym, saving money, and medical checkups, but never the ice cream. Economists also call it hyperbolic discounting.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you want to convince someone to do something that pays off in the future, give them an immediate benefit too, small but concrete. Not "in ten years you'll have saved a bundle," but "starting this month, your bill goes down." If you want to help someone resist a temptation, bring the benefit closer: a small reward right away for every step they take.

◆ EXAMPLE

A sign in an appliance store reads: "Take your washer home today. No payments until March!" Kevin walks in just to look and walks out with a top-of-the-line washing machine. He has never added up what the installments come to, with interest.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a deal makes you feel good now and makes you pay later, do the math: how much does it cost in total, at the end? Give yourself a fixed rule for spending you hadn't planned, such as waiting three days. And picture, in concrete terms, the moment six months from now when you open your statement.

TECHNIQUE 16

The Ostrich Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

Faced with news we're dreading, we'd rather not know. Like the ostrich of legend, we bury our heads in the sand and hope the problem goes away on its own. Avoiding the information brings instant relief, but it almost always makes the problem grow.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

If you need someone to face something unpleasant, lower the barrier to entry. Not "we need to talk about the finances," but "let's take ten minutes and look at just one number." Make the first step small, specific, and scheduled. People who are afraid of the answer are more willing to accept a small question.

➤ EXAMPLE

Donna knows something is wrong with her shop's finances, but for months she hasn't opened the letters from the bank. Instead of lecturing her, her accountant suggests: "Friday at nine, just bring me the latest bank statement. We'll look at the rest later." On Friday, Donna shows up with all the envelopes, still sealed. They open them together, and the problem is smaller than she feared.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The ostrich effect is also exploited by anyone who tells you "don't worry about these clauses, they're just formalities." Whenever someone invites you not to look, look. For your own affairs, set a standing appointment with bad news: every Sunday morning, bank statement and mail.

TECHNIQUE 17

The Ambiguity Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

We prefer a risk we know to one we don't, even when the second is the better deal. In 1961, economist Daniel Ellsberg showed this with two urns of colored balls: people chose the urn with the known proportions, even when the other one was no worse at all. The unknown scares us more than a calculated risk.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you propose something new, take away the unknown: explain what happens step by step, what it costs in the worst case, and how to back out. A warranty, a free trial, or the story of someone who has already done it makes the new thing feel familiar. The clearer your proposal, the better it does against an old habit, even if the habit is worse.

◆ EXAMPLE

A company in Ohio wants to switch to new payroll software, but the HR department is resisting. The vendor doesn't push the benefits: it offers a one-month trial running side by side with the old program, which stays switched on. After three weeks, nobody wants to go back.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to keep you where you are will paint change as a dark place full of dangers: "Who knows what's out there?" Answer by turning the unknown into specific questions: "What's the worst-case scenario? How likely is it? How do I get out?" Often, once you shine a light on it, the risk is smaller than they made it sound.

TECHNIQUE 18

Probability Neglect

➤ WHAT IT IS

When an event frightens or excites us a great deal, its probability stops mattering. Whether the risk is one in a million or one in ten, the fear is the same. In 2001, Yuval Rottenstreich and Christopher Hsee showed this in *Psychological Science*: faced with a neutral loss of twenty dollars, people carefully weigh the difference between a 1 percent and a 99 percent chance, while to avoid an electric shock they pay almost the same amount in both cases.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

To get people to take a real, overlooked risk seriously, don't rely on statistics alone: show a concrete scene, a person, a specific moment. The same goes for a positive promise. Use it only for real risks: blowing up a fear to make a sale works once, and then it burns your credibility.

➤ EXAMPLE

A home security salesman rings the Hendersons' doorbell and tells them, in vivid detail, about a break-in at a house two blocks over, "while the family was asleep." That evening the Hendersons sign a three-year contract. They never asked how many break-ins there had actually been in the neighborhood in the past year.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a fear or a dream is pushing you to decide, stop and ask the person in front of you for the data: "In numbers, how many times has this happened around here in the past year?" Compare that risk with others you take every day without thinking about them. And never sign the same evening you heard the story.

TECHNIQUE 19

The von Restorff Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

In a series of similar things, the one that's different jumps out and sticks in memory. In 1933, the German psychologist Hedwig von Restorff had volunteers study lists of items that were all of the same kind, with a single odd one out: for example, a number among lots of syllables. The odd one out was remembered much better than the rest. The mind glosses over uniform items and locks right onto whatever stands out.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Pick one thing you want people to remember and make it different from everything else: a color, a box around it, a pause, an object on the table. Only one, though: if you highlight five points, none of them stands out anymore. The same goes for speaking. After ten sentences in the same tone, lower your voice and slow down on the sentence that counts.

◆ EXAMPLE

A pizza place in Chicago has a menu with forty pizzas, all listed the same way, and just one inside a red box labeled "House Favorite." It also happens to be the one the owner makes the most money on. A month later it's the most-ordered pizza in the place, and no customer could tell you why they picked it.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

What they point out to you is what they want you to remember. In a contract, a flyer, or an estimate, the highlighted line is the benefit; the identical lines in small print are often the cost. Before deciding, read precisely the parts nobody highlighted and ask: "Besides the part you've highlighted, what are the other line items?"

TECHNIQUE 20

Social Proof

✦ WHAT IT IS

When we don't know what to do, we look at what other people are doing. If lots of them are doing it, we assume it's the right choice. In 2009, Hongbin Cai, Yuyu Chen, and Hanming Fang measured this in the *American Economic Review*, at a restaurant chain in Beijing: when the tables displayed cards listing the five dishes other customers ordered most, demand for those dishes rose by 13 to 20 percent.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

When the person you're talking to is torn between too many options, make the most common choice visible: "This is the model eight out of ten customers choose." In moments of doubt, knowing which way the majority is going makes deciding less of an effort. Use real numbers that can be checked. And never say "lots of people don't do it": that teaches the person that not doing it is normal.

✦ EXAMPLE

Emma's school needs to collect permission slips for the field trip. The notice "Many families haven't responded yet" doesn't move anyone. The following week, the class parent posts in the group chat: "Twenty out of twenty-five families have already confirmed." Within two days, almost everyone responds.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself: "Would I still do it if nobody else did?" Check whether the crowd is real: reviews that all sound alike, all posted on the same day, are a warning sign. And to anyone pushing you with "everybody's already bought one," answer: "Good for them. I'm looking at whether it works for me." The majority can be wrong, especially when it was put together by the person doing the selling.

TECHNIQUE 21

Authority Bias

◆ WHAT IT IS

We give too much weight to the opinion of anyone who strikes us as an authority, even when they're talking about things outside their field. Lab coats, titles, uniforms, and a confident tone switch off critical thinking. In 1963, Stanley Milgram, at Yale, showed that many ordinary people were willing to give a stranger electric shocks they believed were painful, just because a researcher in a lab coat told them to continue. The shocks were fake. The obedience wasn't.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you have real expertise, make it visible before you speak: your title, your years of experience, the concrete case you solved. Stay within your field and state your limits: "I can help you with this. For the tax side, talk to an accountant." People who state their limits become more credible on everything else.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the pharmacy, an older woman asks for a memory supplement. A customer in line, wearing a jacket and tie, introduces himself as an "engineer" and confidently recommends a product he saw on TV. The woman buys it, without listening to the pharmacist, who was about to suggest something else. When it comes to supplements, an engineer knows no more than she does.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask two questions: "Is this person an expert in this specific field?" and "What evidence are they offering, besides the title?" Separate the uniform from the message: a title is a clue, not proof. If someone cuts you off with "trust me, this is what I do for a living," answer: "I do trust you, and that's exactly why I'm asking: what data are you basing this on?"

TECHNIQUE 22

The Default Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

Faced with an option that's already selected (what's called the default), most of us leave it as it is. Changing it takes effort, and the preset option looks like the one "recommended" by someone who knows best. In 2003, Eric Johnson and Daniel Goldstein compared several European countries: where people are organ donors unless they say no, there are far more donors than where people have to sign up.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

If you want a choice to be made, make it the preset one, and always keep the way out easy and visible. On forms, in meetings, in invitations: "Unless I hear otherwise, see you Thursday at ten." Anyone who doesn't reply has already said yes. The default has to serve the other person's interests too. Otherwise it's a trap, and sooner or later it will be thrown back in your face.

➤ EXAMPLE

Lisa signs up online for a new phone plan. The "recommended" plan is already highlighted and selected, with auto-renewal switched on and a bundle of extra services included. She's in a hurry, so she clicks "Continue." Two months later, she realizes she's paying almost twice what she thought.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Treat every pre-checked box as a question, not an answer. Uncheck everything that's preselected and put back only what you want. In a store or on the phone, say right away: "Let's start with the basic plan, no add-ons, and I'll tell you what to turn on." The default option is often the best one for whoever set it up, not for you.

TECHNIQUE 23

Everyone Sees a Different Game

◆ WHAT IT IS

The same event, seen by two different groups, becomes two different events. We don't interpret facts after we've seen them: we see them already filtered through who we are and whose side we're on. In 1954, Albert Hastorf and Hadley Cantril showed film of a very rough football game between Princeton and Dartmouth to students at both schools. Each side saw far more infractions by the other team. It was as if they had watched two different games.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before you tell a group about something that happened, ask yourself whose side they're on, and start from what they also recognize as true. If you need to get two sides to agree, don't ask "who's right?" Have each side describe the facts through the other side's eyes. Only then do you discuss it.

◆ EXAMPLE

After a clash on the school council between the teacher representatives and the parent representatives over dismissal times, the principal gets two opposite accounts of the same meeting. Instead of picking one, she calls both groups in together and asks a single question: "Can you tell me what the other group asked for, in their words?" For the first time, they listen to each other.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When it seems obvious who's in the wrong, ask yourself: "Would I see it the same way if my team had done it?" Look for an account from someone who isn't on either side. And watch out for anyone who tells you what happened only after reminding you whose side you're on.

TECHNIQUE 24

The Narrative Fallacy

➤ WHAT IT IS

Faced with scattered facts, the mind stitches together a story with a beginning, a reason, and an ending, even where there's nothing but chance. A coherent story seems true, and coherence gets mistaken for proof. In 1944, Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel, in the *American Journal of Psychology*, showed a silent film in which two triangles and a circle moved around a rectangle: almost all the participants spontaneously came up with a dramatic story, full of intentions, jealousy, and distinct personalities.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you present a project or a result, put it inside a simple story: starting point, obstacle, turning point, outcome. People remember stories, not lists. But also tell the part that luck and mistakes played: sooner or later, someone will pick apart a story that's too perfect, and your credibility along with it.

➤ EXAMPLE

A friend tells Jason about an acquaintance who got rich: he quit his steady job and opened an e-bike shop "because he'd figured it all out before everybody else." Jason is about to quit his job. Missing from the story: the two shops that closed before, and the loan from his in-laws that kept the third one afloat.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a story runs a little too smoothly, ask yourself: "What facts are missing? How many people did the same thing and had it go badly?" Nobody tells the stories of the people who failed, and that's why the success stories look easy. To anyone who brings you the perfect case, ask: "Great, but out of ten people who tried, how many did it work out for?"

TECHNIQUE 25

The Barnum Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

We accept vague statements that apply to anyone as accurate descriptions of ourselves. In 1948, psychologist Bertram Forer gave his students a “personality profile” that seemed personal: in reality, it was identical for everyone, and partly taken from a horoscope. Almost all of them rated it as very accurate. It’s the mechanism behind horoscopes, fortune tellers, and online quizzes.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Barnum statements have three ingredients: they’re flattering, they cut both ways (“sometimes you love being around people, and sometimes you need time to yourself”), and they’re vague enough to leave the listener the job of filling in the details. At a first meeting, a line like that makes the other person feel understood within seconds. Use it to open a conversation, never to pretend you know things you don’t.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a wellness expo, a “holistic consultant” looks Amanda in the eye and says: “You give a lot to others, but you often feel you don’t get the same back.” Amanda is moved. Ten minutes later, she walks out with a six-session program, already paid for.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Try the neighbor test: would the statement also fit your cousin, your coworker, anyone at all? If so, it says nothing about you. Ask for a specific detail you can check: “Can you give me a concrete example, with a fact and a date?” Someone who really knows you can give one. Someone putting on an act can’t.

CHAPTER 02

Cognitive Biases and Heuristics

The brain takes shortcuts to decide quickly, and they almost always work. This chapter gathers the shortcuts that fail in predictable ways. If you know them, you can use them to make yourself better understood, and above all you can spot them when someone uses them to steer your choices.

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TECHNIQUE 26

The Availability Heuristic

◆ WHAT IT IS

We judge how likely something is by how easily an example comes to mind. If we can recall a case right away, we assume it's common. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman described it in 1973. The problem is that how easily we remember something depends on things that have nothing to do with how often it happens: how much TV talks about it, how frightening the scene was, how recent it is.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you want a risk or an opportunity to be taken seriously, make it easy to remember: a concrete case, recent, close to home, told with one detail that sticks. A vivid example beats a spreadsheet. Bring it up on several occasions, always with the same image, until it becomes the first thing that comes to mind.

◆ EXAMPLE

After a news segment about the grandparent scam, Mrs. Baker, eighty-two, won't open the door to anyone, not even the furnace technician she called herself. Meanwhile she keeps opening every text from "the bank" that lands on her phone, which is the risk she actually runs every week.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When something seems to be happening "more and more," ask yourself: "Is it really, or have I just heard about it recently?" Look for the data, not the example. If someone answers a number with a story, tell them: "That's a single case. Out of a hundred times, how often does it really happen?"

TECHNIQUE 27

The Representativeness Heuristic

➤ WHAT IT IS

We judge how likely something is by how closely it matches our mental picture of it, and we forget how common it is. In 1983 Tversky and Kahneman showed this with the famous Linda problem: described as bright and socially engaged, Linda was judged by many people as more likely to be “a bank teller and a feminist activist” than simply “a bank teller.” That’s impossible: the second group contains the first.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

If you want a proposal to be taken for what it is, present it with the typical signs of its category. A professional estimate has a letterhead, clear line items, and an expiration date. A handmade product shows the name of the person who made it and a few imperfections. People compare against their mental model before they even read the details.

➤ EXAMPLE

Interviewing for a warehouse job, the owner turns down Alexandra, who has an English degree, glasses, and a soft voice: “She’s not the type.” He hires a burly young man who looks like the perfect warehouse worker. Alexandra had five years of experience driving forklifts; the young man had none.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a description seems “typical,” ask yourself: “How many cases like this exist, all told?” The more detailed a story is, the truer it seems, and the less likely it is. Look at the base rates before the resemblance, and ask anyone who judges by eye: “Setting impressions aside, what results has this brought so far?”

TECHNIQUE 28

The Affect Heuristic

◆ WHAT IT IS

We decide with the emotion of the moment and then call it judgment. If something makes us feel good, we also believe it's useful and low-risk; if it makes us feel bad, we believe it's useless and dangerous. In 2000 Paul Slovic and his colleagues showed that risks and benefits, in our heads, move together: what we like also seems safer.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before you present an idea, take care of the feeling that comes with the first contact: a pleasant setting, a warm tone, an example that makes people smile. The evaluation comes later, but it starts from there. For the same reason, don't present a good proposal at a tense moment: the negative emotion sticks to the idea and never comes off.

◆ EXAMPLE

Frank and Hillary tour two preschools for their son. At the first, a smiling teacher greets them, there's a smell of cake, and the kids are singing. At the second, closer to home and better equipped, it's raining and the front office is in a hurry. They pick the first, and when they compare costs they find every reason to have done so.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't decide in moments of strong emotion: happiness, anger, fear. Ask yourself: "How would I judge this choice if I didn't care either way?" Write the pros and cons on a sheet of paper and put the brakes on your enthusiasm: "I like the proposal, but I'll decide only after comparing costs at the end of the week."

TECHNIQUE 29

The Halo Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

A single striking quality (good looks, charm, a beautiful store) colors our judgment of everything else. If a person is attractive, we also believe they're smarter and more honest. The psychologist Edward Thorndike described it in 1920, noticing that officers who gave a soldier a good rating for appearance tended to rate him highly for intelligence and character as well.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Take care of the first visible detail, because it becomes the lens for everything else: being on time for the first meeting, a clean business card, the first page of a document. Choose your best quality and make sure it's the first one the other person runs into. Everything else will be read in that light.

➤ EXAMPLE

A restaurant opens downtown with meticulous decor and elegant waiters. The pasta is average, the service slow. The first reviews, though, talk about "refined cuisine" and "attentive service." The impression at the door did the rest.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Judge one quality at a time, with separate criteria. When you're choosing between people or suppliers, prepare a grid of items and score each one before you look at the total. There's also the reverse, the horn effect: a single visible flaw makes everything else look worse.

TECHNIQUE 30

Confirmation Bias

✦ WHAT IT IS

We look for, notice, and remember mostly what proves us right. It's a filter on reality that lets confirmations through and blocks the rest. In 1960 Peter Wason asked people to discover the rule behind the sequence 2, 4, 6: almost everyone proposed sequences that confirmed their own idea, and almost no one tried to disprove it. So the real rule stayed hidden.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

If you want to convince someone, start from what they already believe and show that your proposal confirms it: "You've always said quality matters more than price: that's exactly why this solution is right for you." People who feel confirmed listen; people who feel contradicted shut down and stop hearing.

✦ EXAMPLE

Simon has gotten it into his head that his new coworker is trying to outshine him. From that day on he notices every time the coworker talks to the boss, and he doesn't notice the times the coworker covers for him in meetings. After a month he has a list of "evidence" and no desire to look at anything else.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself: "What would make me change my mind?" If you can't answer, you're not evaluating, you're defending. Deliberately look for information that contradicts you, and play devil's advocate with your own beliefs before someone else does.

TECHNIQUE 31

Disconfirmation Bias

✦ WHAT IT IS

Information that proves us wrong gets examined under a magnifying glass; information that proves us right gets accepted with no checks at all. For the first, the question is “Must I believe this?”; for the second, “Can I believe this?” In 1979 Charles Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark Lepper gave supporters and opponents of the death penalty the same two studies, one for and one against: each side found the study that agreed with them solid and the other one full of flaws. By the end, the two groups were further apart than before.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

If you have to bring an inconvenient fact, don’t arrive with a frontal attack: get there through the other person’s sources, words, and goals. “Let’s start from your January numbers.” And let the other person draw the conclusion. A fact they can check for themselves gets past even the strictest scrutiny.

✦ EXAMPLE

The new sales manager shows the owner of a furniture company that younger customers buy online. The owner spends half an hour tearing the research apart: “Who did it? How many people did they ask?” The next week he reads an article that says the opposite and pins it to the bulletin board without a single question.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Use the same yardstick for everything. When you see a fact you like, ask the same questions you’d ask of a fact you don’t. Ask yourself: “If this study said the opposite, would I find it this solid?” And when someone dismisses an inconvenient fact, ask them: “What evidence would be enough to change your mind?”

TECHNIQUE 32

The Framing Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

The same information, presented in different ways, leads to different choices. Psychologists call it framing. “Nine out of ten survive” and “one out of ten dies” say the same thing, but the first sentence reassures and the second frightens. Tversky and Kahneman demonstrated it in 1981. People changed their choice depending on whether the same options were described in terms of lives saved or lives lost.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Choose the frame that matches the action you want. To get someone to make a prudent choice, talk about what’s being protected: “With this policy, your house stays safe.” To get someone who’s stuck to move, talk about what they’re losing: “Every winter without insulation, you’re throwing heating money out the window.” Losses move people more than gains.

◆ EXAMPLE

The gym near Anna’s apartment tests two flyers. The first says: “Join in January and save \$50.” The second: “Wait until February and you lose your \$50 discount.” The offer is identical, but the people showing up at the front desk are mostly holding the second flyer.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone presents you with a choice, flip it around: if they frame it as a gain, think of it as a loss, and vice versa. If your decision changes, you’re deciding on the words, not the substance. Ask for the bare numbers, without adjectives: “Can you give me the raw figure? Out of a hundred times, how often does it work and how often doesn’t it?”

TECHNIQUE 33

Negativity Bias

➤ WHAT IT IS

The negative weighs more than the positive. One criticism stays with us longer than ten compliments; one bad experience wipes out many good ones. In 2001 Roy Baumeister and his colleagues gathered a long review of studies under a title that says it all: “Bad Is Stronger Than Good.” For our ancestors, noticing a threat was a matter of life and death, and the brain has stayed that way.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

If you have to give feedback, remember that the negative part will be felt much more strongly: say it once, precisely, and pair it with real, concrete recognition. If, on the other hand, you want to grab attention, start with a problem, a risk, something that’s wrong: the negative opens ears. Then bring the solution.

➤ EXAMPLE

Out of twenty glowing reviews of her bed-and-breakfast in Savannah, Theresa gets a single negative one, about street noise. She spends the week thinking about it, replies to the review three times, and sleeps badly. New guests, meanwhile, keep booking just as before.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a criticism seems huge, put it back in proportion: count it along with everything else. Every evening, write down three things that went well. And when headlines frighten you, ask yourself whether they show reality or just the part that makes the most news.

TECHNIQUE 34

The Endowment Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

Something seems more valuable to us the moment it becomes ours. To sell it, we ask far more than we'd be willing to pay to buy it. In 1990 Daniel Kahneman, Jack Knetsch, and Richard Thaler gave a mug to half the students in a classroom. Those who had received one asked far more to give it up than the others offered to get it. A few minutes of ownership were enough.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Let people “own” the thing before they buy it: the test drive, the couch at home for a week, the first month of membership free, the house tour in which the client is already calling the kids’ room “theirs.” Once the person feels it’s theirs, giving it up becomes a loss, not a purchase they didn’t make. It only works if returning it is genuinely easy: the freedom to back out is what makes people accept the trial.

◆ EXAMPLE

The dealership lets Michael keep the car for the whole weekend. On Saturday he takes it to the beach with the kids; on Sunday he parks it outside his in-laws’ house. On Monday morning, handing it back feels like giving away something of his own. He signs the contract.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before a free trial, decide with a cool head what the thing is worth to you, and write it down. When you have to sell something of yours (your house, your car), ask an outsider for an appraisal. Your affection isn’t part of the price.

TECHNIQUE 35

The IKEA Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

We place more value on things we've built or fixed with our own hands, even only in part. In 2012 Michael Norton, Daniel Mochon, and Dan Ariely showed that people were willing to pay more for an IKEA box they had assembled themselves than for an identical one that came already assembled. The effort becomes part of the value.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Involve the other person in the result: let them choose a detail, complete a step, add an idea. A proposal they've contributed to becomes theirs too, and they'll defend it. In a meeting, instead of bringing the finished plan, bring it almost done and ask the others to complete it. The contribution has to be real and has to succeed: a task that fails produces the opposite effect.

➤ EXAMPLE

Last year the rules for the neighborhood community garden were written by the board alone, and nobody followed them. This year the association's president asks every member to propose one rule. The final rulebook is almost identical, but now everyone defends it: there's a sentence of theirs inside.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you evaluate something you made yourself (a project, a piece of furniture, an idea), ask yourself: "How much would I pay for it if someone else had made it?" When someone has you "complete" their proposal in order to tie you to it, set the boundary right away: "I'm happy to give you my opinion, but then I'll evaluate the final quote like all the others."

TECHNIQUE 36

Status Quo Bias

✦ WHAT IT IS

We prefer to leave things as they are. Every change looks like a possible loss, and losses weigh more than gains. In 1988 William Samuelson and Richard Zeckhauser showed that, with equal options, people chose the one presented as the current situation far more often. The more numerous and complicated the alternatives, the more we stay put.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

If you want to get someone to change, take the weight off the switch: do the work yourself, the forms, the data transfer, canceling the old contract. Make the cost of staying put visible: “If you leave things as they are, you’ll pay three hundred dollars more this year.” And if you are the current situation, know that you start with an advantage. You don’t need to be the best choice, you just need to give no reason to leave.

✦ EXAMPLE

For twelve years the Lombard family has had the same electricity and gas provider, the most expensive in the area. Every year they say, “We need to switch.” This year a neighbor offers to do the comparison and the online paperwork for them. In twenty minutes they’ve switched.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Treat the current situation as one of the options, not as the starting point. Ask yourself: “If I were starting from scratch today, would I choose this?” Review your contracts and subscriptions every year as if you were starting from scratch, and when someone says “We’ve always done it this way,” answer: “If we had to choose today for the first time, would we still choose this?”

TECHNIQUE 37

Unit Bias

✦ WHAT IT IS

We treat the portion we're given as the "right" one, and we tend to finish it, whatever its size. In 2006 Andrew Geier, Paul Rozin, and Gheorghe Doros left a bowl of chocolates in the lobby of a building with either a small spoon or a large one: with the large spoon, people took more. The unit decides for us when to stop.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

You decide the size of the unit. To get people to do more, offer complete packages: "the ten-lesson course," "the meal with appetizer and dessert." To help someone do less, divide things into small portions: the single-serving package, the work broken into twenty-minute blocks. The end of every portion is a moment when people choose whether to keep going.

✦ EXAMPLE

The movie theater near Greg's place changes its popcorn buckets: the medium is now almost twice as big, and costs a dollar more. Greg keeps ordering "a medium" and always finishes it before the movie ends, just like before. His hunger hasn't changed, but the new bucket steers him without his noticing.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Decide your portion before you see the one they offer you. Use smaller plates, split big packages as soon as you get home, and when you're faced with a bundle, ask yourself: "How much do I really need?"

TECHNIQUE 38

Optimism Bias

◆ WHAT IT IS

We believe things will go better for us than for others. We overestimate our chances of success and underestimate our chances of accidents, illness, and failure. In 1980 Neil Weinstein asked students to compare themselves with their classmates: almost all of them saw themselves as luckier than average when it came to life events. A little optimism makes us act; too much makes us ignore the risks.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

With a group that's about to get started, optimism is fuel: talk about what can be achieved and what has already worked. But before actually starting, ask everyone to write down the three most likely obstacles and what to do if they show up. That way the risks come out early, while they're still cheap.

◆ EXAMPLE

Nadia and Steve open an ice cream shop on a busy street. In their plan they've used July's sales, not November's, and neither of them has thought about the roadwork the city announced months ago. The first winter nearly forces them to close.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone plays on your optimism ("It'll work out for you," "You'll make it for sure"), answer: "How many people started last year, and how many are still standing today?" Base your expectations on similar cases, not on a feeling.

TECHNIQUE 39

The Planning Fallacy

➤ WHAT IT IS

We underestimate the time, cost, and risks of our projects, even when all our previous projects ran over. “This time will be different.” In 1994 Roger Buehler, Dale Griffin, and Michael Ross, in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, asked college students when they would finish their senior thesis: on average they estimated 34 days, but they took 55, and fewer than a third finished on time. We look at the plan from the inside, in the version where everything goes smoothly, and forget what usually happens.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you promise time and costs, use the “outside view”: start from how long similar projects, yours or other people’s, actually took, and add a margin. Promise less than you think you’ll do, and deliver early. People who meet deadlines, even long ones, get called back; people who promise short timelines and blow them don’t.

➤ EXAMPLE

Richard decides to set up his booth for the craft fair “in one weekend.” On Saturday he discovers the wood panels have to be cut to size; on Sunday, that the spotlights are missing; on Monday, the electrician can’t come. He opens the booth on Thursday morning, with the fair already underway.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who sells you a job with overly optimistic time and costs knows that once it’s started, you’re unlikely to back out. Ask: “On your last three similar jobs, how long did it take and how much did it cost in the end?” Before you sign, have the delivery date and a penalty for every week of delay written into the estimate.

TECHNIQUE 40

Hindsight Bias

◆ WHAT IT IS

Once something has happened, it seems to us it was predictable from the start. “I told you so.” In 1975 Baruch Fischhoff showed that people, once they knew the outcome of an event, believed they had predicted it better than they actually had. The brain rewrites the past to make it match the result.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before an important decision, yours or your group’s, put in writing what you know, what you expect, and why you’re choosing what you’re choosing. When the outcome arrives, good or bad, reread the page. That way the decision is judged with the information you had then, not the information you have afterward, and nobody can rewrite history.

◆ EXAMPLE

The vendor Monica chose for the new management software goes out of business after a year. In the meeting, the sales director says: “It was obvious. You could tell they weren’t solid.” Monica pulls up the minutes from a year earlier. The sales director had voted in favor, calling them “the safest choice.”

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone accuses you of not foreseeing what no one could have foreseen, bring the discussion back to the moment of the choice: “With the information we had then, what would you have decided?” And keep a written record of decisions: it’s the best antidote.

TECHNIQUE 41

Omission Bias

➤ WHAT IT IS

We judge harm caused by an action more harshly than the same harm caused by doing nothing. In 1990 Ilana Ritov and Jonathan Baron asked people to imagine having to decide whether to vaccinate their child: many preferred not to, even when the risk from the disease was higher than the risk from the vaccine. Harm from the vaccine would have been “their fault”; harm from the disease would not.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

If you want someone to act, show them that not acting is also a choice, with consequences of its own: “If we don’t decide today, we’ve decided to lose the client.” If, on the other hand, you want to slow down a reckless decision, shift the focus to the responsibility of whoever acts: “If we do this and it goes wrong, we’re the ones who did it.”

➤ EXAMPLE

The president of a youth basketball league has known for months that one of the hoops in the gym has a loose support cable. He doesn’t call a technician, because closing the court for two days would mean rescheduling games and listening to the coaches complain. When the backboard comes crashing down, he defends himself: “I never touched it.” That’s exactly the problem.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Judge choices by their results alone: “Which option leads to the least harm, whether it means doing or not doing?” And when someone justifies themselves with “I didn’t do anything,” ask: “What could have been done, and why wasn’t it?”

TECHNIQUE 42

Self-Serving Bias

◆ WHAT IT IS

Successes are our doing; failures are the fault of others or of bad luck. If things go well, it's because we're good; if they go badly, we blame the boss, the traffic, or the market. The bias protects self-esteem, but it keeps us from learning from our mistakes, and it makes flattery easy for anyone who knows about it.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you give someone feedback, use this mechanism in favor of the relationship: credit successes to their abilities ("The client stayed because you knew how to listen to him") and talk about mistakes as situations to fix together ("The delivery fell through: what do we need for the next one?"). The person listens without getting defensive, and actually corrects course.

◆ EXAMPLE

When Carl's store does well, it's "because I know what people want." When it does badly, it's the fault of the malls, the city, the economy. After three years of blaming outside forces, Carl has never changed his window display, his hours, or his prices.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Run the test in reverse: for every success, look for the part that was luck and other people's help; for every failure, the part that depended on you. And when someone flatters you by always telling you "It's not your fault," answer: "Thank you, but I want to understand which part depends on me, so I don't make the same mistake again."

TECHNIQUE 43**The Fundamental Attribution Error****➤ WHAT IT IS**

We explain other people's behavior by their character, and our own by the situation. If a car cuts us off, the driver is a jerk; if we do it, we were running late. In 1967 Edward Jones and Victor Harris had people read essays in favor of Fidel Castro: even knowing that the writer had been required to write them, readers thought the writer truly believed what they wrote.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you want a person to change their behavior, leave their character alone and change the environment around them. Not "You don't take care of things," but "Let's put a shelf by the door." People judged for who they are get defensive; people who get practical help change. And when you defend someone, bring the context: "That day she had three customers at once."

➤ EXAMPLE

A new supermarket cashier gives the wrong change twice in one morning. The manager writes him up as "careless." Nobody notices that his is the only register without an automatic coin dispenser, and that the line that morning stretched all the way back to the frozen foods.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to undermine trust in you attacks your character: "That's just how you are. You'll never change." Answer by bringing the conversation back to the facts and the circumstances: "Let's talk about what happened on Tuesday, and why." And before you judge someone, look for at least three explanations rooted in the situation.

TECHNIQUE 44

The Dunning-Kruger Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

People who know little about a subject tend to overrate themselves, because they lack exactly the knowledge they'd need to notice their own mistakes. People who know a lot, on the other hand, often underrate themselves, because they assume that what they find easy is easy for everyone. David Dunning and Justin Kruger described it in 1999, at Cornell University, using tests of logic, grammar, and humor.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

With beginners, don't contradict them head-on: suggest a small concrete test, a case to solve, a practical trial. A mistake discovered on your own teaches more than a hundred explanations. And if you know a subject well, don't assume it's easy for others: explain even the steps that seem obvious to you.

◆ EXAMPLE

After watching a few videos online, Valerie's brother-in-law offers to redo the wiring in her basement: "It's nothing. It'll take me an afternoon." Valerie asks an electrician for an opinion anyway, and in ten minutes he lists three things her brother-in-law didn't even know existed.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of certainty, other people's and your own, precisely where experience is thinnest. In fields where you're just starting out, ask the opinion of people who've worked in them for years. Ask yourself: "What don't I know about this subject?" And to anyone who makes it sound too easy, ask: "What's the nastiest surprise that can come up in this job, and how do we handle it?"

TECHNIQUE 45

The Law of the Instrument

• WHAT IT IS

We look at every problem through the lens of our own profession. The lawyer sees contracts, the engineer sees processes, the accountant sees costs. The philosopher Abraham Kaplan in 1964, and then the psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1966, summed it up in a line that became famous, now known as the law of the instrument: if the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. The patterns of our work are so convenient that we use them even where they don't belong.

• HOW TO USE IT

To convince a professional, speak the language of their trade: show a contractor a floor plan, an accountant a spreadsheet, a doctor a "diagnosis" of the problem and a "treatment." The proposal will seem familiar and reasonable to them. And when you ask an expert for advice, remember that they'll offer you the solution from their own field, not necessarily the right one.

• EXAMPLE

Patricia's son is doing badly in school. The psychologist recommends counseling, the doctor an eye exam, the tutor more hours of math. Each of them is right from their own point of view. The real problem is that the boy sleeps five hours a night, with his phone under the pillow.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask professionals from different fields for their opinion, and ask each of them this question: "If we couldn't use the tools of your profession, what other approach would you try?" And ask yourself, about your own work: "How would someone in the opposite line of work see this problem?"

TECHNIQUE 46

The Peltzman Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

When we feel more protected, we become less careful, and part of the benefit of the protection is lost. In 1975 the economist Sam Peltzman, of the University of Chicago, argued that new auto safety regulations were pushing some drivers to take more risks behind the wheel. Part of the risk simply shifts, often onto pedestrians and cyclists.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you introduce a safeguard at work or at home, pair it with a rule that doesn't change: "With the new alarm, nothing changes: the front door always gets locked." Never present safety as total, because people who feel sheltered stop paying attention.

◆ EXAMPLE

Ever since he got his new car with automatic braking and sensors everywhere, George checks his phone at red lights and backs up without turning around. One morning the sensor misses a small kid on a scooter right behind the bumper. Luckily, the kid gets away with nothing worse than a scare.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Every time a new safeguard gives you more peace of mind, ask yourself: "Am I paying less attention than before?" And when someone pushes you to take a risk by saying "Don't worry, it's covered" or "I've got your back," answer: "Fine, then let's decide as if there were no coverage: is the risk still worth it?"

TECHNIQUE 47

Automation Bias

✦ WHAT IT IS

We trust machines too much: GPS, algorithms, software. We follow their directions even when common sense says otherwise, because we believe they're objective and infallible. Following a direction is easy, thinking takes effort, and the machine hands us a ready-made excuse: "The system said so."

✦ HOW TO USE IT

If you present a decision based on data and tools, show the method: where the numbers come from, how they were calculated, what the system can't see. Reasoned trust lasts longer than blind trust. And if you work with an automated system, decide in advance when a human check is mandatory.

✦ EXAMPLE

The GPS sends a delivery truck down a lane in a small mountain town, narrower and narrower. There was a sign banning heavy vehicles, and the driver had seen it, but the screen said to keep going. It takes two hours and a tractor to pull the truck out.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Treat machines as assistants, not bosses. Before you follow an automated direction, ask yourself: "Does this make sense? Does it match what I'm seeing?" And when someone hides behind "The system decided," answer: "The system follows rules. Who can check them right now and authorize an exception?"

TECHNIQUE 48

The Google Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

We forget more easily what we know we can find online. The brain doesn't remember the information, but where to find it. In 2011 Betsy Sparrow, Jenny Liu, and Daniel Wegner showed this in the journal *Science*. People who believed a piece of information would be saved on the computer remembered it worse than people who thought it would be deleted.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you want something to really be remembered, don't say "I'll just email it to you": have the person repeat it, write it by hand, explain it in their own words. If, instead, you want to become someone's point of reference, become the "where" yourself: the guide to consult, the person to call. People who use you as their archive always come back to you.

◆ EXAMPLE

After a safety training course, the employees of a small print shop receive the manual as a PDF. A month later, no one remembers where the fire extinguishers are. The following year the manager walks everyone through the building, asking each person to touch an extinguisher and point to the nearest exit. This time they remember.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate what you can leave on your phone from what needs to stay in your head: emergency numbers, essential information, the fundamentals of your job. When you find something important, stop for a minute and repeat it. And be wary of a single source that controls everything you know about a subject.

TECHNIQUE 49

The Decoy Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

When we have to choose between two very different options, for example a cheap one and an expensive but better one, we struggle to decide. But if a third option shows up, the decoy, clearly worse than one of the two and close to it in price, the choice shifts toward the option that beats it. In 1982 Joel Huber, John Payne, and Christopher Puto, in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, showed that adding an “asymmetrically dominated” alternative raised the choice of the target product by more than 9 percentage points on average.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you present three options in a price list or an estimate, build the middle one so that it makes the advantage of the complete one obvious: the reader gets an easy comparison and sees right away why it pays to step up. All three proposals, though, must make sense and be real: adding a fake option just to inflate the price deceives the buyer.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a coffee roaster in Seattle, the owner, Neil, sells a small bag of coffee for \$6 and a large one for \$12. Few people buy the large one. Neil adds a medium size at \$11: by comparison the large one looks like a bargain, and sales of the \$12 bag take off.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The decoy isn't there to be bought: it's there to make the option next to it shine. When one item on a three-item price list seems absurd, cover it with your finger and compare only the other two: “Let's drop the middle option, it's a bad deal for anyone. Between the basic and the complete, the basic is enough for me.”

TECHNIQUE 50

The Bias Blind Spot

◆ WHAT IT IS

We see other people's biases perfectly well, and almost never our own. It seems to us that others are swayed by advertising, interests, and prejudice, while we reason objectively. In 2002 Emily Pronin, Daniel Lin, and Lee Ross, at Stanford, showed that people judged themselves less susceptible to bias than the average person. It's the bias of not seeing your own biases.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

To get someone to question an idea, don't say "You're being influenced": nobody believes that about themselves. Show the same mistake in an outside case, a third person, another company, and let the other person make the connection. With yourself, do the opposite: start from the assumption that you have the same biases as everyone else.

◆ EXAMPLE

In a meeting, Luke accuses his coworker Pam of defending a supplier "because she worked with them for years." He's right. But Luke doesn't see that he's defending the other supplier because it belongs to his business partner's cousin.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone tells you "You're one of the few people who think for themselves," they're using your blind spot: they're lowering your defenses with flattery. Answer right away: "Let's set the compliments aside and look at the numbers, for and against." And before every important decision, ask yourself: "Which bias is working on me right now?"

CHAPTER 03

The Power of a Cool Head

People who stay cool while everyone else heats up make better decisions, and they become much harder to manipulate. This chapter gathers the techniques for cooling down: first through the body, then through the mind, and finally through your words. Every technique also has its flip side: how to recognize someone who's trying to make you lose your cool.

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TECHNIQUE 51

Name What You Feel

◆ WHAT IT IS

Whoever stays cool in heated moments has a huge advantage: they decide while everyone else reacts. The simplest way to cool down is to tell yourself, in words, what emotion you're feeling. In 2007, Matthew Lieberman, at the University of California, used MRI scans to show that putting a name to an emotion turns down its activity in the amygdala, the brain's alarm center.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

The moment you feel anger or anxiety rising, stop for a second and name it silently, with one precise word: "This is anger," "This is embarrassment." Don't judge it and don't fight it: just give it a name. Then take one slow breath, and only then respond.

◆ EXAMPLE

In a meeting, a coworker goes after you in front of everyone. You feel your voice starting to crack and the urge to snap back. Inside, you say: "This is humiliation." The spike passes. You answer calmly, with facts, and the one in that room who comes off as having lost control is your coworker.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to manipulate you tries to make you react in the heat of the moment, because that's when people make bad decisions. Whenever someone pushes you to answer right away, remember: the first thing you name is your own emotion. Then you decide.

TECHNIQUE 52

The One-to-Ten Thermometer

➤ WHAT IT IS

An emotion you don't measure always feels like it's at full blast. Rating it from one to ten forces you to look at it from the outside, and that alone cools it down. The psychiatrist Joseph Wolpe used a similar scale with his patients to measure their distress before and after each exercise: in an instant, a vague feeling becomes a number you can reason about.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you feel a reaction building, ask yourself: "On a scale of one to ten, how strong is this?" Below five, you can talk and decide. Between five and seven, slow down and buy time. Above seven, don't answer, don't sign, don't write anything: bring the number down first, then act. Practice on calm days too: rating a small annoyance while you're stuck in line at the post office makes the scale automatic for when you really need it.

➤ EXAMPLE

Your daughter comes home two hours past curfew. You notice you're at an eight. Instead of starting the argument at the front door, you say: "We'll talk about it tomorrow morning, over breakfast." In the morning you're at a three, you listen to her side of the story, and the conversation finally gets somewhere.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who want something from you often pick the moment when your thermometer is running high: right after a fight, some bad news, a long day. If you notice an important request landing right then, the high number is reason enough to put it off: "There's too much tension right now for me to give you a real answer. Let's talk after lunch."

TECHNIQUE 53

Hungry, Tired, or Lonely?

◆ WHAT IT IS

Often it isn't the situation that makes us lose our cool, but the state it catches us in. Addiction support groups have used an acronym for decades, HALT, which stands for Hungry, Angry, Lonely, and Tired. These are the four conditions in which we give in most easily: to temptation, to a fight, to the wrong request. People who check for them before reacting avoid a lot of missteps.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before an important reply, run a thirty-second check. Am I hungry? How long have I been carrying this anger around? Do I have someone to talk to about it, or do I feel alone? How much did I sleep? If even one answer is yes, deal with that first: eat something, get some sleep, call a friend. Then decide.

◆ EXAMPLE

At seven in the evening, after a day at the office with no lunch break, you get a text from your brother about dividing up your grandmother's house. Your first impulse is to fire back something harsh. You run the check: hungry and tired. You have dinner, watch a movie, and reply calmly the next day, and the negotiation between the two of you stays open.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who knows how this works can use it against you: meetings that drag on until dinnertime, negotiations in the middle of the night, phone calls the minute your shift ends. If a decision reaches you in one of these states, the right answer is always the same: "It's too late to decide this well. Let's get something to eat and pick it up again tomorrow at nine."

TECHNIQUE 54

Four-Count Breathing

➤ WHAT IT IS

When stress hits, your breathing gets short and fast, and your body reads that as an alarm. Slowing it down on purpose sends the opposite message: everything's fine, you can think. Four-count breathing, also called box breathing, is taught in the military and in police departments precisely so people can stay clear-headed under pressure.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Breathe in through your nose for a count of four. Hold it for four. Breathe out through your mouth for four. Stay empty for another four. Repeat three or four times. You can do it silently, in front of anyone, without anybody noticing: in a meeting, on the phone, in a waiting room. If holding your breath makes you uncomfortable, just lengthen the exhale: that's the part that calms you.

➤ EXAMPLE

You're about to go in and see the bank manager to ask for a line of credit for your store. Out in the hallway, you can feel your heart pounding. While you wait, you do four rounds of box breathing. When you sit down, you speak more slowly, listen to each question all the way through, and answer without getting flustered, with your numbers in order.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A lot of pressure goes straight for the body: raised voices, standing too close, rushing you. Your breath is the one part of the alarm you can control. When you feel yourself getting breathless during an argument, do one round of breathing before your next sentence. The person pushing you loses the rhythm they wanted to force on you.

TECHNIQUE 55

Come Back to the Room Through Your Five Senses

◆ WHAT IT IS

When you're anxious, your mind races ahead toward everything that could go wrong and stops seeing what's actually there. Grounding, as psychologists call it, brings the mind back to the present through the senses. The best-known exercise is 5-4-3-2-1, often taught to people who suffer from panic attacks. It also works well for getting your composure back before you speak.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Silently name five things you can see, four you can touch, three sounds you can hear, two smells, and one taste. Take your time and pick precise details: not "a chair," but "the blue chair with the scratched back." It takes less than a minute. You don't need to close your eyes: you can even do it in the middle of a conversation.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a job interview, while the recruiter reads your résumé in silence, your head fills up with "what if she asks me..." You look around: the plant on the windowsill, the red pen, the hum of the air conditioner, the smell of coffee. When she looks up, you're back in the room, and you answer the question she actually asks, not the ones you were dreading.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Someone who wants to scare you drags you into the future: "Think about what happens if..." and "Just imagine if..." The more your mind wanders into the worst case, the easier you are to steer. Coming back to the facts of right now, the ones you can see and touch, breaks their grip: "Okay, but today, in concrete terms, what's actually happening?"

TECHNIQUE 56**Release Your Body, Muscle by Muscle****➤ WHAT IT IS**

Anger and fear settle into your muscles: raised shoulders, clenched jaw, balled fists. And your brain reads that tension as proof that there's danger. In 1929, the American physician Edmund Jacobson developed progressive muscle relaxation: tensing and then releasing one muscle at a time, until the whole body winds down.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

You can do the full version at home, lying in bed: tense your feet for a few seconds, then release, and slowly work your way up to your face. The quick version can be done anywhere, with three checkpoints: shoulders, jaw, and hands. If you find them tense, squeeze them a little harder for a moment, then let go all at once. Drop your shoulders, part your teeth slightly, and open your hands on the table.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the bowling league meeting, the treasurer starts in again on the unpaid dues. You notice your teeth are clenched and your hands are balled up on your knees. You release your jaw and hands and drop your shoulders. When you take the floor, your voice comes out lower and steadier, and the room listens to you.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Tense posture shows, and anyone looking for your weak spot notices it right away: they know they've hit a nerve. Every time you feel attacked, run the three-point check. Besides calming you down, a relaxed body takes away the very signal the other person was looking for.

TECHNIQUE 57

Slow Down Your Voice and Gestures

◆ WHAT IT IS

People who talk fast and move in jerks look like they're struggling, even when they aren't. People who slow down look in control, and little by little they actually get there, because the body follows the rhythm you give it. Chris Voss, a former FBI hostage negotiator in kidnapping cases, recommends the "late-night FM DJ voice" for tense moments: low, slow, and reassuring.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When tension rises, drop your pitch a notch and slow your pace, as if you were reading a bedtime story. Use short sentences and pause between them. Slow your gestures down too: no drumming fingers, no pen spinning between your hands. Slow movements, hands still on the table. After a few seconds, the calm you show on the outside starts to settle in on the inside too.

◆ EXAMPLE

You work the returns counter at a store, and a customer starts raising her voice because her return isn't being accepted. Instead of raising yours, you answer quietly, in short sentences: "I understand. Let's see what we can do together." After two sentences, she lowers her voice too, without even noticing. In an argument, calm is contagious, just like anger.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone fires words at you and keeps pressing, they're forcing their pace on you: and at that pace, people make bad decisions. Don't chase it. Answer more slowly than you were spoken to. If you need to, say it openly: "Let's take this slowly. I want to make sure I understand."

TECHNIQUE 58

The Neutral Face

• WHAT IT IS

Your face gives away what you feel in a split second: an eyebrow, the corner of your mouth. People who can keep a neutral face don't hand out free information. But be careful: this isn't about crushing the emotion. The psychologist James Gross, at Stanford, showed that suppressing emotions drains energy and even makes your memory of the conversation worse. You manage your face on the outside, while on the inside you acknowledge the emotion and let it pass.

• HOW TO USE IT

Work out your own baseline expression: relaxed face, lips closed without pressing, a calm gaze on the other person. Practice it in the mirror until it feels natural. In delicate moments, when you hear a number, an offer, or a piece of news, go back to it. If you need to react, do it afterward, in words, once you've decided what to show.

• EXAMPLE

The owner of the apartment you want to rent tells you the monthly rent. It's lower than you'd hoped. You keep a neutral face, nod slightly, and ask: "Are utilities included?" If you had smiled, the negotiation over the utilities would have been over before it started.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who know how to read faces watch you at the key moments: when they name the price, when they ask the awkward question. Knowing that it's the first second that counts helps you control it. And if someone criticizes you for not showing anything, remember that your emotions belong to you: you choose when to share them, and with whom.

TECHNIQUE 59

Surf the Urge

◆ WHAT IT IS

An urge, even a very strong one, has the shape of a wave: it rises, peaks, and then subsides on its own, as long as you don't give in to it. The psychologist Alan Marlatt, at the University of Washington, called this technique urge surfing, and he used it with people who wanted to quit drinking or smoking. It works the same way with the impulse to snap at someone, to buy something on a whim, or to send one text too many.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you feel the urge, don't fight it and don't obey it: watch it. Where do you feel it in your body? In your chest, your hands, your stomach? How strong is it right now? Follow it as it changes, breath by breath, as if you were watching a wave from the beach. The peak usually passes within a few minutes. When the wave goes down, decide what to do.

◆ EXAMPLE

A snarky message from another parent pops up in the group chat for your son's class. Your fingers are already on the keyboard. You put the phone down and watch: heat in your face, an itch in your hands. After a few minutes, the push fades. You reread the message and decide not to answer at all: by the next day, nobody's thinking about it anymore.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Many traps are built specifically to set off an urge: the bait in the comments section, the flash sale, the message designed to make you feel guilty. Whoever sets them is counting on you to act at the crest of the wave. Remember that the peak doesn't last: wait for it to come down, and you'll often find the urge to react is gone.

TECHNIQUE 60

Talk to Yourself by Name

➤ WHAT IT IS

When we talk to ourselves in tough moments, we use “I”: “I can’t do this,” “They’re humiliating me.” The psychologist Ethan Kross, at the University of Michigan, showed that simply switching pronouns, and talking to yourself in the second or third person using your own name, is enough to see the situation with more distance, as if it were happening to someone you care about.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

In tense moments, change the way you talk to yourself. Instead of “What do I do now?” ask yourself, using your name: “Mike, what are you feeling?” or “Anna, what do you need to come out of this well?” Use the same tone you’d use with a friend who’s struggling: practical, kind, no drama. A few sentences are enough, even silently.

➤ EXAMPLE

Before asking his boss for a raise, Kevin feels his palms starting to sweat. In front of the bathroom mirror, he tells himself: “Kevin, you know what you accomplished this year. Say it with numbers, and then listen.” He walks in with a cooler head, brings three specific results, and gives his boss time to respond.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A manipulator wants you to experience the situation from the inside, at peak emotion, where everything feels urgent and personal. Talking to yourself by name takes you out of the scene for a moment, to the spot where you can see the other person’s moves. Use it every time a conversation starts to overwhelm you.

TECHNIQUE 61

The 10-10-10 Rule

♦ WHAT IT IS

In the heat of the moment, every problem looks huge, because we're looking at it too close up. Pushing it out in time puts it back in proportion. In 2009, the American journalist Suzy Welch popularized a simple question, which also became a book: how will I feel about this choice ten minutes from now, ten months from now, and ten years from now?

♦ HOW TO USE IT

When a situation gets you heated, stop and ask the three questions, one at a time. Ten minutes from now: how will I feel if I answer like this right now? Ten months from now: will this still matter? Ten years from now: will I even remember it? Almost always, the knee-jerk reaction only satisfies the first ten minutes. The right choice is the one that holds up in the other two as well.

♦ EXAMPLE

Another driver steals the parking spot you've been waiting on for five minutes with your blinker on. Your first impulse is to get out of the car and have it out. You ask yourself the three questions: in ten minutes your heart would still be pounding, in ten months it won't matter at all, and in ten years you won't even remember the license plate. You drive on, find a spot a hundred yards ahead, and spare yourself a ruined morning.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Pressure works on the first ten minutes: "Decide now," "If you don't answer right away, it means you're on their side." When you feel that push, look further ahead. Anyone demanding an immediate reaction is counting on you to see only the moment.

TECHNIQUE 62

“I’m Having the Thought That...”

➤ WHAT IT IS

A thought isn’t a fact: it’s something your mind produces, often on autopilot. But in tense moments, we believe it instantly: “They’re making fun of me,” “I’ve ruined everything.” The American psychologist Steven Hayes, founder of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, uses the word defusion for the ability to step back from your own thoughts: looking at them, instead of looking at the world through them.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When a thought shows up that gets you heated, put a phrase in front of it: “I’m having the thought that...” So “They’re trying to rip me off” becomes “I’m having the thought that they’re trying to rip me off.” It seems like nothing, but it moves the thought to a different place: from truth to hypothesis. At that point, you can calmly ask yourself whether it’s true, and what to do.

➤ EXAMPLE

The furnace repairman hands you a high estimate. The thought comes up: “He’s ripping me off because he thinks I don’t know anything.” Inside, you rephrase it: “I’m having the thought that he’s ripping me off.” Instead of accusing him, you ask for the list of parts and let him know you’ll be getting a second estimate. The repairman walks you through it line by line, and part of the price comes down.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A manipulator plants thoughts and then leaves it to you to believe them: “Do you know what they’re saying about you at the office?” The thought that sticks in your head feels like your own, and therefore true. Putting “I’m having the thought that...” in front of it reminds you that it’s only a hypothesis, and that sometimes someone planted it there on purpose.

TECHNIQUE 63

It's Not About You

◆ WHAT IT IS

One of the most common mental traps is believing that whatever other people do is always about us. The psychiatrist Aaron Beck, the father of cognitive therapy, called it personalization. The coworker who doesn't say hello, the neighbor who slams the door: very often the reason lies in their day, not in you. People who know this react less and understand more.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When someone's behavior hurts you, before reacting, look for at least two explanations that have nothing to do with you. They didn't answer your text: are they in a meeting? Having problems at home? Only bring it up if you have concrete facts that involve you. And in that case, ask, don't accuse: "I get the feeling something's off between us. Am I wrong?"

◆ EXAMPLE

Your manager walks past your desk without saying hello three days in a row. Your first thought is that she has something against you. Then you find out she's handling the office move and her mind is elsewhere. If you had responded by giving her the cold shoulder, you would have created a problem that didn't exist.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A manipulator turns this tendency around: they make you believe that even things outside your control are your fault. "If I'm in a bad mood, it's because of you." Remember that other people's moods belong to them. You can feel bad and offer to help, but you don't have to carry what isn't yours.

TECHNIQUE 64

And Then What Happens?

➤ WHAT IT IS

When we're afraid, the mind jumps from the problem straight to catastrophe, skipping everything in between: a mistake at work becomes getting fired, and getting fired becomes ruin. Cognitive therapists call this leap catastrophizing. The remedy is to follow the chain all the way to the end, with a cool head, one link at a time.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Write the fear down in one line. Then ask yourself: "If that happens, then what happens?" Answer realistically, not dramatically. Repeat the question until you reach the end. You'll often find that the worst case is manageable, or very unlikely. Next to each link, write down what you could do. A fear with no name paralyzes you; a plan, even an imperfect one, gets you moving again.

➤ EXAMPLE

You sent the wrong invoice to an important client. In your head, you've already lost your job. You walk through the chain: the client notices, gets annoyed, asks for a correction. You call, apologize, and send the right invoice the same day. End of chain. So you call right away, before the client even notices, and you come out of it looking better than before.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A lot of manipulation feeds on predicted disasters: "If you don't sign today, you'll lose everything," "If you leave, no one will ever want you." Run the chain on these too, and ask out loud: "And if that happens, what actually changes?" Vague threats rarely hold up against precise questions.

TECHNIQUE 65

Drop the “I Have To”

◆ WHAT IT IS

In the 1950s, the psychologist Albert Ellis noticed that many of our strongest reactions don't come from the facts, but from rigid rules we carry around in our heads: “Other people have to respect me,” “I always have to look good,” “This can't happen to me.” When reality breaks the rule, we explode. Softening the rule cools down the reaction.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When a situation sets you off, look for the “have to” hiding under the anger and write it down. Then rewrite it as a preference: “I'd prefer to be treated with respect. It bothers me when that doesn't happen, but I can handle it.” This isn't resignation: you still want the same thing, but without it turning into an emergency. From there, choose what to do.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a restaurant, the server brings you the wrong dish for the second time. You feel the heat rising. Underneath it is the rule: “If I'm paying, the service has to be perfect.” You turn it around: “I'd like better service, and I can ask for it.” You calmly ask for the manager, and you get the right dish plus dessert on the house.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who knows your “have to” rules knows where to push. If they know that, for you, “a good parent always has to be there,” all it takes is “you're never around” to make you give in on everything. Knowing your rigid rules lets you notice when someone is using them as a lever, and stop them: “I know this matters to you, but I can't make it today. I'll come by Saturday morning.”

TECHNIQUE 66

What Depends on You

➤ WHAT IT IS

Almost two thousand years ago, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus opened his *Handbook* with a distinction: some things depend on us, and others don't. Other people's opinions, traffic, the boss's decisions: none of these depend on us. Our responses do. People who put their energy only where they can act stay calm while everyone else gets worked up.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you're facing a problem, take a sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle. On the left, what you don't control; on the right, what you do. Then let go of the left column: not because it doesn't matter, but because worrying about it changes nothing. From the right column, pick one concrete action, even a small one, to take today.

➤ EXAMPLE

Your train to a meeting in New York has been stopped for forty minutes. The breakdown, the delay, and the client's mood don't depend on you. What does depend on you: the call to give them a heads-up, the offer to join by video, going over your presentation in your seat. You arrive late but with your head on straight, and the meeting goes well anyway.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A manipulator loads you up with responsibility for things you don't control: "If your mother isn't well, it's your fault," "If the project goes wrong, it'll be because of you." Put every accusation back in the right column: "I'm sorry you're not doing well, but this isn't my fault."

TECHNIQUE 67

The Map of Your Hot Buttons

◆ WHAT IT IS

We all have sore spots: a phrase, a tone, a topic that sets us off instantly. Psychologists call them emotional triggers. As long as you don't know what they are, anyone who finds them can push them and move you however they like. Once you know them, you see them coming, and the automatic reaction becomes a choice.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Think back to the last five times you lost your cool. For each one, write down who was there, what was said, and which word or gesture set you off. Look for what repeats: being interrupted, being accused of incompetence, being compared to a sibling. That's your map. Next to each button, write down in advance the calm response you want to give next time.

◆ EXAMPLE

Rachel realizes that her hot button is the phrase "Here, let me do it," which makes her feel useless. Now, when her mother-in-law says it in the kitchen, Rachel recognizes it, takes a breath, and answers with a smile: "Thanks, but I'd really like to finish it myself." At Christmas, for the first time in years, there's no fight.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A manipulator learns quickly which buttons you have, and pushes them at just the right moment. If your map is clear, every time one gets pushed you can ask yourself: "Is this an accident, or are they doing it on purpose?" The question alone buys you the one-second head start you need to keep from reacting.

TECHNIQUE 68

The If-Then Plan

➤ WHAT IT IS

Good intentions collapse right in the heated moment, exactly when you need them. In 1999, the German psychologist Peter Gollwitzer studied “implementation intentions”: simple plans in the form “if this happens, then I’ll do that.” Deciding your response in advance makes it almost automatic, and it takes away the time emotion needs to take charge.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Think about the situations that most often make you lose your cool. For each one, write a precise sentence: “If my sister brings up the money thing, then I’ll say we’ll talk about it another time and change the subject.” “If the client raises his voice, then I’ll lower mine and ask what he needs.” Repeat them a few times, out loud too. Your brain will find them on its own when the moment comes.

➤ EXAMPLE

At every kids’ birthday party in the family, your uncle starts picking fights about politics. This time you have a plan: “If he brings up the election, then I’ll ask about his vegetable garden.” The first jab comes, and you ask about his tomatoes. Your uncle talks about tomatoes for half an hour, and the party ends in peace.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Whoever is provoking you is counting on improvisation: they want you to react on the spot, without thinking. With a plan ready, their move becomes predictable and your answer is already written. Prepare one especially for the people who know you best: they’re the ones who know where to hit.

TECHNIQUE 69

The Dress Rehearsal for the Hard Moment

◆ WHAT IT IS

The philosopher Seneca advised imagining hardships in advance, so you aren't overwhelmed when they arrive: the Stoics called it *praemeditatio malorum*. In the 1970s, the psychologist Donald Meichenbaum turned it into a modern method, stress inoculation: like a vaccine, a small, controlled dose of difficulty prepares you to withstand the real thing.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before a difficult meeting, picture the scene in detail: where you are, who's talking, the worst thing they could say to you. Notice what you feel. Then picture your calm response, word for word. If you can, rehearse out loud with someone you trust playing the other person. When the real moment comes, the scene feels like something you've already lived through.

◆ EXAMPLE

You have to tell an employee that his contract won't be renewed. The night before, you rehearse with a friend, who reacts first by crying and then by accusing you of ingratitude. The next day, when the employee raises his voice, you don't freeze: you've already heard that line, and you already know what to say.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to throw you off balance relies on the element of surprise: the unexpected question, the accusation out of nowhere. The more scenarios you've rehearsed, the fewer surprises are left. Before the meetings you dread, always ask yourself: "What's the worst thing they could say to me?" And prepare your answer.

TECHNIQUE 70

Ask for a Break When Your Heart Is Racing

➤ WHAT IT IS

The psychologist John Gottman, who spent decades studying couples in his lab, described “emotional flooding”: when your heart rate climbs too high during a fight, your body goes into alarm mode and you can no longer think straight. In that state, every word makes things worse. The only useful move is to truly stop, for as long as it takes your body to come back down.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Learn to recognize the signs: pounding heart, hot face, the urge to yell or walk out. When they show up, ask for a break clearly and with a time limit: “I’m getting too worked up to talk about this well. Let’s pick it up again in half an hour.” During the break, don’t replay the fight in your head: take a walk, read, clean up the kitchen. Then come back, as promised.

➤ EXAMPLE

You and your business partner are arguing about how to split the profits. Voices are rising, and you can feel your temples throbbing. You say: “I need an hour. Let’s pick this back up at three.” You walk around the block and grab a coffee. At three, the same discussion takes twenty minutes and ends with a written agreement.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who want to win an argument often keep it going precisely when the other person is in alarm mode, and they treat your break as running away: “There you go, running off like always.” Saying exactly what time you’ll be back is what separates a real break from running away. Repeat the time calmly and stick to it: your punctuality is the answer.

TECHNIQUE 71

The Email You Don't Send

◆ WHAT IT IS

Writing down what you feel brings order to your emotions: the psychologist James Pennebaker has been studying this since the 1980s. Abraham Lincoln was already doing it in the 1800s: when he was furious with someone, he'd write a scathing letter and then keep it in a drawer. After the Battle of Gettysburg, he wrote one to General Meade, who had let the enemy army slip away. It was found among his papers with a note: never sent, or signed.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When something burns you up, write it all out: the anger, the accusations, the words you'd never say. Do it on paper or in a document, never in your email, where one wrong click sends it. Don't edit, don't polish. Then let it sit overnight. Reread it the next day: the real point is usually in two lines, and those are the ones you can send.

◆ EXAMPLE

The president of the farm co-op has been ignoring your reports about the broken irrigation system for months. You write a furious page in a document. The next day you reread it and keep three lines: the dates of your reports, photos, and a request for a repair within fifteen days. That's the email that gets someone out to inspect it.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Someone who provokes you in writing is hoping for a heated reply, one they can forward to others or use against you. An email written in anger lasts forever. Every time you feel the urge to fire back, first write the version you won't send.

TECHNIQUE 72

Answer the Content, Not the Tone

➤ WHAT IT IS

In an argument, two messages arrive at once: what the other person says and how they say it. A rude tone is the louder of the two, and it's often what we react to, losing sight of the point. People who can separate the two stay on the ground of facts, where they're strongest, and leave the tone to whoever chose it.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you hear an aggressive remark, mentally strip away the tone and ask yourself: "If they'd said it nicely, what would they have been asking me for?" Answer that. If the tone is truly unacceptable, name it once, calmly, and then go straight back to the content: "I'll answer you, even though I don't like your tone. About the late delivery..."

➤ EXAMPLE

A client emails you: "You people are hopeless. The invoice is wrong yet again!" Strip away the tone: there's a wrong invoice to fix. You reply: "You're right, there's an error in the amount. I'll send you the corrected invoice by the end of the day." The client's next email has a completely different tone, and it ends with a thank-you.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Sometimes a harsh tone is a strategy: it's meant to shift the discussion onto your reaction, so nobody talks about the real problem anymore. "See? You get mad right away." If you answer the content, the move doesn't work, and the conversation stays where you need it.

TECHNIQUE 73

From Defense to Curiosity

◆ WHAT IT IS

When someone attacks us, we instantly turn into judges: who's right, who's wrong, who owes an apology. Curiosity switches off defensiveness. Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, of the Harvard Negotiation Project, explain this in their 1999 book *Difficult Conversations*: people who go into an argument to understand, rather than to win, get more out of it and heat up less.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you feel yourself getting defensive, change the question in your head: from "How do I prove they're wrong?" to "What do they see that I don't?" Then actually ask: "Help me understand. What made you think that?" Listen to the whole answer before you push back. Often a piece of information comes out that changes the entire discussion.

◆ EXAMPLE

Your brother accuses you of not doing enough for your mom, who's getting on in years. Instead of listing everything you do, you ask: "What made you think that?" It turns out Mom told him you never call her. The problem isn't between the two of you: it's a misunderstanding to clear up with her, together.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Curiosity also works against people who provoke you on purpose: someone looking for a fight expects a defense, not a question. When you get hit with a vague accusation, ask for concrete details: "On which occasions? What exactly happened?" Accusations built to hurt often fall apart after three calm questions.

TECHNIQUE 74

Fogging

➤ WHAT IT IS

When you're criticized, the instinct is to defend yourself or hit back. Fogging does something different: it calmly agrees with whatever part of the criticism is true, without giving ground on everything else. The American psychologist Manuel J. Smith described it in 1975, in a book on assertiveness with a telling title: *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*. As in a fog, the blows go right through and find nothing to hit.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Listen to the criticism and find the true part, even if it's only true in theory. Agree with it in short sentences: "You're right, it was late," "Maybe so, I could do better." Don't justify yourself, don't counterattack, don't promise anything. Then, if you need to, hold your position: "That's true, and I still think that..."

➤ EXAMPLE

Every time she visits, your mother tells you the house is a mess and that this just won't do. You answer with a smile: "That's true, it's messy today." She keeps going: "It's always like this." You: "Could be. Sometimes it happens." After two rounds, the criticism fizzles out on its own, without the usual fight.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Fogging is useful against people who criticize out of habit or to throw you off balance, but use it with judgment: serious, well-founded criticism deserves a real answer. And if someone uses it on you so they never have to address the substance, ask for a specific commitment: "You agree I'm right. So starting tomorrow, what are we going to do differently?"

TECHNIQUE 75

The I-Message

◆ WHAT IT IS

When we're angry, we say "you": "You never listen," "You only think about yourself." Every sentence like that sounds like an accusation, and the other person responds by getting defensive. The American psychologist Thomas Gordon, in his 1970 book for parents, proposed an alternative: the first-person message, also called the I-message. You talk about what's happening to you, not about what kind of person the other one is. The emotion gets said, but calmly, and the conversation stays open.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Line up three pieces. The fact, with no judgment: "When you get home an hour later than you said..." The effect on you: "...I worry, and dinner gets cold..." The concrete request: "...it would help if you sent me a text, even just two words." No "always," no "never," no labels on the person.

◆ EXAMPLE

Your upstairs neighbor plays loud music until midnight. Instead of knocking and opening with "You're incredibly rude," you say: "When the music goes past eleven, I can't sleep, and I get up at six for work. Could we turn it down after eleven?" The neighbor apologizes: he had no idea it carried so much.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Even the I-message can become a lever: "When you go out with your friends, I spend the whole evening anxious." The emotion may be real, but it's being used to make your decisions for you. You can acknowledge what the other person feels without taking responsibility for it: "I'm sorry you feel that way. I'm still going out tonight, and tomorrow we'll have dinner together."

CHAPTER 04

Strategic Thinking and Reading People

Thinking strategically means seeing the whole game, not just the move in front of you: what the other person wants, who decides, what happens next. Reading people means understanding who you're dealing with from their words, their choices, and the right questions. The last three techniques show the moves of people who turn these same weapons against you.

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TECHNIQUE 76

Strategic Silence

◆ WHAT IT IS

Deliberately staying quiet at the moment the other person expects an answer. Silence in a conversation makes almost everyone uncomfortable, and people who can't stand it fill it: with a justification, a concession, a piece of information they didn't mean to give. Whoever can hold the silence longest steers the conversation.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Make your offer or ask your question, then stop. Don't add anything, don't soften it, don't explain. Look at the other person calmly and count to ten in your head. The first one to speak usually gives something up. It works best after a number, a request, or a "no."

◆ EXAMPLE

In a bike shop, standing next to the road bike, the owner says: "That's as low as I can go." You don't answer. You look at him, nod slightly, and wait. After six or seven seconds he adds: "The most I can do is throw in clipless pedals and the first tune-up." The silence did the work for you.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you feel the void, recognize it for what it is: pressure, not an obligation of yours. Don't fill it. You can stay silent too, or hand the ball back with an open question: "What do you suggest?" If needed, say it calmly: "Take all the time you need."

TECHNIQUE 77

The Dramatic Pause

➤ WHAT IT IS

A deliberate pause, two or three seconds long, right before saying the important thing or right after saying it. The brain notices changes in rhythm: when the voice stops, attention rises and listeners lean in to find out what comes next. The pause works like a highlighter: it says “this matters.” Where strategic silence waits for an answer, the dramatic pause sets up a sentence.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Choose a single key sentence for each talk: the news, the number, the proposal. Get there at your normal pace, then stop, look at your listeners, and only then say it. Afterward, stop again, to let it sink in. Don’t use it every three sentences: if everything is important, nothing is.

➤ EXAMPLE

You’re presenting the results of the store’s new website to the owner. You show the visits, the inquiries, then you say: “And the most important result is...” You stop. Two seconds. “...that half of all orders now come from new customers.” The owner looks up from his phone for the first time in the whole meeting and asks you to go on.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The pause gives weight to a sentence, but it doesn’t make it any truer. When you hear a revelation arrive after a theatrical silence, ask yourself: “If they’d rushed through it, would it still seem this important?” Judge the content, not the staging, and bring the conversation straight back to specifics: “Let’s get to the point: what’s the exact figure?” Salespeople and speakers use it above all before the price and the promises.

TECHNIQUE 78

The Broken Record

◆ WHAT IT IS

Calmly repeating the same sentence, word for word, every time the other person tries to sidestep, justify themselves, or change the subject. Like a broken record. It's an assertiveness technique made famous in the 1970s by the American psychologist Manuel J. Smith. It works because every attempt to drag you somewhere else falls flat, and in the end the other person realizes that arguing is pointless.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Decide on your sentence beforehand: short, clear, polite. For example: "I understand, and I'd like the product replaced." At every objection, acknowledge what the other person said in a few words, then repeat the identical sentence. Don't add new reasons: every reason is a foothold for a new argument. Keep your tone calm, never irritated.

◆ EXAMPLE

On the phone with your cell provider, you ask them to remove a paid service you never requested. The rep tries an offer, then "the system won't allow it," then "you'll have to go to a store." Every time, you say: "I understand, and I'd like the service turned off today." On the fourth round she transfers you to a colleague, who turns it off.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone uses the broken record on you, don't get pulled into the loop of repetitions. Point it out calmly: "I understand the request. Let's see what can actually be done." Then propose a concrete alternative or a break. And ask yourself whether the repeated request is legitimate: sometimes the broken record is simply right.

TECHNIQUE 79

The Strategic Interruption

➤ WHAT IT IS

Interrupting a speaker not out of rudeness, but to take charge of the conversation: to stop a discussion that's going off the rails, to keep a wrong statement from going unanswered, to bring everyone back to the point. Used badly, it's a display of power that breaks the other person's train of thought and forces them on the defensive. Used well, it saves a meeting.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Interrupt only for a specific reason, and say what it is: "Sorry to stop you, there's a number here that doesn't add up." Call the person by name, raise your hand slightly, speak calmly. Then give the floor back: "Please, go on." That way the interruption looks like a service to the discussion, not an attack. Never interrupt to finish the other person's sentence: it looks like listening, but it steals the scene.

➤ EXAMPLE

In a meeting, a coworker is about to promise the client an impossible delivery date. You stop him: "Jake, sorry, before we set the date let's check the warehouse." The client nods, Jake picks up again after the check, and nobody commits to a promise that can't be kept.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone interrupts you to dominate, don't give up the floor. Keep talking calmly and raise a hand slightly: "One moment, let me finish this point." Or use a bridge: "Good question, I'll get to it in a moment. First let me wrap up." If it happens every time, say so openly: "Could you let me finish, please?"

TECHNIQUE 80

Look for the Interest Behind the Request

◆ WHAT IT IS

What a person asks for, their position, almost never matches what they actually need, their interest. Roger Fisher and William Ury, of the Harvard Negotiation Project, put this at the center of their 1981 book *Getting to Yes*: two opposing positions can hide interests that fit together perfectly. Whoever finds the interest also finds the agreement.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When someone makes a rigid demand, don't argue about the demand: ask what it's for. "What worries you?" "What would happen if you didn't get it?" "What would a good solution look like for you?" Listen to the answer and look for a second path that meets the same interest at a lower cost to you.

◆ EXAMPLE

Your neighbor insists that you take out the hedge along the property line. Instead of defending the hedge, you ask what bothers her. It turns out that every fall the leaves clog her gutters. You offer to trim it on her side and to clean the gutters in November. The hedge stays, and so do good relations.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The person negotiating with you may do the opposite: hide their real interest behind an extreme position, to get you to give in on everything. Ask the questions about interest yourself, without revealing yours too early: "I understand what you're asking for. Can you explain the practical problem you want to solve?"

TECHNIQUE 81

The Power of Being Able to Walk Away

➤ WHAT IT IS

In a negotiation, the person with the better alternative if the deal falls through has more power. In the same book, Fisher and Ury call it the BATNA: the best alternative to a negotiated agreement. More than skill with words, what counts is how well you can afford to say no. And knowing you can say no also changes how calmly you speak.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before every important negotiation, write down what you'll do if you don't reach an agreement. Then strengthen that alternative: get a second quote, see another house, go to another interview. The stronger it is, the more you can hold your ground. Also set your threshold: below this number, I get up and leave. And try to figure out what the other side's alternative is.

➤ EXAMPLE

You're selling your used car. Before meeting the buyer, you get a written appraisal from a dealership: that's your alternative. The buyer offers much less. You answer calmly: "The dealership is offering me more. At this point I'd rather sell it to them." The buyer raises the offer.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to weaken you tries to convince you that you have no alternatives: "Nobody's going to give you a price like this," "Without us you're not going anywhere." Before giving in, check, and make it clear that you have other options: "Before I give you an answer, I'm going to compare at least one other quote by Friday." Often the alternative exists, and it's exactly the one the other person doesn't want you to see.

TECHNIQUE 82

Sit on the Other Side of the Table

✦ WHAT IT IS

Before a negotiation, few people ask themselves how the other side thinks. In 2008 the psychologist Adam Galinsky and his colleagues compared two approaches: trying to get inside the other party's head and trying to feel their emotions. The first group more often found creative deals in which everyone gained. Empathy helps the relationship; understanding how the other side thinks helps the deal.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Before the meeting, take ten minutes and write out the negotiation from the other person's point of view: what they want, what they fear, what constraints they have, what they'll have to tell their boss or their family afterward. Then prepare a proposal that takes all of that into account, and that the other side can defend in front of whoever holds them accountable.

✦ EXAMPLE

You want to ask your manager to let you work from home two days a week. You put yourself in her shoes: she's afraid the department will slow down and that everyone will ask for the same thing. So you propose a one-month trial, with a weekly report on results. Your manager agrees, because she has something concrete to show upper management.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The best salespeople also sit on your side of the table, and they know what worries you before you say it. If a proposal seems tailor-made for your fears, ask yourself what the person making it gains, and uncover the hidden side: "So far I see the advantages for me. What are the constraints, and what's left out?"

TECHNIQUE 83

Ask Who Benefits

✦ WHAT IT IS

Charlie Munger, for decades Warren Buffett's business partner, used to say: "Show me the incentive and I'll show you the outcome." People, even honest ones, tend to see things in the way that suits them. Understanding the incentives of the person in front of you explains many behaviors better than any speech, and lets you predict their next moves.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

When you face advice, a proposal, or strange behavior, ask yourself: How does this person get paid? What do they gain if I say yes? What do they lose if I say no? Who do they answer to? Conversely, when you want to get something, build the request so that it suits the other person too, for their own reasons.

✦ EXAMPLE

The adviser at your bank enthusiastically recommends one of the bank's own mutual funds. You ask yourself: does he get a commission on that fund? You ask for a comparison with similar products from other companies, with the fees in black and white. The differences become clear in an instant.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Advice isn't neutral just because it comes from a nice person. Before you follow it, ask openly: "What do you gain if I choose this option?" People acting in good faith answer without a problem. People who change the subject have already given you the answer.

TECHNIQUE 84

Who Really Decides

◆ WHAT IT IS

In every family, office, or company there are people who talk, people who advise, and people who decide. Often they're not the same person. Anyone who sells to businesses knows it well: you can perfectly convince the wrong person and get nowhere. Understanding who really has the power to say yes, and who can block everything even without having it, is the first step of any strategy.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before an important request, ask yourself: Who signs? Who does the person who signs listen to? Who can say no even without the title to say yes? If you don't know, ask without embarrassment: "Besides you, who else will be involved in the decision?" Then adapt the proposal: facts for the person who decides, reassurance for the person who advises.

◆ EXAMPLE

You're showing an engaged couple a quote for their wedding photography. You mostly talk with the groom, who asks lots of questions. But you notice that before every answer he glances at the bride's mother, who will be paying for it. You start showing her the printed albums and the delivery times. The contract arrives a week later.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A classic negotiating move is hiding behind an absent boss: "I'd be fine with it, but I have to check with my boss." If it keeps happening with the same person, cut to the chase: "Then let's talk to your boss together, so we can settle everything at once."

TECHNIQUE 85

Second-Order Thinking

➤ WHAT IT IS

First-order thinking asks: “What happens if I do this?” Second-order thinking keeps going: “What will the others do in response? And what effect will that have on the next step?” The American investor Howard Marks considers it the difference between people who decide well and people who decide like everyone else. The first consequence of a choice is almost always the most obvious one; the ones that matter come later.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before a decision, write down the immediate consequence. Then ask yourself “What will the others do in response?” for at least two more steps. Also ask how the people involved will react: coworkers, customers, family, competitors. If the choice still looks good at the third step, go ahead. If it turns bad, look for another path before you move.

➤ EXAMPLE

The owner of a pizzeria is thinking about cutting prices to beat the competition. First order: more customers. Second order: the pizzeria across the street cuts its prices too. Third order: both make less money, with the same customers as before. Instead, he decides to add home delivery, which the other place doesn’t offer.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to talk you into something shows you only the first order: the immediate advantage, the discount, the satisfaction. Before you say yes, ask the second-order questions yourself: “And then? What happens in six months? Who pays, in the end?”

TECHNIQUE 86

The Premortem

◆ WHAT IT IS

A project is usually analyzed after it fails: the postmortem. The psychologist Gary Klein proposed doing it beforehand: imagine the project has already failed and ask why. He explained it in 2007 in the *Harvard Business Review* as a practical remedy for excessive optimism in work teams.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Gather the people involved, or do it on your own. Say: “It’s one year from today. The project was a disaster. Each of you, write down why it went wrong.” Allow a few minutes of silence. Then read the causes and, for the most likely ones, decide right away how to prevent them. It works because it gives everyone permission to voice the doubts they’d otherwise keep to themselves.

◆ EXAMPLE

You and your brother want to rent out your grandparents’ house to tourists. Before applying for the renovation loan, you do a premortem. Three causes come up: the town’s permits, a season that’s too short, and fights over who looks after the guests on weekends. You decide to write up an agreement on shifts right away and to get advice from a contractor.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone presents you with an opportunity that’s all enthusiasm and no risk, do the premortem on your own: “If a year from now I regret saying yes, what will the reason be?” The first answer that comes to mind is the one to check before signing, by asking the other person: “If this plan stalls six months from now, where do you think the weakest point will be?”

TECHNIQUE 87

The OODA Loop

➤ WHAT IT IS

Colonel John Boyd, a fighter pilot in the US Air Force, described every confrontation as a four-step loop: observe, orient, decide, act. OODA, for short. The winner is whoever runs through the loop faster and more precisely than the other side, because each of their moves lands before the opponent has understood the previous one. Today it's also studied in business and in sports.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

In a fast-changing situation, don't jump straight to action. Observe: what's really happening? Orient: what does it mean, in light of what you know? Decide on one move, just one. Act, then go right back to observing the effect. The most important step is orientation: that's where you correct the mistaken ideas you started with.

➤ EXAMPLE

You run a small bike shop, and a big sporting goods chain opens on the same street. You observe: customers buy cheap bikes there, but come back to you for repairs. You orient: your advantage is the repair shop. You decide to focus on fast repairs and rentals. You act, and after a month you look at your sales and adjust your aim.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to throw you off tries to stall you right at the orientation stage, constantly reshuffling the deck with news, requests, and new deadlines. If you feel you no longer understand what's going on, break the other person's rhythm: "Too many new things all at once. Send me a summary by text and I'll think it through calmly."

TECHNIQUE 88

Tit for Tat, but Generous

✦ WHAT IT IS

In the early 1980s, the American political scientist Robert Axelrod organized a tournament between computer programs that faced off in a game where they could cooperate or betray. The simplest strategy won, submitted by Anatol Rapoport: start by cooperating, then do whatever the other player did on the previous move. Nice, but not naive. Later studies showed that it also pays to forgive a mistake every now and then.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

In long-term relationships, with coworkers, suppliers, neighbors, always start by cooperating. If the other person cooperates, keep going. If they do you wrong, respond once, proportionately and without revenge: make it clear that it doesn't come free. As soon as the other person goes back to cooperating, do the same. And let a few small mistakes slide: they could be accidents.

✦ EXAMPLE

The produce supplier for your restaurant delivers late for the first time. You let it go. The next week he's late again: you apply the small penalty in your agreement and explain it calmly over the phone. The deliveries go back to being on time, and the relationship stays good.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

This strategy protects you from people who take advantage of kindness: someone who always cooperates, no matter what, becomes easy to exploit. If someone takes without ever giving back, set a clear boundary: "This time I'll meet you halfway. From now on, we both stick to the agreement." Generosity only works if the other person knows it has a limit.

TECHNIQUE 89

Leave the Other Person a Way Out

➤ WHAT IT IS

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu advised always leaving a surrounded army a way to escape: those with no way out fight to the end. The same thing happens in arguments. People backed into a corner defend their pride at any cost, even against the facts. People who can back down without losing face, back down.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you're right and the other person is wrong, don't demand that they admit it. Offer an explanation that saves their dignity: "With the information we had, it was the most logical choice," "Maybe my email wasn't clear." Then move straight on to the solution. You don't need to win the argument: you need to get the result.

➤ EXAMPLE

Your neighbor has always claimed that your renovation caused the crack in your shared wall. The inspector's report says otherwise. Instead of waving the report around, you say: "It was easy to think so, the work was going on at the same time. Shall we split the repair the way the HOA rules say?" The neighbor agrees, without having to admit anything.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Manipulators know this technique too, and use it in reverse: they offer you a comfortable way out to get you to give in on an important point. "Come on, it's not your fault. Just sign and let's forget about it." When you're offered a very comfortable way out, look at where it leads and slow down: "I'm not looking for a shortcut. I'd rather get this point clear before I sign."

TECHNIQUE 90

The Waiter Rule

◆ WHAT IT IS

The way people treat someone who can do nothing for them says more about them than the way they treat someone who can help them. It's the waiter rule: Bill Swanson, head of the American company Raytheon, included it among his rules of management, warning not to trust anyone who's nice to you but rude to the waiter. To really read someone, watch how they behave with those below them.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before you trust a new business partner, supplier, or boss, watch them where they don't need to impress anyone: with the waiter, the receptionist, the delivery guy, the parking attendant. Notice the tone, the patience, the thank-yous. A business lunch with a small mix-up in the kitchen tells you more than ten meetings at the office.

◆ EXAMPLE

Alicia has to choose between two contractors for her remodel. At the site visit, the first owner is extremely polite to her, but chews out his worker in front of everyone. The second apologizes to his foreman for calling him late. Alicia picks the second: she already knows how the first would treat her at the first sign of trouble.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone trying to win you over shows their best side only to you. If you see contempt for people who don't count, know that one day you could be the one who no longer counts. Don't judge by the attention you get; look at the attention others get and, before signing a deal, ask a former employee or supplier: "How do they behave when something unexpected comes up?"

TECHNIQUE 91

Ask About the Last Time

➤ WHAT IT IS

People are terrible at predicting what they'll do, but much more reliable when they describe what they've done. That's why the most serious job interviews don't ask "How would you handle an angry customer?" but "Tell me about the last time you handled an angry customer." Rob Fitzpatrick, in his 2013 book *The Mom Test*, gives the same advice to anyone who wants to find out whether people really like an idea: questions about the past, never about the future.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Turn every hypothetical question into a question about the concrete past. Instead of "Would you buy this product?" ask "The last time you had this problem, how did you solve it? How much did you spend?" Instead of "Are you a punctual person?" ask "When was the last time you delivered something late? What happened?" Listen for details: true stories are full of them.

➤ EXAMPLE

You're choosing a babysitter for your daughter. Instead of asking whether she's patient, you ask: "Can you tell me about a time a child didn't want to go to bed? What did you do?" The first candidate stays vague. The second describes a specific evening, with names, times, and a bedtime story she made up. You pick the second.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People selling you something may do the opposite: ask questions about the future that get you to promise. "If I gave you this price, would you sign today?" When you hear a hypothetical question that commits you, bring it back to specifics: "Send me a text with an itemized summary, so I can evaluate it on real numbers."

TECHNIQUE 92

Ask What “Other People” Think

◆ WHAT IT IS

Asked directly “What do you think?” people answer with what seems right to say. If you ask what other people think, they often answer with what they think themselves. Market research has used indirect questions for decades precisely to get around the desire to look good, which psychologists call social desirability.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you suspect the honest answer is embarrassing, shift the question onto other people: “How do you think your coworkers took it?” “What do customers usually think of this service?” “Why do you think people aren’t signing up for the class?” Listen carefully: without realizing it, the person answering puts a lot of themselves into the answer.

◆ EXAMPLE

You’ve recently taken over a department, and you want to understand why morale is low. When you ask “Do you like it here?” everyone says yes. So you ask Martha: “What do you think would make someone here change jobs?” The answer comes right away: “Saturday shifts decided at the last minute.” Now you know where to start.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone asks you what “other people” think of the boss, the family, or the neighbor, know that your answer will be read as your own opinion, and possibly passed along. Answer with facts, not impressions: “I wouldn’t know. You’d have to ask them.”

TECHNIQUE 93

Listen to the Pronouns

➤ WHAT IT IS

The smallest words, I, we, you, are the ones we control least, and that's why they reveal so much. The psychologist James Pennebaker, at the University of Texas, analyzed a huge number of texts and conversations, and tells the story in his 2011 book *The Secret Life of Pronouns*. Among his findings: people who feel they hold a position of power tend to say "I" less, while people experiencing distress or insecurity say it more often.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

In a conversation or an email, pay attention to the pronouns. A coworker who talks about a successful project with "we" and a failed one with "they" is telling you where they stand. A supplier who answers a complaint without ever saying "I" or "we" is distancing themselves. It goes for you too: saying "we" builds a team, saying "I" takes responsibility.

➤ EXAMPLE

Two candidates describe a project that went badly. The first says: "The client changed their mind, the team wasn't ready." The second: "I underestimated the timeline, and from that I learned to..." The second candidate uses "I" exactly where the mistake is. She's telling you she owns her responsibilities.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

You also leave traces in your pronouns when you write. In sensitive messages, reread: are you distancing yourself where you should be taking responsibility? Careful readers notice. And don't draw conclusions from a single clue: pronouns suggest, they don't prove.

TECHNIQUE 94

The SCARF Model

◆ WHAT IT IS

In 2008 David Rock, a researcher in leadership and neuroscience, summed up in an acronym the five things people defend most in their dealings with others: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness. SCARF, for short. When one of these is threatened, the brain reacts as it would to danger. When it's reassured, the other person opens up.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before a sensitive conversation, ask yourself which of the five needs is strongest in the person you're dealing with. People who care about status need recognition, ideally in front of others. People who want certainty want clear timelines and steps. People who defend their autonomy want to be able to choose. People who live on relatedness want to feel part of the group. People focused on fairness want the same rules for everyone. Speak to that need.

◆ EXAMPLE

You have to tell a longtime team member that his office is being moved. You know that status matters to him. You tell him first, before anyone else, and let him choose between two rooms. The move, which you feared would turn into a big deal, happens without a single complaint.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Many provocations hit exactly one of these five points: status ("This isn't for someone like you"), fairness ("They gave it to the others"), autonomy ("You'll do it this way, period"). When you feel a strong reaction, ask yourself which of the five has been touched. Recognizing it lets you respond to the problem and not to your wounded pride: "Let's set aside who's right and look at the numbers in the proposal."

TECHNIQUE 95

Keep Three Explanations Open

➤ WHAT IT IS

Faced with strange behavior, the mind immediately picks an explanation and then looks only for evidence that confirms it. Richards Heuer, a CIA analyst for decades, wrote a manual in 1999 for his intelligence colleagues on how to avoid this mistake. His method, the analysis of competing hypotheses, asks you to keep several explanations open and to look for the evidence that rules them out, not the evidence that confirms them.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When someone does something you don't understand, write down at least three different explanations, including the ones that seem least likely. Then, for each one, ask yourself: what fact would disprove it? Go look for those facts. The right explanation is the one that holds up best, not the one that came to mind first.

➤ EXAMPLE

For a month, a longtime client of your accounting practice hasn't answered your emails. The possible explanations: she's switched accountants, she has personal problems, your emails are landing in her spam folder. You check the third in two minutes: her company has changed its email address. You write to the new one, and she answers the same day, apologizing.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to convince you of something offers you a single explanation, ready-made, with the evidence to confirm it: "It's obvious they've got it in for you." Before you accept it, look for the other two and say it out loud: "It could be the way you say, but there are at least two other possible explanations. Let's check before we draw conclusions." A story that only holds up until you look for another one isn't a solid story.

TECHNIQUE 96

Don't Show Your Cards Too Soon

◆ WHAT IT IS

When you suspect someone is lying, the most common mistake is to put the evidence on the table right away: that lets the other person adjust their version. Two Swedish researchers, Pär Anders Granhag and Maria Hartwig, developed a method for interrogations called the strategic use of evidence: first you let the person tell the whole story, then you compare it with the facts, one at a time. People telling the truth stay consistent; people lying stumble.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

First gather what you know, quietly. Then ask open questions and let the person talk: "Tell me how that evening went." Ask detailed questions precisely on the points where you have evidence, without saying you have it. Only at the end, if the story doesn't add up, show one fact at a time and ask how it can be explained.

◆ EXAMPLE

The register at your store is fifty dollars short, and one of your employees did the closing. You have the closing receipt. Instead of showing it, you ask: "How did the evening go? Did you close out the register?" The answer comes with a detail you didn't know: a refund to a customer, never recorded. Now you know exactly what to check.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone asks you a lot of detailed questions about an incident without telling you why, they may already have something in hand. If you're telling the truth you have nothing to fear, but you have the right to ask: "Why are you asking me these questions? What have you been told?"

TECHNIQUE 97

Tell the Story Backward

➤ WHAT IT IS

Lying takes effort: you have to invent, remember what you invented, and control your reactions, all at once. In 2008 the psychologist Aldert Vrij, at the University of Portsmouth, showed that asking people to recount an event starting from the end and working backward increases that effort. People telling the truth just remember; people lying struggle more, and let more signals slip through.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

First have the person tell the story normally. Then ask, casually: “Help me get this straight. Let’s start from the end. What happened right before you came home? And before that?” Listen for the details: the hesitations, the contradictions, the parts that disappear. No single signal proves a lie: what matters is the overall picture, compared with the first telling.

➤ EXAMPLE

Your fifteen-year-old son says he spent the afternoon studying at a friend’s house. You ask him to tell you about his day starting from dinner. He gets stuck on what he did before coming home, mixes up the times, changes the friend’s name. Without accusing him, you tell him you’d rather know the truth. The truth comes out a little later: he was at the skate park with his bike.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People telling the truth have nothing to fear from telling a story backward, but anxiety can trip anyone up. If you’re asked to go back over an event in reverse, take the time you need: “Let me think about it calmly.” Remembering slowly is not a sign of guilt.

TECHNIQUE 98

RED FLAG

Claiming the High Ground

◆ WHAT IT IS

Presenting your own opinion not as one among many, but as the most evolved, the best informed, or the most moral. People who disagree aren't just wrong: they have less intelligence, less awareness, less ethical sense. The discussion shifts from a level playing field to a hierarchy, and listeners, afraid of looking ignorant, start doubting themselves instead of the argument.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by sentences that judge the speaker instead of what they're saying: "That's a common view among people who haven't looked into it," "With a little experience, you see it right away," "One day you'll get there too." It often comes with a patient smile, like someone explaining something obvious to a child. The facts, on the other hand, never come.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the parents' meeting, you propose moving the field trip to the spring. Another parent replies: "I get it, that's the idea people have when they don't know experiential education. Anyone who's read anything on the subject knows fall is more formative." No data, just a pedestal to look down on you from. Several parents nod, so as not to be the ones who "haven't read."

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Bring the discussion back to the substance, calmly: "It doesn't matter who's read more. What data are you basing that on?" Ask for sources and data. People with real arguments bring them out; people who only had the pedestal find themselves on the ground, in front of everyone.

TECHNIQUE 99

RED FLAG

The False Superiority and Inferiority Complex

➤ WHAT IT IS

The person using it alternates between two masks: the superior one, who intimidates and makes others feel small, and the fragile victim, who asks for reassurance and makes others feel guilty. They switch from one to the other depending on what suits them at the moment. The people around them are caught in the crossfire: challenge the grandiosity and you look envious; fail to comfort the self-pity and you look heartless.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

In the grandiose phase, they list their own successes, use complicated language, take little digs at other people's ideas, and act like the only competent person in the room. In the fragile phase, usually right after a criticism, they say: "I know, my ideas are never good enough," "So I'm a failure." The purpose of the second mask is to get the criticism withdrawn and to collect comfort.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the office, a coworker dominates every meeting, corrects everyone, and uses big words. When the manager turns down one of his proposals, he changes in an instant: "Fine, I get it, I'm not up to it." Half the room rushes to say the idea was great. Two minutes earlier, the same room didn't dare open its mouth.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't believe either mask: look only at the facts. Faced with grandiosity, respond on the merits, with data. Faced with self-pity, don't withdraw the criticism: "We're not talking about you, we're talking about this proposal. As it stands it doesn't work, for these reasons. Do you have an alternative?" Always keep the same tone, calm and firm: your consistency exposes the other person's inconsistency.

TECHNIQUE 100

RED FLAG

Cognitive Overload

◆ WHAT IT IS

Burying someone in data, clauses, options, and technical terms in a short time, not to inform them, but to short-circuit their ability to reason. Working memory has a limit: when it's exceeded, confusion and a sense of inadequacy set in, and people look for the quickest shortcut out: trusting the expert, or signing just to be done with it. In debates there's a rapid-fire version, The Avalanche of Arguments in Chapter 20.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Contracts dozens of pages long in legal language, handed over in a hurry. Salespeople who rattle off features, options, and promotions without stopping, and then suggest "the simple solution." Presentations full of unreadable charts and acronyms that discourage questions. The common signal: tons of information, very little time, and at the end a single path already laid out.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the counter to sign up for a new electricity plan, the rep lists time-of-use rates, indexed pricing, rebates, penalties, and five different offers. After ten minutes your head is full. The close arrives right on cue: "Tell you what, I'll put you on the most complete plan and you won't have to think about it." It's also the most expensive.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Confusion is a stop sign: if you don't understand, you don't sign. Ask them to simplify: "Tell me in three lines what I'm paying, for how long, and how I cancel." Choose in advance the two or three things that matter to you and compare only those. For contracts and investments, get the opinion of a competent person who has nothing to gain.

PART II

THE WEAPONS OF COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER 5 Words and Persuasion

CHAPTER 6 Body Language and Signals

CHAPTER 7 Rapport and Mirroring

CHAPTER 8 Storytelling and Strategic Narrative

CHAPTER 05

Words and Persuasion

Words don't just describe reality: they frame it. In this chapter you'll find the techniques that work on sentences, from the questions that get people talking to the structures that get an idea accepted without any debate. For each one, there's a way to use it well and a way to notice when someone is using it on you.

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TECHNIQUE 101

The Echo Question

✦ WHAT IT IS

Repeating the other person's last few words, or their key word, in the tone of a question. It's the simplest listening move there is. The other person feels followed and, faced with that small gap, keeps talking and adds what they hadn't said yet. It costs nothing and pays off enormously, because it keeps the conversation on them and not on you.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

When the other person finishes an important sentence, pick up the last two or three words, or the one that carries the most weight, and let your voice rise slightly at the end, the way it does in a question. Then go quiet. Don't add comments, and don't jump in with your own opinion. Use it two or three times in a conversation, not after every sentence: done constantly, it turns into a caricature, and the other person notices.

✦ EXAMPLE

A client on the phone says: "The quote is fine. The problem is the timing." All you say is: "The timing?" The client explains that his company is changing warehouses in March and that, without delivery by February, the whole thing falls apart. In four seconds you've found the real reason he will or won't sign.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

It's a tool for good listening, not an attack. But if you notice that someone keeps repeating your words and you keep telling them more than you meant to, decide for yourself how much to say. Finish with a complete sentence and hand the question back: "Yes, the timing. And what matters most on your end?"

TECHNIQUE 102

The Funnel Question

➤ WHAT IT IS

A series of questions that starts wide and narrows little by little: first open questions, then requests for detail, and finally closed yes-or-no questions. At the start, the other person talks freely, and by the time the precise questions arrive, they've already said so much that denying it or changing their story gets hard. Doctors, recruiters, investigators, and good salespeople all use it.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Open with "How," "What," or "Tell me": "How did the first week with the new software go?" Then pick up their own words to go one level down: "You said invoicing is slow. Slow how?" Then the details: "How many invoices do you send out a day?" Only at the end comes the closed question: "So if invoicing were faster, would the software work for you?" Each step grows out of the previous answer, so the funnel just looks like careful listening.

➤ EXAMPLE

An HR manager asks a candidate what his old job was like, then what he didn't like about it, then who his direct boss was, and then: "So you left because of your relationship with your boss?" The candidate, who had meant to say "for the chance to grow," says yes.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Notice the path: questions that keep closing in on the same thing. During the open questions, answer in general terms about anything you want to keep to yourself. When the closed question comes, you're not obligated to say yes or no. You can calmly ask: "Why do you need that detail?"

TECHNIQUE 103

Hypothetical Questions

◆ WHAT IT IS

Questions that open with phrases like “What if,” “Imagine that,” and “What would you do if.” They move the conversation from the real world into a make-believe one, where the obstacles are put on hold. Since “it’s just a hypothetical,” defenses drop, and people say what they really want without feeling they’re committing to anything.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When an objection comes up, don’t fight it: set it aside for a moment. “Let’s leave the price out of it for a second. If it cost the same, would you go with this model?” If the answer is yes, the real objection is only the price, and you know what to work on. If it’s no, the problem is something else, and it’s better to know right away. In a negotiation, it lets you test the waters without promising anything: “Let’s say we can give you some flexibility on timing. Would you be willing to move on price?”

◆ EXAMPLE

At an RV rental lot, a couple planning their vacation says: “This model is too long to park in all those little historic towns.” The agent asks: “If it had a backup camera and came with two e-bikes, so you could leave it outside the town center, would it be the right one?” The two of them look at each other: yes. Now the conversation is about the bikes, not the length.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

You can play along, but bring everything back down to earth before you decide: “Sure, in theory, yes. But the bikes aren’t included in the price, so let’s talk about the RV as it is.” Enthusiasm born in the make-believe world shouldn’t get to sign for you in the real one.

TECHNIQUE 104

The Rhetorical Question

➤ WHAT IT IS

A question that isn't waiting for an answer, because the answer is already built in. The listener answers on their own, in their head, and so they get the impression they reached the conclusion by themselves. Meanwhile, without realizing it, they accept the premise hidden in the question. It's one of the oldest tools in rhetoric, from political rallies to the pulpit.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Turn your most important statement into a question that has only one possible answer. Instead of "This furnace is safer," ask: "You want your kids sleeping soundly all winter, don't you?" Use it sparingly and at key points: at the start to build agreement, at the end to close. One rhetorical question now and then sharpens attention; three in a row sound like a stump speech.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a meeting of the youth basketball league, the president tells the board: "Do we really want to wait until a kid gets hurt on that warped floor?" Nobody answers, but the money to redo the gym floor is approved in ten minutes.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you hear a rhetorical question, ask yourself: "What statement is this getting me to accept?" Then actually answer it, stepping out of the script: "No, we don't want to wait. But before we choose, I'd like to see three bids." Giving a real, spoken answer to a question that wasn't looking for one breaks the spell and reopens the discussion on the merits.

TECHNIQUE 105

The “But” That Erases

◆ WHAT IT IS

The word “but” has a very specific effect: the listener tends to forget what comes before it and remember only what comes after. “The work is good, but there are mistakes” lands as “there are mistakes.” Choosing where to put the “but,” or replacing it, changes the message without changing the facts.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you want the positive part to stick, put it after the “but”: “There are two mistakes to fix, but the overall structure of the work is excellent.” If you want both parts to stick, replace “but” with “and”: “The work is good, and once we fix these two mistakes, it’s ready.” The same goes for a customer raising an objection: “I understand the price is high, and that’s exactly why I want to show you what it includes.”

◆ EXAMPLE

A mother tells her son: “You got a B in math, but your English grade dropped.” The boy hears only the second half and slams his door. The next week, she tries it this way: “Your English grade dropped, and that B in math tells me that when you buckle down, you can do it.” This time, her son asks for help with his essay.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone says “You did a great job, but...” listen to both halves and give each one its real weight. And if the person talking always puts the “but” right after your reasons (“You’re right, but...”), know that your point has just been erased. Put it back on the table: “Let’s stop for a second on what I said before the ‘but.’”

TECHNIQUE 106

Euphemisms and Dysphemisms

➤ WHAT IT IS

Changing the word to change the emotion, without touching the fact. A euphemism softens: “downsizing” instead of “layoffs,” “collateral damage” instead of “civilian casualties,” “mature skin” instead of “old skin.” A dysphemism sharpens: calling the estate tax the “death tax.” Words carry emotional baggage: once the word is chosen, half the judgment has already been made.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before you communicate something, decide which emotion you want to stir and pick the name to match. Bad news delivered in soft words hurts less. A doctor talks about “a number we should keep an eye on,” not “a serious problem,” if there isn’t a serious problem yet. There’s only one limit: the soft word can soften, never hide. If, after your explanation, the other person hasn’t understood what’s really going on, you’ve crossed the line.

➤ EXAMPLE

Two private sellers list the same ten-year-old compact car online. The first writes: “Old car, dings in the body.” The second writes: “Mechanically sound and proven, ideal for new drivers, a few minor parking dings.” Almost all the calls go to the second seller.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Translate. When you hear a word that’s too neutral or too harsh, ask yourself: “What actually happened, in everyday words?” “Workforce optimization” becomes “they let people go.” “Socialized medicine” becomes “a health care reform.” Call facts by their name, and only then pass judgment.

TECHNIQUE 107

The Sentence Without a Culprit

◆ WHAT IT IS

Making whoever acted disappear from the sentence. There are two ways to do it: turning the action into an abstract noun (“there was a reduction in staff” instead of “we fired people”), or using the passive voice without saying by whom (“mistakes were made”). The thing seems to have happened all by itself, like the rain. And nobody argues with the rain.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

In its honest version, it lets you point out the problem without attacking the person. Instead of “You got the estimate wrong,” you can say: “There’s an error in the quantities on the estimate. Let’s fix it.” The other person doesn’t have to defend themselves and can focus on the solution. Use it for problems you’re solving together, not for your own responsibilities: there, the right sentence is still “I made a mistake.”

◆ EXAMPLE

The supplier writes: “A shipping delay occurred due to organizational challenges.” No names, no verb with a subject. The owner of the business picks up the phone and asks: “Who decided to ship on Monday instead of Friday?” And from the other end of the line, at last, she gets a name and a new date.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Put the subject back. Whenever you hear an abstract noun or a passive, ask: “Who did what?” “A decision has been made” becomes “Who decided?” “The targets were not met” becomes “Not met by whom?” Responsibility goes back where it belongs, and with it, the chance to discuss it.

TECHNIQUE 108

RED FLAG

Weasel Words

➤ WHAT IT IS

Vague words that seem to promise a lot and actually promise nothing: “helps,” “up to,” “contributes to,” “experts say,” or comparatives with nothing to compare to, like “whiter” and “fairer.” The name comes from the weasel: just as a weasel sucks out an egg and leaves the shell whole, these words hollow out a sentence and leave its appearance intact. The listener fills the gap with their own hopes: “helps reduce” becomes “reduces.”

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You’ll find them wherever someone wants an effect without making a commitment: sale signs (“up to 70% off,” when almost everything is barely marked down), labels (“supports well-being”), campaign promises (“we’re working toward a safer city”), everyday phrases (“I’ll try to swing by,” “I’ll see what I can do”). The signal is always the same: a verb or a number that sounds precise but can’t be measured or checked.

➤ EXAMPLE

An air purifier salesman says: “Recent studies show it helps eliminate up to 99% of bacteria.” Which studies? Helps how much? Up to 99% under what conditions? Take out the weasels, and all the sentence says is: “This machine does something to bacteria.”

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask for the measurement. “Helps how much, compared to what?” “Up to 70% on how many items?” “Which experts, which study?” If the answers stay vague, you already have your answer. And with personal promises, remember the translation: “I’ll try” very often means “maybe not.”

TECHNIQUE 109

Reframing

◆ WHAT IT IS

Changing the meaning of a fact by changing its frame. The fact stays the same; what changes is how you read it. A cost becomes an investment, a flaw becomes a strength in the right setting, a failure becomes information. Whoever picks the frame also picks the emotion the other person will feel when they look at the picture.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Two moves. The first changes the meaning: “These two extra days are what we need to test it properly.” The second changes the context: find the setting where the flaw becomes useful. “Stubborn? In a negotiation with suppliers, that’s exactly what we need.” It works if the new frame is true and the other person can recognize it on their own: a forced frame sounds like an excuse.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a jewelry store, a customer says: “It’s cheaper online.” The clerk replies: “That’s true. But here we resize the ring for free and clean it every year. Online you’re buying a ring; here you’re also buying the people who take care of it.” The price hasn’t dropped by a single dollar, but now it’s the price of something else.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone offers you a new frame, don’t reject it and don’t rush to accept it: look at it. “Is this the only way to see it? What other frames are there?” And if the one on offer doesn’t sit right with you, propose your own: “To me, it’s still a cost. Let’s see whether it pays for itself, and how long that takes.” Whoever controls the frame controls the conversation.

TECHNIQUE 110

Presupposition

➤ WHAT IT IS

Taking something for granted inside a sentence that's about something else. To answer, the other person has to accept the assumption: "Will you be paying with credit or debit?" takes it as a given that they're buying. The mind focuses on the question in the foreground and lets the background slip by, because challenging it would mean stopping everything and seeming rude.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Put the idea you care about in the background and ask about something else in the foreground. The most common forms: a choice between two options that both work for you ("Should we meet Tuesday or Thursday?"), time words ("Once you've tried the service, you'll see that..."), and awareness verbs ("Have you noticed how quiet it is?"). Use it to help along a decision the other person is already about to make, not to override a no.

➤ EXAMPLE

The plumber finishes looking over the job and asks: "Do you want me to do the work next week, or would you rather wait until after the holidays?" Mrs. Carter answers, "After the holidays," and only later, in the car, does her husband point out that they hadn't even decided to have it done.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before you answer, look for what the question takes for granted. Then bring the conversation back to the step that got skipped: "Before we talk about when, I'd like to decide whether. Leave me the estimate and I'll call you." The third option, the one the question hides, is always there. You just have to name it.

TECHNIQUE 111

Scratching the Itch

◆ WHAT IT IS

Instead of convincing with logic, you find the other person's "itch" (a fear, an annoyance, an insecurity), make them feel it more strongly, and only then offer your proposal as the way to scratch it. People move more to get rid of a pain than to gain a pleasure: if the offer arrives when the pain is at its peak, it looks like the only way out.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

In the honest version, start from the customer's real problem, not from your product. Have them describe it in their own words, help them see its concrete consequences, and only then present the solution. The sequence is always: problem, consequence, solution. The line is clear: you can make a problem that exists visible, but you can't inflate one that doesn't.

◆ EXAMPLE

The mechanic doesn't bring up brake pads right away. He asks: "Have you been hearing a squeal lately when you brake going downhill?" The customer: "Yeah, for about a month now." "In the rain, on that road down to the lake, that's the difference between stopping in time and not. I can swap them out today, in an hour." The customer leaves the shop having bought, more than anything else, his own peace of mind.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a message stirs up a strong fear in you right before it offers you something, stop. Separate the problem from the solution and ask yourself: "Is it really that serious? And is this the only solution, or just the first one they put in front of me?" Get a second opinion, and decide once the fear has gone down.

TECHNIQUE 112

RED FLAG

The Leading Question

➤ WHAT IT IS

A question that already suggests the answer. “You saw the man in the black coat too, didn’t you?” isn’t asking: it’s steering. In 1974, Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer showed people a film of a car accident and asked how fast the cars were going, changing a single verb. Those who heard “when they smashed into each other” estimated higher speeds than those who heard “when they hit each other,” and a week later they even remembered broken glass that wasn’t in the film.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You can recognize a leading question when it contains loaded adjectives (“this dangerous proposal”), a detail nobody had mentioned (“the man in the black coat”), or a tag asking for confirmation (“right?” or “don’t you think?”). You’ll find it in polls designed to get a certain result, in high-pressure sales, and in family arguments: “Don’t you think your brother is going overboard?”

➤ EXAMPLE

At the office, a manager asks a coworker: “The delay on the project is purchasing’s fault, right?” The coworker, who knows nothing about it, answers: “I think so.” The next day, that answer is making the rounds as a fact: “Even Megan confirmed it.”

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Break the question apart: separate the fact from the opinion that’s been attached to it. Answer only the neutral part, or take the premise apart: “I don’t know whose fault it is. I know the materials arrived on the 12th.” And if you’re asked to remember something, tell it first in your own words, without starting from the details they’ve suggested.

TECHNIQUE 113

RED FLAG

Intimidating Jargon

◆ WHAT IT IS

Using abbreviations, acronyms, and technical terms with people who aren't in the field. It works on three levers: whoever talks over your head seems more expert; having too much to take in wears people down and pushes them to just trust; and whoever doesn't understand is embarrassed to ask, so as not to look like the only outsider. The result is always the same: people nod along and leave it to the expert.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

A professional or a salesperson answers your questions with harder words than before instead of simpler ones. Abbreviations come with no explanation, the buzzwords pile up, and every question you ask is met with a patient smile that makes you feel slow. The clearest signal: at the end of the conversation, you know you have to sign, but you couldn't explain to a friend what you're signing.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the bank, the advisor talks about “a balanced asset allocation, synthetic-replication ETFs, and a short duration” (meaning: how to split up your savings, funds that copy an index, and the average maturity of the bonds). The customer nods for twenty minutes and signs up for a product with fees nobody explained to him. One question would have done it: “In plain English, how much do I pay every year?”

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask for a translation, without embarrassment: “I don't know that term. Could you explain it the way you'd explain it to your mom?” Then put it in your own words: “So, if I understand correctly, this is what happens. Right?” Anyone who really knows a subject can say it simply. If the expert gets irritated when you ask them to simplify, the jargon was there to cover things up, not to explain them.

TECHNIQUE 114

RED FLAG

The Question Barrage

♦ WHAT IT IS

A volley of questions fired one after another, with no time to answer any of them. The mind doesn't know where to start, feels like it's being tested, and looks for the quickest way out: any answer at all, a yes, a surrender. The only goal of the person asking is to put you under pressure.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

The rhythm is the signal: three, four, five questions in a row, often with an accusation hidden in the last one. "Where were you? Who with? Why weren't you answering? What are you hiding from me?" Or, in the sales version: "Do you like the model? And the color? Did you see the accessories? And the price, amazing, right? Shall we write it up?" The person asking isn't waiting for answers: they're waiting for you to give in.

♦ EXAMPLE

You get home after a work dinner, and the person you live with greets you like this: "Why didn't you call? Do you know what time it is? Do you even care about this family? And who's taking the kids tomorrow?" You find yourself apologizing for everything, even things you didn't do, just to make the barrage stop.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Stop the flow, calmly: "One question at a time, so I can really answer you." Then you pick the question that matters and answer only that one: "I didn't call because my phone died. I'll take the kids tomorrow." The pace of the conversation is set by the person answering, not by the person asking.

TECHNIQUE 115

RED FLAG

The Awkward Question in Disguise

◆ WHAT IT IS

A nosy question (about weight, salary, private life) presented as concern, curiosity, or admiration. The disguise makes it hard not to answer: if you back away, you seem rude, like someone turning down a kind gesture. That way, the person asking gets into places they have no right to enter, and keeps an innocent air.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The shape is almost always double: a question that intrudes and a justification that covers it. “Have you put on a few pounds? I’m only asking because I care about your health.” “How much do you make a year? I’m only asking because I admire your career.” It often comes in front of other people, so saying no costs more and everyone is waiting for the answer.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the baby’s baptism, an aunt asks her niece in front of everyone: “So, when are you two having kids? At your age, the clock is ticking. I’m only saying it for your sake.” Everyone turns to look. The niece feels forced to justify a choice that concerns only her and her partner.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Answer the premise, not the question: “Thanks for thinking of me, Aunt Carol. So, how was the bus trip to Branson?” Or use a sentence that needs no explanation: “I’d rather not talk about it.” That’s a complete sentence, and you don’t need to add anything. If the other person keeps pushing, turn the question around: “Why are you so interested?”

TECHNIQUE 116

RED FLAG

The Poisoned Compliment

➤ WHAT IT IS

A compliment with a criticism hidden inside. “What a great speech. I didn’t think you could speak in public” praises and strikes at the same moment. The person on the receiving end is left off balance: was that praise or an insult? And if they object, they’re told it was a compliment and they’re overreacting.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The structure is fixed: a positive part up front, which lowers your guard, and a tail that stings. “You look amazing, that dress is so slimming.” “Great work, for someone without a degree.” “So brave of you, wearing that color.” The hit always comes in the tail, and the tail can always be denied: “But it was a compliment!” Repeated over time, these compliments keep the other person insecure and hungry for approval.

➤ EXAMPLE

A coworker looks at Paul’s presentation and says: “It’s good, really. You can tell someone helped you this time.” Paul thanks her on reflex and spends the whole afternoon wondering whether his work is worth anything.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Isolate the tail and ask them to explain it, in a curious tone: “What do you mean, someone helped me this time?” Almost always, the person who said it backs down. Or take only the good part: “Thanks, I worked hard on it.” If the poisoned compliments always come from the same person, they point to a clear intention to keep you down. Poison only works if you swallow it.

TECHNIQUE 117

“I Don’t” Instead of “I Can’t”

◆ WHAT IT IS

Changing a single word in the way we phrase a refusal changes how strong that refusal is, both for the person saying it and for the person hearing it. “I can’t” sounds like a limit imposed from outside, which invites pushing; “I don’t” sounds like a stable rule we chose ourselves. In 2012, Vanessa Patrick and Henrik Hagtvedt, in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, asked two groups to resist a temptation by saying either “I can’t” or “I don’t.” On the way out, 61 percent of the first group chose the chocolate bar over the apple, compared with only 36 percent of the second.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you need to hold a boundary, with yourself or with someone else, swap the verb of prohibition for the verb of habit: “I don’t sign contracts at a first meeting.” “In our shop, we don’t hand back a car until it’s been tested.” The listener hears a firm rule, not an excuse to get around. Use it to defend real choices, not to hide a whim behind a fake company policy.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a pastry shop in Savannah, a supplier keeps pressing the owner, Grace, to pay cash on delivery. Back when Grace used to say “I can’t today,” the supplier would come right back at her. Ever since she started answering “I don’t pay suppliers in cash,” the pushing stops on the spot.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Sometimes other people use “I can’t” on you to offload the responsibility for a refusal, or use “we don’t do that” to block a legitimate request. Check whether there’s a real constraint behind the phrase: “I understand you don’t usually do it. In this case, what’s stopping you from making an exception?”

TECHNIQUE 118

RED FLAG

Amphiboly

➤ WHAT IT IS

A sentence built so that it can be read in two different ways. It's not just vagueness: it's an ambiguity in the very structure of the sentence, and it always leaves an escape hatch. The most famous example comes from Herodotus. The Oracle of Delphi told Croesus, king of Lydia, that if he attacked Persia, he would destroy a great empire. Croesus attacked, and the empire he destroyed was his own.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The listener almost always picks the most convenient reading. The speaker knows it, and if someone complains later, they retreat to the other one: "You misunderstood me." You'll find it in slogans ("Nothing works faster than our product": maybe it's the fastest, maybe you're better off taking nothing), in contract clauses, and in promises made to keep everyone happy.

➤ EXAMPLE

An employer tells an employee: "If the numbers are good at the end of the year, we'll talk about your raise." In December, the numbers are excellent. "And we did talk about it: for now, it's not possible." The promise was kept to the letter, and the raise never existed.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a sentence sounds too good or too careful, ask yourself whether it can be read another way. Then restate it in your own words and ask for a precise confirmation: "So if the numbers are good, the raise kicks in in January. Can you put that in the meeting notes?" Ambiguity doesn't survive a request for confirmation, especially when the confirmation is in writing.

TECHNIQUE 119

The Miracle Question

◆ WHAT IT IS

A question that shifts attention from the problem to the solution, and makes the solution concrete. It was developed in the 1980s by therapists Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, the founders of solution-focused brief therapy. It goes more or less like this: “Imagine that tonight, while you’re asleep, a miracle happens and the problem disappears. Tomorrow morning, what’s the first thing you notice that’s different?” The person answering stops complaining and starts describing what they want.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Use it when someone keeps going around in circles about the problem. Ask the question calmly, then ask for small, visible details: “What would you do first? Who would notice? What would they say to you?” The more concrete the answer, the more it turns into a goal, and that’s where the first step comes from.

◆ EXAMPLE

A teacher in Baltimore is talking with a boy who wants to drop out of school. Instead of lecturing him, she asks the miracle question. The boy answers: “I’d walk into class without being scared of getting called up to the board in math.” Now the problem has a precise name. Together, they set up one hour of tutoring a week.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Salespeople use the same question: they get you to describe your ideal life, and then they show you the product as the miracle. If a contract shows up right after you’ve been dreaming out loud, stop and ask yourself whether the product really delivers that result: “Nice picture. But now show me, in concrete terms, how we get there and what it costs.”

TECHNIQUE 120

The Rhyme-as-Reason Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

A sentence that rhymes strikes us as truer, wiser, and more convincing than the same sentence without the rhyme. The brain mistakes musicality and ease of hearing for proof of truth. In 2000, psychologists Matthew McGlone and Jessica Tofiqbakhsh, in the journal *Psychological Science*, had volunteers rate little-known proverbs, either in their rhyming version or with one word swapped out to break the rhyme, with the meaning unchanged. The rhyming proverbs consistently got higher truth ratings.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you want a practical rule, a slogan, or the central point of a talk to stick, wrap it in a short formula with a rhyme or an assonance: “Check it right, and there’s no fight.” “Keep the price clear, keep the customer near.” The form helps the listener remember. The ethical line is clear: a rhyme is there to make a solid argument memorable, never to stand in for evidence that isn’t there.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a cheese plant in Wisconsin, the safety manager, tired of signs everyone ignores, replaces the long notice about wet floors with a single line: “Run when it’s slick, you’ll go down quick.” The workers start repeating it to each other as a joke, and falls on the production floor go down.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Proverbs, ad slogans, and campaign one-liners use rhyme to pass off a questionable idea as age-old wisdom. When a line sounds so good that it immediately seems true, take it apart by paraphrasing it in flat words, and respond on the merits: “Nice rhyme, but take away the slogan: what data is this rule actually based on?”

TECHNIQUE 121

Emotional Anchoring

◆ WHAT IT IS

Linking a strong emotion to a specific signal (a gesture, a word, a touch), so that repeating the signal brings the emotion back too. NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) made it famous under the name “anchoring”; underneath it lies the conditioning studied by Ivan Pavlov, the physiologist whose dogs salivated at a sound. Not to be confused with The First-Number Anchor in Chapter 1.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

With other people, accompany the most positive moments of what you’re saying with the same understated gesture, and repeat it when you ask them to decide. But the most useful way is to use it on yourself. Recall in detail a moment when everything was going your way: where you were, what you saw, what you felt. When the emotion is at its peak, make a small, unique gesture, such as pressing your thumb and index finger together. Repeat the exercise a few times, on different days. Before an interview or a tough phone call, make the gesture again: it helps you call back part of that state.

◆ EXAMPLE

Before every exam in college, Luke would press his thumb and index finger together while thinking back to the day he passed his driver’s test on the first try. Today he does it in his car, in the parking lot, before meetings with his most important clients. It isn’t magic: it’s a physical reminder of how it feels when things go well.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you notice that someone repeats the same touch, the same word, or the same gesture right at your most emotional moments, they may be building an anchor. Noticing it is already enough to weaken it. When the signal comes back, ask yourself: “Is this emotion coming from the offer, or from the gesture?”

TECHNIQUE 122

The Hidden Command

➤ WHAT IT IS

Slipping a short order into a longer, harmless sentence and marking it ever so slightly, with a lower tone, a half pause, a glance. “Many customers, before they *choose this model*, ask a lot of questions.” The attentive part of the mind follows the whole sentence, while the command slips by almost unnoticed. It comes from the school of hypnotherapist Milton Erickson and from NLP: a single command counts for little, but repeated, it gives the conversation a direction.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

First write down the phrase you want to get across, short and in the imperative: “decide today,” “trust yourself.” Then build a normal sentence around it: “I don’t know if it’s the right time; only you can decide today what’s best for your family.” When you reach the key words, lower your voice slightly and slow down. Don’t overdo it: a command that’s stressed too heavily gets noticed, and it sounds odd.

➤ EXAMPLE

A gym instructor wraps up the trial class like this: “People who come here for the first time usually don’t know that when you *start today*, a month from now you feel like a different person.” The two key words come out a tone lower. At the front desk, more than one person asks for the membership form right away.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

It’s hard to catch in real time, so look at the effect: if you feel a push to decide without a reason you could explain, stop. Ask yourself where the hurry is coming from. And listen to how the other person talks: odd shifts in tone, always on the same words, or fake negations (“I don’t want you to decide right now”) are a clue. A good offer holds up even when it’s delivered in a flat voice.

TECHNIQUE 123

RED FLAG

The Double Bind

◆ WHAT IT IS

A message containing two contradictory demands, so that obeying one means disobeying the other, and on top of that, you can't point out the contradiction. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson described it in the 1950s while studying communication in families. The classic example is "Be spontaneous!": if you try, the spontaneity is already gone. The person on the receiving end is stuck, with the feeling that whatever they choose will be the wrong choice.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It usually takes one of three forms. The first is words contradicted by the body: "Go to the dinner, really, it's fine," said in an icy voice with arms crossed. The second is the impossible command: "I want you to take the initiative, but don't do anything without asking me." The third is the choice with no way out: whatever you choose, afterward it will turn out to be the wrong one. The telltale sign is always the same: the feeling that you can't win.

◆ EXAMPLE

The department head tells Sarah: "You need to be more independent." Sarah makes a call on her own about an urgent order. The next day: "Who authorized you?" The next time, she asks for permission, and she hears: "I told you, you need to be more independent."

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Get out of the trap by talking about the trap: "You're asking me for two things that don't fit together. Which one applies in this case?" When words are contradicted by the body: "You say it's fine, but your tone says otherwise. What's going on?" After the conversation, send a quick three-line message right away with the criteria you agreed on, and keep it as a reference.

TECHNIQUE 124

The Milton Model

➤ WHAT IT IS

A deliberately vague, enveloping way of talking, drawn from the work of the American hypnotherapist Milton Erickson. Sentences without details, abstract words, cause-and-effect links that don't exist ("as you listen, you can begin to relax"), mind reading ("I know you're wondering..."). The listener fills the gaps with their own experience and, since they supply the meaning themselves, finds nothing to push back against.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

In its useful version, it helps motivate people and get them imagining, for example when you're speaking in public or leading a team. Leave room: instead of "We need to increase revenue by 10%," try "You can already sense there's a new way to grow what we do." Link what's happening now to what you want to happen: "As you look at these numbers, you can already see where to improve." It's for setting a mood; when it's time to decide, you need the details.

➤ EXAMPLE

The speaker at a sales seminar closes like this: "And as you head home tonight, a part of you will begin to notice all the opportunities you haven't been seeing until now." No concrete promise, and yet the room walks out fired up, and the next day many people sign up for the advanced course.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The antidote is precision, meaning The Meta Model on the next page. When you hear a vague sentence, ask: "What, exactly? How, exactly? Who says so?" Enveloping sentences dissolve as soon as you bring them down to concrete terms. And never decide while riding the high of a speech that stirred you up without telling you anything specific.

TECHNIQUE 125

The Meta Model

♦ WHAT IT IS

The opposite of the Milton Model: a set of precise questions for bringing vague sentences back down to earth. It was developed in the 1970s by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, the founders of NLP, by observing how a few highly effective therapists worked. It's used to recover missing information, take apart generalizations, and find out what a person really means.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

Listen for four kinds of sentences. The ones missing a piece: "It's better this way" calls for "Better than what?" Generalizations: "Nobody ever listens to me" calls for "Nobody? Ever?" False obligations: "I can't say no" calls for "What would happen if you did?" Distortions: "You make me angry" calls for "What exactly do I do that makes you angry?"; "You don't look at me, so you don't love me" calls for "Why would my not looking at you mean that?" Use them with a curious tone and in moderation: fired off one after another, they feel like an interrogation.

♦ EXAMPLE

An employee walks into his manager's office and says: "Everything's going wrong around here." The manager, instead of reassuring him, asks: "What, exactly?" "Well, the Saturday shift." "Every Saturday?" "No, when Joey's out." In two questions, "everything's going wrong" has become a problem with a name and a possible solution.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

It's already a defensive tool: against vague promises, blanket accusations, and "everybody says so." If, on the other hand, someone else uses it on you in a pushy way, calmly answer only the questions that serve you, and say clearly when a detail is private: "I'd rather keep that general."

CHAPTER 06

Body Language and Signals

The body speaks before the mouth does, and sometimes it says something different. Here you'll find the signals you can read in others and the ones you send yourself, from the greeting to the gaze, all the way to gestures used to make people uncomfortable. One rule holds for the whole chapter: no signal, on its own, is proof.

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TECHNIQUE 126

The Eyebrow Flash

◆ WHAT IT IS

When we're glad to recognize someone, we raise our eyebrows for an instant, without realizing it. The Austrian ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt observed it among peoples all over the world and considered it one of the oldest greetings we have. It means "I see you, and I'm not a threat." The person receiving it feels welcome before hearing a single word.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you meet someone, raise your eyebrows for a moment, half a second, together with a smile and direct eye contact. Do it at the start, when your eyes meet, not halfway through the conversation. With strangers it works as an entry ticket: the other person picks it up without knowing it and tends to return it. Watch out for the opposite: still eyebrows and a fixed stare at the moment of meeting are read as coldness.

◆ EXAMPLE

First day at a new office. Walking down the hallway, you give every coworker you pass a small eyebrow flash and a half smile. At lunch, two of them ask you to sit at their table. You didn't say anything special: you just greeted them in the way the brain has always recognized.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The flash is a signal of openness, not of friendship: a trained salesperson does it with everyone. Enjoy the good start, but judge the person by what they do afterward. And notice who never does it with you: sometimes it's shyness, sometimes it's a message.

TECHNIQUE 127

The Handshake

➤ WHAT IT IS

A handshake is often the first physical contact with a new person, and it leaves a lasting impression. In 2000 the psychologist William Chaplin, at the University of Alabama, had a group of volunteers shake hands with trained observers. People with a firm, full grip, along with direct eye contact, were judged more extroverted and made a better first impression.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Dry hand, palm to palm, a firm grip but not a vise, two or three pumps at most. Look the other person in the eye and smile while you shake, not afterward. Adjust your strength to the hand you meet: with an elderly person or a slender hand, less pressure. Before a meeting, keep your right hand free: no cold drink, no bag to shift at the last second.

➤ EXAMPLE

Two candidates for the same job at a travel agency. The first offers a limp hand and is already looking at the chair. The second shakes firmly, looks the owner in the eye, and says her name. For both of them, the interview starts with that handshake.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A strong handshake says a person knows how to present themselves, not that they're trustworthy. Some people squeeze too hard, or turn your hand under theirs to end up on top: don't get into a contest. Respond with a normal handshake, hold their gaze, and move on to words. That's where you see who you're dealing with.

TECHNIQUE 128

The First Few Seconds

◆ WHAT IT IS

We form an idea of other people in very little time, and that idea tends to stick. In 1993 Nalini Ambady and Robert Rosenthal, at Harvard, showed students a few seconds of silent video of some professors. The judgments made on those clips closely matched the ratings given by students who had taken the courses for an entire semester.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Prepare the first few seconds the way you prepare your talk. Before you walk in, stop for an instant, straighten your back, take a slow breath. Walk in at a steady pace, without hurrying. Look for people's eyes, smile, take the initiative in greeting. Hands out of your pockets and free of papers. What you say afterward matters, but it's heard through the filter of your entrance.

◆ EXAMPLE

The sound engineer arrives at the town's theater after half an hour of looking for parking. Before getting out, he gives himself a minute in the van: he straightens his bag, he breathes. At the entrance he greets the artistic director calmly and shakes her hand. The same explanations, given out of breath with a folder under his arm, would have seemed less solid.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Precisely because the first impression weighs so much, when you're the one deciding, give it less power. Someone who shines in the first few seconds isn't necessarily competent. Before you choose a supplier, a collaborator, or a doctor, also look at what they've actually done, not just how they come across.

TECHNIQUE 129

Hands in View

➤ WHAT IT IS

We trust people more when their hands are in view, and we stiffen up around people who keep them in their pockets, under the table, or behind their back. The most accepted explanation is an ancient one: a hidden hand can hide something. Showing open palms, in particular, is a signal recognized almost everywhere, and it means “I’m not hiding anything.”

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you talk, keep your hands above the table and let them move naturally. At moments when you’re asking for trust or explaining something delicate, open your palms upward or toward the other person, without theatrics. On video calls, frame yourself so your hands show at least now and then. Avoid talking with your hands in your pockets or your arms behind your back, unless you want to seem distant.

➤ EXAMPLE

An insurance agent explains the clauses of a policy to a retired couple. She keeps her hands open on the table, next to the contract, and turns them toward the couple when she says: “This is the part they usually don’t explain to you.” The husband, who arrived full of suspicion, starts asking questions instead of defending himself.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who want to deceive you may also have learned to show their palms: it’s one of the first gestures taught in sales courses. Take it as a sign of good manners, not as proof of sincerity. Sincerity is checked against facts, numbers, and documents, not hands.

TECHNIQUE 130

The Real Smile

♦ WHAT IT IS

There are two smiles. The polite one moves only the mouth. The sincere one involves the eyes too: the cheeks lift and crow's feet appear at the corners. The French neurologist Guillaume Duchenne described it in the nineteenth century, which is why the psychologist Paul Ekman named it the Duchenne smile. The muscle around the eyes is hard to move on command, so this smile is harder to fake.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

To read others, look at the eyes, not the mouth. A smile that doesn't reach the eyes, or that switches off abruptly, is often just politeness. For yourself: don't force a smile. Think of something you genuinely like about the person or the situation, and let the smile come from there. A smile that arrives a moment after the greeting and spreads slowly seems more genuine than one flashed instantly.

♦ EXAMPLE

You're presenting an idea to a client who smiles the whole time. But her eyes stay still, and the smile shuts off the moment you look away. Instead of asking "Do you like it?" you ask: "What would make you hesitate?" The client admits that the budget is half what you thought. Better to know now.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who work with the public learn to smile with their eyes too, and some people do it naturally. A real smile tells you that the other person is feeling pleasure at that moment, not that they're on your side. Use it as one clue among others.

TECHNIQUE 131

The Nod

• WHAT IT IS

Nodding doesn't just mean yes: the movement itself pushes toward agreement, both for the person doing it and for the person watching. In 1980 Gary Wells and Richard Petty asked students to test some headphones by moving their heads up and down, or side to side, while listening to a speech. Those who moved their heads up and down agreed more with the message than those who shook them.

• HOW TO USE IT

When you listen, nod slowly, two or three times, at the moments when the other person opens up: it encourages them to keep going and say more. When you make a proposal, nod slightly as you say it: people watching you tend to imitate you. Nodding quickly, on the other hand, means "I get it, move on," and it rushes people: use it only when you want to wrap things up.

• EXAMPLE

At the pharmacy, while ringing up the antibiotic, the pharmacist says, "People usually take a probiotic along with it," nodding slowly as she speaks. Without realizing it, the customer starts nodding too and answers: "Sure, I'll take one."

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you notice yourself nodding while someone is proposing something to you, stop for a moment: your head is saying yes before you are. Keep it still, listen to the end, and answer in words. A real yes is spoken, not nodded.

TECHNIQUE 132

Following the Gaze

◆ WHAT IT IS

We're built to look where others are looking: if someone stares at a spot, we turn too. In 1969 Stanley Milgram and two colleagues had people stand still on a New York sidewalk looking up at a window. The bigger the group looking up, the more passersby stopped or raised their eyes, even though there was nothing up there: with one person, one passerby in twenty-five stopped; with fifteen, four in ten.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Your gaze is a pointer. In a presentation, when you want people to look at a number on the screen, look at it first yourself and point to it. At a store counter, when you talk about the product, look at the product and not the customer. The other person's eyes will follow yours. In photos for a shop window or a website, have the person pictured look toward the product or the price, not toward the camera.

◆ EXAMPLE

In an ice cream shop, when a customer hesitates at the counter, the girl serving glances for an instant at the tub of the new flavor, pistachio-orange, and says: "This one came out this morning." The customer follows her gaze and, very often, asks to taste it.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Pickpockets and magicians use the same reflex: a showy gesture or a glance in one direction, while the other hand does the work. When someone pushes you to look one way, in a crowded place or in a negotiation, ask yourself what's happening on the other side. Keep your eyes on the point that matters to you: the wallet, the contract, the clause at the bottom.

TECHNIQUE 133

The Four Distances

• WHAT IT IS

Each of us carries invisible bubbles around us. In 1966 the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall described them like this: intimate distance, for the people we love; personal distance, for friends, about an arm's length; social distance, for work and strangers; public distance, for someone speaking in front of an audience. Stepping into the wrong bubble makes people uncomfortable, even if nobody can explain why.

• HOW TO USE IT

Before you move closer, read the distance the other person chooses and stay there. If you take a step forward and they take a step back, you've crossed the line: go back to the previous distance. To build closeness, get nearer gradually, over several meetings, not in the first minute. Remember that distances vary with culture and age: friends at a bar stand closer than people at a government office.

• EXAMPLE

A new coworker, trying to be friendly, talks to everyone from six inches away. The women back up against their desks, the men cross their arms. After a week, in the break room, nobody stops to chat with him anymore. The only problem is that he keeps invading the wrong bubble.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who get too close on purpose do it to apply pressure or to create an intimacy that isn't there. You don't have to put up with it: take a step back, or put an object between you, a chair, the table. If the other person insists, say so: "I'm more comfortable if we stand a little farther apart."

TECHNIQUE 134

Sit at an Angle

◆ WHAT IT IS

Where people sit changes the tone of the conversation. Facing each other, with the table in between, they're in negotiating position: two teams, two sides of the field. On either side of a corner, instead, they're in collaborating position: looking at the same sheet from the same side. Doctors, mediators, and experienced salespeople know it well.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you need to convince someone or solve a problem together, avoid the seat across from them. Choose the chair next to the corner of the table, or sit on the same side with the document between you. If the room doesn't allow it, turn the sheet or the screen so you can look at it together. The message gets across without words: "The problem is there, on the table, and we're looking at it from the same side."

◆ EXAMPLE

A bank branch manager has to tell a customer that the mortgage, as it stands, won't be approved. Instead of staying behind the desk, he pulls up a chair and sits beside him, turning the screen: "Let's look together at what we can change." The customer, who came in ready for a fight, starts thinking about solutions.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If in a tough negotiation you find yourself in a climate of great closeness, with the other person at your side and a friendly tone, ask yourself whether the collaboration is real or just staged. Position changes the atmosphere, not the terms. Read the numbers the way you'd read them from the other side of the table.

TECHNIQUE 135

Taking Up Space

➤ WHAT IT IS

The body signals status through the space it takes up. People who feel strong spread out: shoulders open, elbows on the armrests, legs firmly planted, things on the table. People who feel weak shrink: arms pressed to the body, legs together, bag on their lap. Others read these signals in an instant, and treat us accordingly.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you want to project confidence, take the space that's yours, without invading anyone else's. Standing: feet shoulder-width apart, weight evenly distributed, shoulders relaxed and open. Seated: back against the chair, forearms on the table, papers in front of you and not on your knees. Accompany important sentences with broad, slow gestures, not small, nervous movements.

➤ EXAMPLE

In meetings, Claire always speaks with her arms tight and her notebook against her chest, and her ideas go unnoticed. One Monday she lays her papers on the table, sits back against her chair, and accompanies her sentences with her hands. She says the same things as always, but for the first time the boss takes notes.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who spread out too much, with their feet on the desk or their things scattered on your side of the table, are marking territory. You don't need to do the same: calmly take back your space, move their things just enough to set yours down, and keep talking in a calm voice. The space you take without apologizing already says a lot.

TECHNIQUE 136

The Steeple Gesture

◆ WHAT IT IS

Touching the fingertips of both hands together, palms apart, to form a kind of roof or steeple. It's one of the clearest signals of confidence: people who believe in what they're saying do it spontaneously. People who study body language in negotiations and interrogations consider it a visible clue of confidence in one's own ideas.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Use it when you're stating what you're most certain about (the final number, the proposal, your assessment). Hands at chest height or resting on the table, fingertips touching, slow movements. Don't hold it the whole time: it becomes the movie villain's pose. To read others, notice when they do it and when they drop it: confidence often dips at exactly that point in the conversation.

◆ EXAMPLE

In a negotiation over the lease for a storefront, the landlord keeps her fingers steepled while she talks about the rent. When they get to the renovation costs, she drops her hands into her lap. That's where there's room: and in fact, on that point, she agrees to split the costs.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The steeple can be learned and performed, like any gesture. If someone uses it to look confident, don't be impressed by the pose: ask for the numbers and the guarantees. Real confidence holds up under questions; performed confidence doesn't.

TECHNIQUE 137

The Falling Inflection

➤ WHAT IT IS

The voice is a signal too, and the melody of a sentence matters as much as the words. A sentence that falls at the end sounds like a statement: closed, certain. A sentence that rises at the end sounds like a question, even when it isn't one: it asks permission, it looks for approval. People who end every sentence on an upswing come across as insecure, even when they know the subject inside out.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

On important sentences, the number, the proposal, the decision, let your voice drop on the last word and then stop. Record yourself on your phone while you rehearse your presentation and listen to how your sentences end: many people discover they end everything on the way up. Save the rising sentences for real questions and for moments when you want to invite the other person to speak.

➤ EXAMPLE

Ellen calls a supplier to ask for a discount. The first time she says, "We were thinking eight percent?" with her voice rising, and the supplier answers right away: "Well, that's tough." The next time she says, "For us, eight percent is the starting point," with her voice falling, and then silence. The supplier stalls, and in the end settles at six.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone speaks in a supremely confident tone, separate the music from the content. A sentence delivered with a falling voice isn't any truer than one delivered with a rising voice. Replay it in your head in a flat voice and ask yourself: "If they'd said it in an uncertain voice, would I still believe it?"

TECHNIQUE 138

The Midas Touch

✦ WHAT IT IS

A brief, light physical contact, on the arm or shoulder, makes people more willing. In 1984 April Crusco and Christopher Wetzel tested it in two American restaurants: when waitresses brushed customers' hands or shoulders while returning their change, they got bigger tips. They called it the "Midas touch," after the king who turned everything he touched into gold.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Touch works only if it's brief, light, and on a neutral area: forearm, shoulder, elbow. One second, no more, at the moment you say something warm: a thank-you, a goodbye, a word of encouragement. Look at the person first: if they're stiff, if they pull back, if you barely know them, skip it. Some people and some cultures are more comfortable with touch than others, but everyone has their own boundaries, and they must always be respected.

✦ EXAMPLE

At the end of the evening, the owner of a family restaurant walks between the tables and rests his hand for a moment on the shoulders of his regulars: "Thanks, see you next time." Many come back precisely because they feel at home there, and they tell their friends about it.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone touches you often during a negotiation or while asking you for something, ask yourself whether that warmth is for you or for your yes. You always have the right to pull away: a step back, your arm moved, or a clear, polite sentence: "I'd rather not, thanks." Touch is a gift only when it's welcome.

TECHNIQUE 139

The Baseline

➤ WHAT IT IS

Before you can read a person's signals, you need to know how they behave when they're relaxed. That's the baseline: their normal way of sitting, looking, moving their hands, speaking. In 2003 the psychologist Bella DePaulo and her colleagues, analyzing 120 experimental samples in *Psychological Bulletin*, showed that there's no universal sign of lying. A gesture matters only when it departs from that particular person's usual behavior.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

In the first few minutes of a meeting, talk about neutral things and observe. Notice where the hands are, how often the person blinks, what the posture is like, whether their fingers go to their face. Then move on to the topic that matters and watch what changes, and when. A foot that starts moving exactly when you mention the price says much more than a foot that has been moving since the meeting began.

➤ EXAMPLE

At his annual review, Mr. Grant touches the back of his neck every time overtime comes up. But for the entire half hour before, talking about vacation and projects, his hands stayed still on the table. The HR manager asks: "Is something wrong with the overtime?" A problem with the shift supervisor comes out.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who know you well also know your baseline, and they notice when you change. In an important negotiation, with someone who has time to observe you, keep the same rhythm from start to finish: same gestures, same position, even when you get to the point you care about most.

TECHNIQUE 140

The Feet Don't Lie

♦ WHAT IT IS

When we talk, we control our face, and much less our legs and feet. That's why the feet often say what the mouth hides. They point toward what interests us and turn toward the exit when we want to leave. Joe Navarro, a former FBI counterintelligence agent, made this famous: he considers the feet the most honest part of the body.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

In a standing conversation, look at where the other person's feet are pointing. Toward you: there's attention. Toward the door or off to the side, while the torso stays turned toward you: the person is staying out of politeness. Use it to decide your timing: close your request before the feet leave entirely, or let the person go and try again at a better moment.

♦ EXAMPLE

At the end of a meeting, you stop your boss to pitch him an idea. He smiles and nods, but one foot is already turned toward the hallway. Instead of explaining everything, you say: "I'll send you a couple of lines by email. Can we talk about it this week?" He agrees right away, relieved. On Thursday he really listens to you.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you don't want to show that you're in a hurry or that something interests you too much, remember that your feet talk too. And never read a signal on its own: a foot pointing toward the door might just mean the person is cold. Count the signals that point in the same direction.

TECHNIQUE 141

Barriers

✦ WHAT IT IS

When we feel uncomfortable, we put something between ourselves and the other person: crossed arms, a bag clutched in front of us, a mug held with both hands, an open laptop used as a shield. These are barriers, and they usually appear when a proposal, a question, or a person puts us on the defensive. Removing the barrier often helps remove the defensiveness too.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

To read: notice when the barrier appears, not just whether it's there. Arms that cross right after the price count for more than arms crossed from the start. To dissolve it: give the other person something to hold, a sample, a catalog, a coffee. To take it, they have to open their arms. For yourself: a clear table between you, bag on the floor, phone in your pocket.

✦ EXAMPLE

In a furniture store, the salesman notices that the customer crossed her arms as soon as she heard the price of the sofa. Instead of pushing, he hands her the fabric swatch book: "Feel the difference between these two." The customer opens her arms to take it, touches the fabric, and the conversation starts up again from a different place.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't read every pair of crossed arms as a no: sometimes the person is just cold, or comfortable that way. Look at the timing and the other signals. And if someone keeps putting objects in your hands while pitching you something, remember that opening your arms doesn't mean saying yes.

TECHNIQUE 142

Pacifying Gestures

◆ WHAT IT IS

Under stress, the body tries to comfort itself: we touch our neck, rub our hands on our thighs, play with our hair or a ring, puff out our cheeks and exhale. These are called pacifying gestures, and they're among the most reliable clues of discomfort, because they come right after whatever put us on the spot.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Watch when they appear: the moment matters more than the gesture. If the other person touches their neck right after a question, that question has hit a sensitive spot. Don't attack: slow down, reassure, ask an open question. If you notice them in yourself, they're a good alarm bell: you're getting worked up, and it's time to breathe and buy some time.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a job interview, the candidate talks easily about his experience. When the recruiter asks why he left his previous job, he rubs the back of his neck and adjusts his collar. The recruiter doesn't press: "Everyone leaves a job for difficult reasons at some point. How did it go?" And the candidate tells the truth, much less serious than he'd feared.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A pacifying gesture signals discomfort, not guilt: even people telling the truth can feel scrutinized. Don't let others read it as evidence against you, and don't do it to them. If you want to hide these gestures in tense moments, rest your hands on the table and keep them still.

TECHNIQUE 143

The Disappearing Lips

➤ WHAT IT IS

When we don't like something, our lips press together until they almost disappear, as if to keep the mouth shut on what we'd like to say. It's a quick and often involuntary signal of disagreement, tension, or worry. It's among the most consistent clues: it almost always appears before the person says out loud that something's wrong.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

While you present a proposal, watch the other person's mouth at the key points. If the lips compress on a specific item, a clause, a date, a price, that's the item to revisit, even if they say nothing. Stop there and ask: "How do you see this point?" The sooner you address the silent objection, the less weight it will carry at the end.

➤ EXAMPLE

The exhibit designer presents the trade show booth plan to Mr. and Mrs. Esposito. When he gets to the central counter, Mrs. Esposito presses her lips together for a moment. The designer stops: "Are you happy with the counter there?" It turns out that customers in wheelchairs would have too little room to get by. The drawing changes before the estimate, not after.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you don't want to show disagreement in a negotiation, know that your lips are among the first things to give you away: at critical moments, keep your mouth relaxed, slightly open. And when you read this signal in others, remember that it can mean disagreement with the proposal or just a private thought. Ask; don't conclude.

TECHNIQUE 144

The Yes with a Head Shake

♦ WHAT IT IS

Sometimes the words say one thing and the body another: “Yes, that’s perfect,” said while barely shaking the head; “Everything’s fine,” with hands clenched until the knuckles go white. When words and body disagree, the real message is usually the body’s, because it’s the harder one to control. This mismatch is called incongruence, and it’s one of the most useful signals to catch.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

Listen to the words and, at the same instant, watch the head, hands, and shoulders. If you notice an incongruence, don’t accuse and don’t point out the gesture: make room for the unspoken message. “It seems there’s still something to work out on this point. What would you change?” With an open question, the other person can say the no their body was already saying, without losing face.

♦ EXAMPLE

When Valerie suggests spending Christmas with her parents, her partner says “Sure, perfect” while making a tiny no with his head. Valerie doesn’t stop at the “sure”: “Tell me the truth, what’s bothering you?” It turns out he’d rather split the holidays between the two families, and they decide it together that evening, instead of fighting about it in December.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you want to say no, say it in words too: a reluctant yes becomes a commitment, and the listener records the word, not the head. When you feel a “yes, but” inside you, stop and say it out loud: “Yes, on one condition.”

TECHNIQUE 145

Who Everyone Looks At

➤ WHAT IT IS

In a group, when an important question or unexpected news comes up, the eyes of everyone present almost always go for an instant to the person who really matters: the one who decides, or the one whose judgment people fear. It's not necessarily the person with the highest title or the one who talks the most. It's a lightning-fast signal, and a valuable one for figuring out whom to address.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you meet with a group (a family, a committee, the partners in a business), ask a key question about budget or timing and watch the glances in the first second, before anyone answers. The person everyone's eyes go to is your real counterpart, even if they stay silent. From then on, direct your main arguments to that person, without neglecting the others.

➤ EXAMPLE

A real estate agent is showing an apartment to a family: father, mother, and grandmother. The father asks all the questions. But when the agent states the price, the father and mother look at the grandmother. From that point on the agent talks mostly to her: the light in the living room, the balcony for plants, the elevator. The offer comes two days later.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you're the one who decides in a group and you don't want that known, remember that the others will give you away with their eyes. Before an important meeting, agree with the people on your side: "When they ask about the price, look at Jack, not me."

TECHNIQUE 146

Microexpressions

◆ WHAT IT IS

Emotions that cross the face for a fraction of a second, before the person manages to control them. Ernest Haggard and Kenneth Isaacs described them in the 1960s, and Paul Ekman studied them in depth, identifying a few basic expressions recognizable all over the world: anger, fear, disgust, contempt, sadness, joy, surprise. A microexpression tells you what the person felt, not what they think or what they'll do.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

At the key moments of a conversation (when stating a price, asking a sensitive question, or sharing news), watch the other person's face in the first instant, not afterward. That's when the emotion passes, before the polite mask arrives. A flash of fear, disgust, or anger tells you where to ask your next question. Train yourself by watching interviews with the sound off or by slowing down videos: the eye learns quickly.

◆ EXAMPLE

The owner of a construction company tells his crew that the Main Street job is being pushed back a month. Almost everyone nods. Across Manny's face, for an instant, flashes a grimace of anger, then it goes neutral again. At the end of the day, the owner takes him aside. Manny had already booked his vacation for that period, counting on the job being finished.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Microexpressions aren't a lie detector: they show an emotion, not its cause. A person may feel fear because they're lying, or because they're afraid of not being believed. Use them to ask better questions, never to hand down verdicts.

TECHNIQUE 147

Eye Blocking

➤ WHAT IT IS

When we hear or see something we don't like, our eyes try to shut the problem out: the eyelids stay closed a moment longer than usual, a hand goes up to cover or rub them, the gaze takes cover behind glasses. It's called eye blocking, and it's one of the clearest signals of annoyance or disagreement.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

As with all signals, timing is what counts. If the other person closes their eyes for longer, or rubs them, right after a number, a condition, or a piece of news, that point bothered them, even if their mouth says "fine." Don't plow ahead as if nothing happened: stop and open up some space. "I see some doubt about this. Shall we talk about it?"

➤ EXAMPLE

At the closing for the sale of their parents' house, as the attorney reads through the documents, the older brother closes his eyes for a long moment when they get to the division of the garage. The attorney notices, stops reading, and asks if everything is clear. A misunderstanding about the measurements comes out, settled in ten minutes instead of in a fight in the parking lot.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Eye blocking tells you something is bothering the person, not what: it could be the proposal, sudden fatigue, a private thought, even a contact lens. Don't treat it as a final no, or as proof. And remember that your eyelids talk too: at key moments, keep a calm gaze on the other person.

TECHNIQUE 148

RED FLAG

Staged Disinterest

♦ WHAT IT IS

Deliberately showing boredom or distraction, right while the other person is talking about something they care about: obvious yawns, eyes on the phone, or a distant, serious stare, as if weighing far more important problems. The message arrives without a word: “What you’re saying doesn’t deserve my attention.” And since the gesture is ambiguous, it can always be denied: “I didn’t sleep much,” “I was thinking about something for work.”

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It always shows up at the moments that matter: when you’re telling something important, presenting an idea, asking for an opinion. It’s not occasional distraction: it’s a habit, and it kicks in with you more than with others. Over time it gets the intended result: you talk less and less, and you start wondering whether anything you say really interests anyone.

♦ EXAMPLE

At the department meeting, every time Frances presents her team’s data, the manager picks up his phone or stares out the window. When his favorite coworker speaks, the phone goes back into his pocket. After a few months, Frances cuts her presentations down to two minutes, and nobody asks her for more.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Stop. Stop talking at the exact moment the other person gets distracted, and wait in silence. Then ask calmly: “Would you rather we talk about this later?” If it happens again, address it in private, with specific examples: “When I present, you always look at your phone. On this project I need your attention.” Stop judging the isolated episode: if it happens at every meeting, the problem isn’t what you’re saying.

TECHNIQUE 149

RED FLAG

The Contemptuous Half Smile

➤ WHAT IT IS

One corner of the mouth rising on one side only, eyes rolling, a small snort through the nose while the other person is talking. It's the expression of contempt, the only one of the basic emotions made with half the face, as Paul Ekman described. The psychologist John Gottman, who studied couples for decades, considers contempt the most poisonous signal in a relationship, the one that, more than any other, predicts a breakup.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It's small, quick, and almost impossible to challenge: if you object, the answer is "What are you talking about? I just smiled." It shows up when you talk about your plans, your ideas, your tastes, often in front of other people. People on the receiving end for a long time can't say what happened, but they feel shame and a sense of being out of place.

➤ EXAMPLE

At dinner with friends, Robert says he wants to open a small furniture restoration workshop. While Robert is talking, his wife raises one corner of her mouth and looks at the others. Robert finishes his sentence faster, changes the subject, and doesn't bring it up again for months.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Trust the feeling: if an expression makes you uncomfortable, don't tell yourself you're overreacting. Stop at the exact moment of the smirk and look in silence: the gesture becomes visible to everyone. Or put it into words: "I saw your expression. You don't agree? Tell me." If the contempt becomes constant, it reveals a real lack of respect.

TECHNIQUE 150

RED FLAG

The Stare That Won't Let Go

◆ WHAT IT IS

Fixed, prolonged eye contact, without the normal breaks of a conversation. Usually the gaze comes and goes; when it stays planted, the brain reads it as an anomaly and interprets it according to the context. In a confrontation it becomes a threat and sets off alarms. In a romantic encounter it becomes sudden intimacy, an “I’ve never seen anyone like you” that speeds up attachment. In both cases the goal is the same: to take control of the situation.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

In the intimidating version, the eyes stay locked on yours during an argument, with no smile and no break, until the other person looks down or loses their train of thought. In the seductive version, the gazes are very long from the first date, along with big declarations and a rush to commit that doesn’t match the time spent together.

◆ EXAMPLE

In a negotiation over a subcontract, the owner of the other company stares Marina in the eye every time she makes a request. Marina notices that she’s speaking more and more softly and accepting terms she hadn’t planned on. The next time the stare locks in, she calmly lowers her eyes to her notes, rereads them, and only then answers.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t get into a staring contest. Break the contact on your own terms, calmly moving your eyes to a sheet of paper, your watch, a spot behind the other person’s shoulder. You can also name it: “You’re staring at me a lot. Is something wrong?” In love, remember that intensity isn’t depth: trust needs time.

CHAPTER 07

Rapport and Mirroring

Rapport is the feeling of being on the same wavelength: when it's there, people listen, trust you, and say yes more readily. This chapter starts with the simplest gestures for building trust, moves on to the techniques negotiators use, and ends with the fake versions of rapport, the ones designed to control rather than to understand.

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TECHNIQUE 151

Call People by Name

◆ WHAT IT IS

Your own name is the word you listen to more closely than any other. Hearing someone else say it means: “I remember you. To me, you’re not just anybody.” Dale Carnegie, in his famous 1936 book on how to win friends, called it the sweetest sound there is, to anyone. It’s the fastest and cheapest way to build a connection.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When someone introduces themselves, repeat their name out loud right away: “Nice to meet you, Megan.” Use it once at the start, once at the key moment of the conversation, and once when you say good-bye. No more than that: dropped into every sentence, it sounds like a sales seminar. If you didn’t catch it, ask them to repeat it on the spot: that’s much better than dodging it all evening. To remember it, link it to something you know: “Megan, like my cousin.”

◆ EXAMPLE

Your mother always goes to the little pharmacy around the corner, where the pharmacist greets her by name every time: “Morning, Carol! How’s the blood pressure?” Across the street there’s a bigger chain drugstore with a few more discounts. Your mother keeps going to the little one, and she couldn’t even tell you exactly why.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A name used often creates a closeness that may not exist yet. If a salesperson calls you by name in every sentence, notice the warmth you feel and put it back where it belongs. It’s a technique, not a friendship. Decide on the offer, not on the person.

TECHNIQUE 152**Let the Other Person Talk About Themselves****➤ WHAT IT IS**

Everyone enjoys talking about themselves, in an almost physical way. In 2012, Diana Tamir and Jason Mitchell, at Harvard, used MRI scans to observe that sharing something about yourself lights up the same reward areas of the brain that switch on with food or money. Whoever gets you talking about yourself leaves you with a pleasant feeling, and that feeling sticks to them.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Ask open questions about the other person's life, about what they do and what they enjoy: "What made you choose this line of work?" "What do you do when you get a day off?" Then really listen, without rehearsing your answer while they talk. Let them have the bigger share of the conversation and only jump in to encourage them: "And then what?" "Really?"

➤ EXAMPLE

At the end-of-season dinner for your kid's soccer team, you sit next to a dad you don't know. Instead of talking about your job, you ask him about his love of fishing. He talks about it for twenty minutes, his eyes lighting up. At the end of the night he tells everyone: "What a great person." He knows next to nothing about you.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you walk away from a conversation having told a lot and learned little, ask yourself who was steering it. With someone who needs to sell you something or size you up, at a job interview for instance, be careful how much you share. The other person is gathering information. Turn the questions around with a simple "What about you?"

TECHNIQUE 153

The Second Question

♦ WHAT IT IS

Asking questions isn't enough: what counts is the kind of questions you ask. In 2017, a team of Harvard researchers led by Karen Huang studied conversations between strangers, including speed dates between people looking for a partner, and found that people liked those who asked follow-up questions better, meaning questions that pick up on what the other person just said. They're proof that you're really listening.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

After the other person answers, don't change the subject and don't jump to your own story. Take a detail they mentioned and ask for more: "You said you moved here last year. How has that been?" The questions that work best start with "how," "what," and "what made you." Avoid the rapid-fire questionnaire, one question after another with no link between them.

♦ EXAMPLE

On a break, a new coworker tells you he's from San Diego. Instead of moving on to the weather, you ask: "What do you miss most?" He says: the ocean early in the morning. You ask whether he used to go swimming before work. Ten minutes later you're swapping stories about your teenage summers, and from that day on, he's the one who says hi first.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The risk is telling more than you'd like. If the follow-up questions start digging into money, work problems, or family, and it's someone you've only just met, slow down and close the topic kindly: "It's a long story. Maybe another time." You can be friendly without opening every drawer.

TECHNIQUE 154

Remember the Details

➤ WHAT IT IS

Remembering what someone told you, and bringing it up the next time, is one of the strongest signs of attention there is. It says: “What you told me mattered. I held on to it.” Good neighborhood shopkeepers have always done this without ever studying it, and it’s one of the reasons their customers don’t switch stores.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

After an important meeting, jot down two or three personal details: their kid’s name, the exam they had coming up, the team they root for, the trip they were planning. Your phone works fine, in the notes on their contact. The next time you’re in touch, open with exactly that: “So, how did Ethan’s exam go?” The detail has to be theirs and specific, not a generic question like “Everything good with the family?”

➤ EXAMPLE

When you bring your car in for an oil change, your trusted mechanic asks: “So, how was Hawaii? Did you have a good time?” You’d mentioned it in passing six months ago, while you were paying. His estimates run a little higher than the competition’s, but switching never even crosses your mind.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A remembered detail builds trust, and trust lowers your guard. Go ahead and enjoy the kindness, but keep comparing prices and work the way you would with anyone else. A good memory in the person serving you is good service, not proof of good work.

TECHNIQUE 155

Common Ground

♦ WHAT IT IS

We trust people who are like us, even when the similarity is pure chance. In 2004, psychologist Jerry Burger and his colleagues at Santa Clara University found that people said yes to a small request more often when the person asking happened, by sheer coincidence, to share their birthday or their first name. A point in common, however tiny, turns a stranger into “one of us.”

♦ HOW TO USE IT

In the first few minutes, look for real common ground: hometown, school, a sport, kids the same age, the same struggle with the morning commute. When you find it, say so openly: “No way, I’m from Dayton too!” Use only real similarities. A made-up one, if it’s discovered, wrecks everything. Then let the conversation drift back to the topic at hand.

♦ EXAMPLE

You have to file a permit application at the city building department, and the clerk is curt. On her desk you notice a photo of a youth volleyball team: your daughter plays in the same league. A couple of lines about Saturday away games, and the permit that “takes weeks” already has a date.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a salesperson turns out to have everything in common with you (the team, the hometown, the same breed of dog), stop for a moment. Coincidences that are too perfect are often sought out on purpose, or invented. Ask yourself: “Would I still sign if some random stranger offered me this?”

TECHNIQUE 156

The Specific Compliment

➤ WHAT IT IS

A generic compliment (“good job,” “nice work”) is forgotten in a second and sometimes sounds fake. A specific compliment names something concrete the other person did or chose, and proves you really noticed it. It says two things at once: that you appreciate it, and that you’re someone who pays attention. That’s why it’s worth so much more and is remembered for a long time.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Swap the adjective for the fact. Not “great presentation,” but “the table comparing the two suppliers made everything clear in a minute.” Pick something the other person put effort or taste into, not a gift they were born with. Say it once, and don’t ask for anything right afterward: a compliment followed by a request turns into a bargaining chip.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a business lunch, you tell the server: “The wine you recommended was perfect. I never would have picked it myself.” A little later the owner stops by the table to say hello. The next time, when you call to book on a packed Saturday night, a table for you turns up.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A specific compliment feels good precisely because it seems sincere, and it almost always is. The signal to watch is timing: if the compliments only show up when the other person needs something, they’re not compliments, they’re advance notice. Pay more attention to when they arrive than to the words.

TECHNIQUE 157

Warmth First, Then Competence

◆ WHAT IT IS

When we meet someone, we ask ourselves two questions, almost without noticing: “Do they mean well toward me?” and “Are they capable of acting on it?” In 2007, psychologists Susan Fiske, Amy Cuddy, and Peter Glick showed that the first question, the one about warmth, gets judged first and carries more weight. Someone who seems competent but cold is intimidating; someone who seems warm gets listened to.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

In the first few minutes of a meeting, show warmth: a smile, a personal question, attention to how the other person is doing. Competence comes right after, with facts and results. If you lead with your résumé, the other person respects you but stays on guard; if you lead with warmth, they listen with a different kind of openness. Don’t skip competence: warmth on its own, over time, looks like charm with nothing behind it.

◆ EXAMPLE

A plumber comes into an elderly woman’s apartment to fix a leaking pipe. Before opening his toolbox, he asks: “Did the water do any damage? Is there someone who can help you clean up?” Only then does he explain the problem and the repair, using the proper terms. She recommends him to the whole building.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Early warmth is easy to fake. Before you hand over money or decisions, judge the two things separately: how kind has this person been, and what concrete proof do I have that they can do their job? They’re two different questions, and they deserve two different answers.

TECHNIQUE 158

Respond to Small Bids

➤ WHAT IT IS

In everyday relationships, people are constantly sending out small calls for attention: a comment, a joke, a “look at this.” Psychologist John Gottman called them “bids for connection” and observed, over years of research on couples, that the relationships that last are the ones where people turn toward each other instead of ignoring or rejecting the bid. The same goes for coworkers, friends, and neighbors.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Train your ear to hear the bid behind the throwaway line. “What a day...” isn’t a remark about the weather: it’s an invitation. Respond by turning toward the person, even with just a question: “Rough one? What happened?” Ten seconds is enough. You don’t have to fix anything: you just have to show that the bid got through.

➤ EXAMPLE

The coworker at the next desk sighs at her phone: “My mother. Again.” You could keep typing your email. Instead, you turn around: “Everything okay?” Two minutes of venting, nothing more. The next day, when you need a hand with a deadline, she’s the first to offer.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who want to create dependence do the opposite: they alternate warm responses with ignored bids, so you keep chasing more and more attention. If your bids are often turned away and only welcomed once in a while, it isn’t distraction. It’s a sign to take seriously, and to share with someone you trust.

TECHNIQUE 159

Opening Up Step by Step

♦ WHAT IT IS

Closeness between two people grows when they open up a little at a time, taking turns. In 1997, psychologist Arthur Aron had pairs of strangers talk through a series of questions that became more and more personal: by the end, they felt much closer than pairs who had chatted about light topics. The secret is reciprocity: I share a little, you share a little, and the next step is just slightly deeper.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

Start with light questions (“Doing anything fun this weekend?”), then climb slowly: “What do you really like about your job?” “Is there anything you’d want to change?” At each step, answer too, at the same depth and no deeper. If the other person stops, you stop too: forcing the next step breaks everything.

♦ EXAMPLE

On a long train ride to New York with your new manager, you start with the usual small talk. Then you mention that you also moved to a new city for work, and how hard that first winter was. He tells you how much it cost him to leave his parents behind in New Orleans. By the time you arrive, you’re no longer boss and employee: you’re two people who know each other.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

In cults and in love bombing (the flood of affection in the early days), confidences get pulled out far too fast: the other person reveals a huge amount, right away, to push you into doing the same. If within a few hours you’ve already told your deepest wounds to someone you barely know, slow down. Real closeness takes time. If the other person is rushing, put the brakes on gently: “I’d rather talk about these things once we know each other better.”

TECHNIQUE 160

Mirroring

➤ WHAT IT IS

Subtly copying the other person's posture, gestures, and tone of voice. We do it naturally with people we like, and whoever is being mirrored thinks, without realizing it: "This person is like me." In 1999, Tanya Chartrand and John Bargh called it "the chameleon effect": people who were discreetly mimicked liked the person mimicking them more and found the conversation smoother.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Watch the other person's posture and, after a few seconds, take on a similar one: if they lean back, lean back too; if they lean forward, do the same. Mirror their volume and speed of speech as well. Or follow their rhythm with a different gesture: move your foot slowly while they drum their fingers. Never right away and never everything: one gesture at a time, with a slight delay, as if it were spontaneous. Copying every move looks like mockery.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the bank, the advisor who sees you is very composed: hands folded on the desk, low voice. You rush in, talking with your hands. You notice the gap, slow down, lower your voice, and rest your hands on the desk too. After a few minutes the advisor loosens up, leans back, and offers you the best option.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If it seems like someone is copying you mechanically, run a test: change position in an unusual way, for example by clasping your hands behind your head. If the other person does the same shortly afterward, you have your confirmation. Noticing it is enough to switch off almost all of its effect.

TECHNIQUE 161

Rhythm and Pacing

◆ WHAT IT IS

Adjusting your own rhythm to the other person's: speaking speed, tone, volume, even breathing. In NLP this is called *pacing*, meaning "keeping in step." When two people move at the same rhythm, they feel in sync. And once they're in sync, if one of them gradually changes rhythm, the other tends to follow: that's the leading phase.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

First, listen to the other person's rhythm and match it: with someone who talks slowly, slow down; with someone who talks fast, speed up a little. Stay there for a few minutes. Then start leading: if you want to calm things down, slow down bit by bit and take longer pauses; if you want to convey enthusiasm, speed up gradually. If the other person doesn't follow, go back to their pace and try again later.

◆ EXAMPLE

A customer calls the store, angry about a wrong delivery and talking a mile a minute. The clerk doesn't answer with flat calm, which would only make her angrier. He matches her energy: "You're right, that's a serious problem!" Then, sentence by sentence, he slows down and lowers his voice. Two minutes later the customer is talking at his pace, and they agree on an exchange.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you feel someone is pulling you into a state that isn't yours, calmer or more excited than you'd like to be, listen to your breathing. Then break the rhythm on purpose: slow down abruptly, or take a long pause before you answer. Whoever was leading you loses the thread.

TECHNIQUE 162

Emotional Contagion

➤ WHAT IT IS

Emotions pass from one person to another, like a cold. Without noticing, we mimic the expressions, posture, and voice of whoever is in front of us, and by mimicking them we start to feel the same emotion. Psychologists Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo, and Richard Rapson devoted an entire book to this phenomenon in 1994. So whoever is in charge of their own emotions can set the mood of the room.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before you walk into an important situation, choose the emotion you want to convey and put it in your body, not just your words: voice, posture, rhythm, face. Calm if there's tension, energy if people are tired. It has to be at least partly real: a badly acted emotion shows, and it spreads distrust instead of trust.

➤ EXAMPLE

On a construction site, a concrete pour goes wrong and the crew starts getting worked up, everyone talking over everyone else. The site foreman arrives, doesn't raise his voice, and speaks slowly and in order: "Okay. First we make it safe, then we figure it out." Within five minutes the crew is working calmly again, at the same pace as their boss.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a strong emotion hits you out of nowhere while you're around other people, ask yourself: "Is this mine, or did I catch it from someone?" It happens with a very enthusiastic salesperson, in a meeting gripped by panic, or with a relative who's always anxious. Before you decide, step away from those people for a few minutes and let the emotion settle.

TECHNIQUE 163

Labeling

◆ WHAT IT IS

Putting a name to the emotion you see in the other person, with a neutral phrase like “It seems like...” As we saw with Name What You Feel in Chapter 3, naming an emotion immediately lowers its intensity: people who feel understood lower their defenses. It’s one of the techniques FBI negotiators rely on most.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Observe, then name it: “It seems like something isn’t sitting right with you,” “I get the sense you’re under pressure.” Then stay quiet and let them answer. If the label is right, the other person confirms it and explains the real problem. If it’s wrong, they correct it, and even then they’re telling you what they really think. Never “I think you...”: it has to sound like an observation, not an accusation.

◆ EXAMPLE

Your boss is flipping through the report with a dark look on his face. Instead of defending yourself, you say: “It seems like there’s something here that doesn’t add up for you.” He sighs: “Yes. The delivery times.” In ten seconds, you’re no longer the defendant: you’re the one solving the problem.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone keeps labeling you, they’re steering the conversation. Confirm only what’s true and bring the conversation straight back to hard data: “I just need the numbers for the quarter before I decide.”

TECHNIQUE 164

Get Ahead of the Accusations

➤ WHAT IT IS

Being the first to say the negative things the other person thinks about you or your proposal. Chris Voss, a former FBI negotiator, calls this an accusation audit: a variation on labeling that you use at the start of a difficult conversation. A fear said out loud loses its power; a fear left unspoken grows and poisons everything else.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before the meeting, write down all the bad things the other person might be thinking: that you're wasting their time, that you're asking too much, that you're taking advantage. Then bring them up yourself, at the start, with lines like "You're probably thinking that..." List them calmly, without defending yourself, and then go quiet. Often the other person responds by playing it down: "No, it's not that bad." And at that point, they're already on your side.

➤ EXAMPLE

You need to ask a coworker at your firm to swap the August vacation week that's already marked on the office calendar. You open like this: "I know this is going to sound like a very last-minute request, and you might think I'm taking your flexibility for granted." Your coworker smiles: "Oh, please. Let's figure out how to make it work." The next day, the calendar is updated.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone opens by listing the criticisms for you, they take your arguments away before you can use them. Pick them back up calmly: "You said it yourself, you're asking a lot. So? What are you offering in return?" A criticism being said out loud doesn't mean it's been resolved.

TECHNIQUE 165

The Summary That Gets a “That’s Right”

◆ WHAT IT IS

Summing up the other person’s point of view so well that they answer: “That’s right.” According to Chris Voss, this is the moment a negotiation turns: people who feel fully understood stop defending themselves and start cooperating. It isn’t a “you’re right,” which often just serves to end the conversation: it’s the recognition of feeling understood.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Listen to everything without interrupting. Then sum up the other person’s situation in your own words, with both the facts and the feelings: “So for three months you’ve been working overtime, nobody has recognized it, and now they’re even asking you to cover for people on vacation.” Don’t add judgments and don’t offer solutions yet. If you hear “yes, but...,” the summary isn’t complete: ask what’s missing and try again.

◆ EXAMPLE

Your son slams the door because he can’t go to the concert. Instead of a lecture, you tell him: “So all your friends are going, you saved up for the ticket yourself, and it feels like we don’t trust you.” He stops in the doorway: “Exactly.” From there you can negotiate: yes to the concert, as long as he takes the train home with a friend.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Feeling understood is so pleasant that you let your guard down. If a salesperson has just summed up your problems perfectly, remember that understanding the problem doesn’t mean having the right solution. Evaluate the offer separately: “You’ve nailed the problem. Now I want to compare at least one other option before I decide.”

TECHNIQUE 166

Positive Labeling

➤ WHAT IT IS

Attributing a positive quality to someone to push them to act accordingly: “You’ve got such an eye for detail...” We tend to behave in line with the image others have of us: it’s the same mechanism as the Pygmalion effect, where other people’s expectations end up coming true. In 1975, psychologists Miller, Brickman, and Bolen tested it in an American elementary school: to get kids to keep their classroom clean, telling them they were a tidy class worked better than asking them to be tidy.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Pick a real quality, connected to what you’re asking for, and say it before the request: “You’re the most careful person with numbers I know. Would you take a look at this estimate?” It works better if the label is believable and if you repeat it even when you’re not asking for anything. A blatantly false label sounds like mockery.

➤ EXAMPLE

On Monday morning, the warehouse supervisor tells her team: “You’re the shift that never gets a shipment wrong, and I gave the new client to you on purpose.” All week long, the warehouse workers double-check the labels. No threats, no scolding.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When praise comes paired with a request, separate the identity from the action: “Thanks, I’m glad you see me that way. But I don’t have time this week.” Staying the careful person you are doesn’t oblige you to do other people’s work.

TECHNIQUE 167

The Pattern Interrupt

◆ WHAT IT IS

We go through the day on autopilot: greetings, handshakes, stock phrases. When one of these patterns suddenly breaks, the mind wakes up to figure out what's going on, and for a moment it's more open to the first explanation it gets. In 1999, psychologists Barbara Davis and Eric Knowles sold greeting cards door to door by saying "They're 300 pennies," an oddity, and right after that: "That's \$3. It's a bargain." With that sequence, sales went up.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Break the pattern the other person expects, and right after that, give your frame. The break should be small and friendly, never aggressive: an unexpected question, an opening that's off script. Without the line that follows, the surprise is useless: all it creates is confusion.

◆ EXAMPLE

The receptionist at a dental office calls patients to schedule their check-ups, and they all say "I don't have time" before she's even gotten a word in. So she changes her opening: "Hi, I'm not calling to sell you anything. I'm calling because your tooth asked me to." A laugh, then: "It's been two years since your last cleaning." The number of appointments booked goes up.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When something strange throws you off, like a salesperson who opens with a joke or an absurd question, take a second. Don't accept the first interpretation you're handed. Bring everything back to the point: "Cute. So, what are you offering?"

TECHNIQUE 168

The Peak-End Rule

• WHAT IT IS

We don't remember the average of an experience, but two moments: the most intense one, the peak, and the end. In 1993, Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues had volunteers put a hand in ice-cold water in two trials: a short one, and a longer one with a slightly less cold ending. When they could repeat one, many chose the longer one, meaning more suffering overall, just because it ended better.

• HOW TO USE IT

In any experience you offer (a service, a meeting, a visit to a store), take care of two moments: create a positive peak, a gesture nobody expects, and end well. The bumps in the middle weigh less than a cold ending. If something went wrong, don't leave it as the last memory: close with something good.

• EXAMPLE

After two hours in the maze of a big furniture store, plus the line at the registers, Lauren finds a stand on the way out selling one-dollar ice cream cones. Walking back to the car, she thinks about that ice cream and tells her husband that, all things considered, it was a nice afternoon. She hardly remembers the two hours of slog.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you judge an experience (a supplier, a vacation, a relationship), go back over the middle too, not just the ending. Better yet: take notes while it's happening. A great ending may have been built on purpose to make you forget everything else.

TECHNIQUE 169

The Illusory Truth Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

A statement we've heard several times seems truer, even when it isn't. In 1977, psychologist Lynn Hasher and her colleagues demonstrated this: statements repeated over the course of a few weeks were judged more believable than new ones, regardless of whether they were true or false. A sentence you've heard before takes less effort to process, and the brain mistakes that ease for evidence.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

In honest communication, your key message needs to be repeated: at the opening, in the middle, at the close, in slightly different words each time. One strong sentence, not ten. In a company, a family, or a team, the ideas that stick are the ones people hear often. Use it only for things that are true: with falsehoods, it becomes propaganda.

◆ EXAMPLE

A bike shop puts "Same-Day Repairs" on its sign, its receipts, and its social media page, and says it on every phone call. A year later, whenever someone in the neighborhood has a chain pop off, everyone says the same thing: "Go see them, they'll fix it right away."

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When something seems obvious, ask yourself: "Do I believe this because I checked it, or because I've heard it so many times?" Trace it back to the source and look for people who see it differently. A story shared by a hundred people isn't truer than one shared by a single person: it's just louder.

TECHNIQUE 170

The Mistake That Brings You Closer

➤ WHAT IT IS

People who seem perfect are intimidating; people who are good at what they do and stumble now and then become likable. In 1966, psychologist Elliot Aronson and his colleagues had students listen to a recording of a candidate trying out for a college quiz team. When a brilliant candidate spilled a cup of coffee on himself at the end, he was liked more. The same mishap, happening to a mediocre candidate, made him less likable. A mistake only brings people closer if you've already shown what you're worth.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

First show your competence, with facts and results. Then let a small, real flaw show, far from the core of your work: illegible handwriting, a nonexistent sense of direction, the joke that falls flat. Tell it lightly. Don't invent clumsiness: a staged mistake gets spotted, and one on the point that matters costs you trust.

➤ EXAMPLE

A highly respected surgeon explains a grandmother's operation to her family, calmly and precisely. At the end, reaching for a pen, he knocks the pen cup over on the desk and laughs: "See? With pens, I'm a disaster. With a scalpel, luckily, I'm not." The tension in the room melts, and the family finally asks the questions they'd been holding back.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A small mistake makes the person who makes it human, and that humanity lowers your defenses. If a very skilled person often shows you harmless weaknesses, enjoy the charm, but judge their competence on results, not on the clumsiness that makes you smile.

TECHNIQUE 171

RED FLAG

Fake Listening

♦ WHAT IT IS

Pretending to listen with all the right signals (steady eye contact, nodding, “I see,” “of course”) while actually just waiting for your own turn to talk. Whoever uses it hands the other person the illusion of being heard, and with that counterfeit coin buys the right to speak. Then they ignore everything they heard and push their own idea.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

The listening signals are all there, but the response has nothing to do with what you said. Your words leave no trace: questions you’ve already answered come back, and the details you gave never get used. Sometimes the listening lasts only the bare minimum needed to avoid an argument, and then out comes the phone or a change of subject.

♦ EXAMPLE

At a furniture store, you explain that you’re short on space, you have two small kids, and you have a set amount to spend. The salesman nods at every sentence and takes notes. Then he walks you over to the biggest, most expensive sofa in the store: “This one’s perfect for you.”

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Test the listening with a specific question: “What do you think about what I said about the space?” Or ask for a summary: “Just so we’re on the same page, can you repeat what I asked for?” The final proof is in actions: if the information you gave is never used, no listening happened. At that point, you can point it out, or walk away.

TECHNIQUE 172

RED FLAG

The False Social Mirror

➤ WHAT IT IS

Telling someone how “the group” sees them, with a judgment the group never made, or one that’s been inflated. Whoever uses it becomes the spokesperson for an invented consensus: “Everyone thinks that...,” “People around the office are saying...” It’s manufactured social proof used as a weapon, to make someone change their behavior without taking responsibility for it.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes with vague subjects and never with names: “everyone,” “people say,” “my friends think.” The judgment is always negative and always convenient for the speaker: give me more space, work harder, stop seeing that person. The speaker never puts themselves on the line: they hide behind the group, and often present themselves as the only one brave enough to tell you.

➤ EXAMPLE

A coworker runs into you in the office elevator and says quietly: “I’m telling you this as a friend: everyone in the department thinks you’re a little arrogant with new clients.” From that day on, you stop pitching ideas in meetings. A few weeks later, the new clients are being handled by the very person who talked to you in the elevator.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of “everyone”: it’s almost always false. Ask for names: “Who, exactly? I’d like to talk to them directly.” If a name comes up, go to that person and check, calmly. And even if it were true, the group’s judgment isn’t law: you can listen to it without obeying it. “Maybe that’s what they think, but I decide how I work.”

TECHNIQUE 173

RED FLAG

The False Mirror

◆ WHAT IT IS

Reflecting back to someone only their flaws, mistakes, and insecurities, while ignoring or downplaying everything else. We build our sense of self partly through the eyes of the people close to us: if the main mirror is warped, the self-image warps too. It's a slow form of gaslighting, the manipulation that makes a person doubt their own memory: only here it doesn't go after the facts, it goes after the identity.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Every insecurity you admit gets blown up: "Yeah, you really do always mess things up. I've always told you that." Every flash of anger becomes a label: "See? You're impossible to deal with." Successes vanish or get chalked up to luck. A full compliment almost never comes, and when it does, it's followed by a "but."

◆ EXAMPLE

Rachel has been working at an architecture firm for two years. In meetings, the owner brings up only her mistakes, even ones from months ago, and calls her successful projects "lucky breaks." When another firm offers her a better job, Rachel turns it down. She's sure she isn't good enough.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Look for other mirrors: friends, colleagues from other settings, a therapist, people who know you in different contexts. Save appreciative emails and sign-offs on finished work in a separate folder. If you need to, name the tactic: "You only talk about my mistakes. That isn't a balanced judgment." If the mirror stays broken, distance is the strongest defense.

TECHNIQUE 174

RED FLAG

False Transference

➤ WHAT IT IS

In psychoanalysis, transference is the process by which a patient shifts onto the therapist the feelings they had toward important figures from childhood, such as their parents. A manipulator triggers it on purpose: they step into the role of the protective father or the loving mother to create dependence. The other person stops acting like an adult among equals and, without realizing it, goes back to seeking approval like a child.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You see it in people who offer guidance, protection, and rules “for your own good,” together with an affection that always has to be earned. They use childish pet names, make decisions for you, and discourage any independence. It often shows up in the leaders of closed groups, in mentors who want to be your only source of advice, and in much older partners who play the parent.

➤ EXAMPLE

A young technician joins a company, and the manager takes him “under his wing”: lunches together, advice even about his personal life. Little by little, the young man stops deciding anything without asking first. When another company tries to recruit him, he hears: “After everything I’ve done for you.” He turns the offer down, with a guilt he can’t explain.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself a simple question: “With this person, do I feel like an equal, or like a child asking permission?” Make small decisions without consulting them, voice different opinions, and build relationships with equals. If you notice you’re always looking for someone to guide you, working with a psychotherapist can help you understand where that need comes from.

TECHNIQUE 175

RED FLAG

Normalizing the Abnormal

◆ WHAT IT IS

Passing off unfair or abusive behavior as normal by moving the line a little at a time. Each step is small enough not to set off any alarms, and anyone who objects is told that “it’s normal.” After months, people accept things that would have seemed unthinkable at the start. It’s the boiling-frog principle: if the water heats up slowly, the frog never jumps out.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The key line is always the same: “It’s normal,” “Every couple goes through this,” “That’s how it works here,” “Everybody does it.” The demands climb step by step: first a criticism, then an insult, then yelling; first half an hour of unpaid overtime, then Sundays. Anyone who complains gets described as weak, dramatic, “not cut out for this place.”

◆ EXAMPLE

Early in the relationship, Ashley makes little jokes about the way Kevin dresses. Then come the jealous scenes, then the phone checking. Every time he objects, she answers: “Oh, come on, every couple fights like this.” A year later, it’s Kevin who apologizes when he’s five minutes late.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Trust your first reaction: if something felt wrong the first time, it probably was. Describe the situation to someone outside that environment: people on the outside see right away what you can no longer see from the inside. Write down your limits and reread them. And when you hear “it’s normal,” ask yourself: “Normal where? Only here?”

CHAPTER 08

Storytelling and Strategic Narrative

People forget data and remember stories. This chapter starts with the simplest tools for telling a story well, moves on to the structures used by consultants, screenwriters, and leaders, and ends with the stories used to lock people inside a frame or to rewrite their lives.

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TECHNIQUE 176

The Story Before the Number

◆ WHAT IT IS

One person with a name moves us more than a thousand people in a statistic. In 2007 the American researcher Deborah Small and her colleagues asked for donations for Africa in two ways: with data on hunger among millions of people, or with the photo and story of Rokia, a seven-year-old girl from Mali. Rokia's story raised far more. Adding the data next to the story, surprisingly, made donations go down.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you want to persuade, start with a single person, with a name, a place, and a specific moment. The number comes afterward, if it's needed, and small. "Forty percent of customers have problems" stays on paper; "Yesterday Mrs. Russell waited on hold for two hours" stays in people's heads.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the preschool parents' meeting, you have to convince families to pay for a new gate with an automatic lock. Instead of safety statistics, you tell them about the time a four-year-old made it all the way to the sidewalk on his own. The fee is approved unanimously.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a story moves you, ask yourself: "How typical is this case?" A true story can be the exception. Before you decide, ask for the numbers the story left out: "The case is striking, but out of a hundred people, how many does it actually happen to?"

TECHNIQUE 177

Let Them Live the Future

➤ WHAT IT IS

Instead of listing the advantages of a choice, you lead the other person to imagine themselves after making it: the scene, the details, the sensations. It's a story told in the future tense, with the listener as the main character. In 1982 the psychologists Larry Gregory, Robert Cialdini, and Kathleen Carpenter tested it in Arizona with cable television: to some families they read the benefits of the service, others they asked to imagine their own evenings with those shows. Weeks later, 19.5 percent of the first group had subscribed, and 47.4 percent of the second. What we've already imagined seems more likely to us, and a little bit ours.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Describe a concrete scene with the other person in it: "Picture the first Sunday in the new house: you open the kitchen window and..." Use the senses and a specific moment, not a list of features. It only works if the future you describe is real: if the scene doesn't come true, the disappointment falls on you. Don't confuse it with The Promised Future in Chapter 12, where the future is a trap.

➤ EXAMPLE

A real estate agent in San Diego doesn't list square footage. She takes the Gallaghers out onto the terrace at sunset and asks: "Where would you put the table for summer dinners?" He points to the corner; she's already talking about the pergola. The next day they come back to sign the offer.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you notice that you're already furnishing the house or spending the bonus, stop: you've bought an image, not yet the thing. Go back to the facts the scene skipped: "It's nice to imagine. Now let's look at the HOA fees and the work that needs doing."

TECHNIQUE 178

Show, Don't Tell

✦ WHAT IT IS

The oldest advice in writing workshops, attributed to Chekhov: don't say that something is a certain way, show it. Adjectives ask to be believed; actions can be seen for themselves. "He's a reliable coworker" is an opinion. "He's the only one who answers the phone even on the Fourth of July" is a scene, and a scene doesn't need defending.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Reread what you want to say and look for the important adjectives: reliable, generous, fast, serious. For each one, ask yourself: "What does this person, or this product, do that proves it?" Then replace the adjective with that action. A precise scene is worth more than three adjectives in a row, and the listener reaches the conclusion on their own.

✦ EXAMPLE

The flyer for a neighborhood pizzeria doesn't say "quality dough." It says: "We make the dough the day before and let it rest all night." Readers don't think of a slogan: they picture the pizza maker pulling down the shutter while the dough rises.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A well-chosen scene convinces more than an adjective, but it's still a chosen scene. Ask yourself whether it's typical or the only time it happened. "Even on the Fourth of July" may have happened just once. Ask for other examples, and see whether they come: "That's a nice story, but how does it work on an ordinary day?"

TECHNIQUE 179

The Detail That Makes It Real

➤ WHAT IT IS

A small, precise detail, even a useless one, makes the whole story believable. In 1980 the psychologists Robert Reyes, William Thompson, and Gordon Bower tested this in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* with a mock drunk-driving trial: jurors who read testimony full of vivid but irrelevant details, like a bowl of guacamole spilled on a white carpet, remembered it better the next day and leaned their verdict in that direction. The brain reasons like this: “If they remember this, they remember everything well.”

➤ HOW TO USE IT

In the stories you use to persuade, include one or two concrete details: a time, a color, a name, an object. Not “a dissatisfied customer,” but “a man in a blue coat who came back at ten to seven while we were closing.” Few and true: too many details tire people out and raise suspicion.

➤ EXAMPLE

At an interview, a young woman describes how she handled a tough complaint at the store where she worked. She doesn’t say “I calmed the customer down,” but “I offered him a coffee from the machine in the back room, the one that only made espresso.” The interviewer smiles, and out of twenty candidates, he remembers her.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Details make a story feel true, but they don’t prove it. When you hear a story full of particulars, separate the ones that matter from the ones that are just color: skilled liars often add them on purpose. Bring the discussion back to the point: “The background is clear, but what evidence do we have about the fact itself?”

TECHNIQUE 180

Start Where It Heats Up

◆ WHAT IT IS

Beginning the story at the point of greatest tension, not at the beginning. Back in ancient Rome, Horace, in his *Ars Poetica*, praised Homer for taking listeners straight *in medias res*, into the middle of things. Listeners decide in the first few seconds whether to follow you: if you start with the alarm clock going off, they stop listening before the good part arrives.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Find the strongest moment in your story: the problem, the decision, the risk. Start there, with a single sentence. Then go back and explain in a few lines how things got there. It works for a meeting, an email, a video, a speech. The first sentence is the moment where it heats up, and the rest comes after.

◆ EXAMPLE

The chef opens the staff meeting like this: “Saturday, nine o’clock, full dining room, and the oven died.” Nobody looks at their phone anymore. Then he explains why, starting Monday, maintenance will happen every month and no longer whenever, and this time nobody groans. They all still have that Saturday in mind.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A strong opening grabs attention before judgment kicks in. When a story hits you from the first sentence, wait until the end before forming an opinion. The most dramatic moment was put at the start precisely because it’s striking, not because it’s the most important.

TECHNIQUE 181

The Rule of Three

➤ WHAT IT IS

Things said in groups of three sound complete and are easy to remember. Three is the minimum number needed to create a pattern, and the brain recognizes it instantly: beginning, middle, end. Julius Caesar didn't write "I came and I won," but "Veni, vidi, vici." Fairy tales with three brothers and jokes with three characters work the same way.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you present an idea, choose three points: not two, not seven. Three advantages, three reasons, three steps. Put them in rising order, with the strongest last. If you can, give them the same form: "faster, simpler, cheaper." The rhythm of three comes through even when listeners aren't counting.

➤ EXAMPLE

A contractor presents a renovation plan to a family: "This solution lowers your energy bills, gives you an extra room, and gets you in under the tax credit before the deadline." Three sentences, the strongest at the end. In the car on the way home, the clients repeat them to each other word for word.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Three sounds complete even when it isn't. When you're given a list of three perfect reasons, ask yourself: "What disadvantages weren't mentioned?" A well-paced list isn't proof; it's just a list that's easy to remember. Out loud: "The three advantages are clear. So what's the weak point?"

TECHNIQUE 182

Turn the Number into a Picture

♦ WHAT IT IS

Large or abstract numbers mean nothing to the brain: a million and a billion sound almost the same. They become clear when you compare them to something you can see. Chip and Dan Heath, in their 2007 book *Made to Stick*, list concreteness among the traits of ideas that stay in people's heads. A number translated into a picture is understood and remembered.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

When you have to give an important number, find an everyday comparison for it: a size you can see, like a football field or the floors of a building; a frequency, like how many times a day; an expense, like how many cups of coffee. Do the math beforehand and check it: a wrong comparison brings down trust in everything else.

♦ EXAMPLE

An insurance agent doesn't tell her client that the policy costs three hundred sixty-five dollars a year. She says: "It's a dollar a day, less than the coffee you grab on the way to work." The number is the same, but now you can see it, and the client signs.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Comparisons shrink or inflate on command. When someone translates a number into a picture for you, redo the math in the other direction: the total, over the whole term. And say it out loud: "A dollar a day sounds like nothing, but over ten years it's more than three thousand six hundred dollars."

TECHNIQUE 183

Before, After, and the Bridge

➤ WHAT IT IS

A three-part structure widely used in advertising: what the situation is like now, what it could be like, and what gets you from one to the other. It works because it puts listeners in front of a contrast: they see the problem, they see the solution, and your proposal becomes the natural passage between the two. It's the shortest story there is, and one of the most effective.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

First describe today's situation in the other person's words, without exaggerating. Then paint the after in concrete terms: what changes on Monday morning. Finally, present the bridge: what you're proposing, what it costs, what the steps are. The before must be recognizable, the after desirable, the bridge easy to cross.

➤ EXAMPLE

An accountant writes to her clients who run small trade businesses: "Today you spend your Sundays digging for receipts in a shoebox. Imagine a free Sunday, with everything already in order. Just snap a photo of each receipt with your phone, and we'll take care of the rest." The first requests come in the next day.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The "after" is always the weakest point, because it's only promised. Ask for proof: "Who has already gotten there? Can I talk to them?" And check that the bridge really is the only one. There are often simpler paths than the one for sale.

TECHNIQUE 184

Situation, Complication, Resolution

◆ WHAT IT IS

The pattern consultants use to write emails, reports, and presentations that are understood on the first read. Barbara Minto, a McKinsey consultant, made it famous with her “pyramid principle.” You start from a fact everyone agrees on, show what changed it, and arrive at the proposal. It’s a minimal story, but it has everything: balance, disruption, response.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Write three sentences. Situation: a known, undisputed fact. Complication: what has changed, what no longer works. Resolution: what you propose. If the reader is in a hurry, put the resolution at the start as well. Watch out for the first sentence: if the situation isn’t shared, the reader starts arguing right there and never gets to the proposal.

◆ EXAMPLE

The warehouse manager writes to the owner: “For years our deliveries have gone out at eight. Since September, the new client in Sacramento wants the goods by nine, and every week we risk losing them. I propose moving one shift up to six, only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.” The owner answers in five minutes: “OK, we start Tuesday.”

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who write with this pattern also choose the starting situation, and with it the boundaries of the problem. Before you accept the resolution, check the complication: is it described in full, or only the part that leads straight to that proposal? Out loud: “Is this the whole problem, or is there something else we’re not looking at?”

TECHNIQUE 185

The Story Spine

➤ WHAT IT IS

A set of sentences to complete that gives any account the shape of a real story. It was created by Kenn Adams, a writer and improv theater teacher, and became famous because Pixar uses it too. The sentences are always the same: “Once upon a time... Every day... Until one day... Because of that... Because of that... Until finally... And ever since then...”

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Take the event you want to tell and fill in the sentences one by one. “Every day” shows normal life; “until one day,” the disruption; the “because of that” lines, the consequences; “until finally,” the turning point; “and ever since then,” the new balance. Then tell it in your own words, without reciting the template. It works for the story of a company, a product, a customer.

➤ EXAMPLE

The owner of a bakery writes on its website: “Every day, my grandfather baked bread for the whole town. Until one day the old wood-fired oven cracked. Because of that, we rebuilt it with our own hands, brick by brick. And ever since then, on Sundays, the line stretches all the way to the town square.” New customers come in and ask for “the bread from the rebuilt oven.”

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The shape of a story makes everything more believable and more noble, even a simple change of supplier. When a brand tells you its story, separate the plot from the real terms of the offer: “It’s a nice story, but today, what are the prices and the guarantees in the contract?”

TECHNIQUE 186

Open a Question and Leave It Open

◆ WHAT IT IS

Curiosity arises when we notice that we're missing a piece of information. In 1994 George Loewenstein, of Carnegie Mellon, described it as a gap the mind wants to close at all costs, almost like hunger. A story that opens a question and doesn't close it right away keeps listeners glued until the answer.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

At the start of the story, open a specific question: "That day I understood why we were losing our best customers, and it wasn't the price." Then tell the story, and close the question only near the end. The promise has to be kept: if the answer disappoints, nobody will follow you next time. One open question at a time: three mysteries at once are confusing.

◆ EXAMPLE

A trainer opens a factory safety course: "By the end of this morning, I'll tell you the mistake I've seen behind almost every injury in twenty years on the job. And it's not the one you think." For three hours, nobody looks at their phone.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the hook: headlines like "You won't believe what happened," or a video that promises the answer "at the end." Ask yourself whether the answer is worth the time you're being asked for. If it isn't, close the question yourself: you don't need to know.

TECHNIQUE 187

Raise the Stakes

➤ WHAT IT IS

A story where nothing is at stake doesn't interest anyone. The "stakes" are what the main character risks losing: money, a job, health, a loved one. Screenwriters and novelists have always known it: the clearer and higher the stakes, the more listeners hold their breath. In everyday storytelling it's the same.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

In your story, make explicit what was at stake and at what moment it came close to being lost. Not "the project was running a little late," but "if we didn't deliver by Friday, the client would leave us, and with them six jobs." The stakes have to be real: inflate them, and people can tell right away.

➤ EXAMPLE

A math teacher, instead of telling the class that percentages are useful, tells them about her grandmother, who was about to sign a loan with the wrong interest rate: if her grandson hadn't redone the math, she could have lost her house. For once the class asks questions, and on the test the numbers add up.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

High stakes set off anxiety, and anxiety pushes you to decide in a hurry. When a story puts you in front of an enormous risk, ask yourself how likely it really is. Often the drama is there to make a ready-made solution seem urgent. Say it out loud: "I understand the risk, but how likely is it really to happen if we take two days to think it over?"

TECHNIQUE 188

End with a Single Sentence

◆ WHAT IT IS

A story without a clear ending leaves listeners with a question: “So what?” Aesop’s and Phaedrus’s fables always ended with a moral, one sentence that said what to take home. Communication today works the same way: the story moves people, and the final sentence gives it meaning and fixes it in memory.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before you tell the story, write the sentence you want to end on: it’s the message that has to stick. Just one, short, in simple words. Say it at the end, after a small pause, and don’t add anything else: every word after it weakens it. If you don’t know what the sentence is, your story doesn’t have a purpose yet.

◆ EXAMPLE

A floor supervisor tells his team about the time a mistake, reported right away by a worker in his first month, kept them from shipping a thousand defective parts. Then he closes: “Here, the person who reports a mistake isn’t wrong: they’re saving us.” For months, that sentence is on everyone’s lips.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The final sentence is the one you remember, so it’s the one to check. Ask yourself whether it really comes out of the story or was just stuck on top. A story can be true and its moral wrong: “The episode is clear, but that doesn’t mean it holds as a rule for everyone.”

TECHNIQUE 189

A Hero Who Looks Like the Listener

• WHAT IT IS

We identify with people who resemble us: age, job, problems, way of talking. The researcher Jonathan Cohen, in 2001, described identification as the moment when, for a while, we see the story through the main character's eyes. If the main character is like the listener, the choice they make becomes almost a preview of what the listener could do.

• HOW TO USE IT

Before you choose which story to tell, look at who's in front of you. To an audience of young people, tell the story of a young man at his first job; to a group of retirees, the story of a retiree. Give the main character recognizable details: the same doubt, the same neighborhood, the same excuse for putting things off. The more the main character resembles them, the less convincing you need to do.

• EXAMPLE

At the gym, the instructor of the morning class doesn't tell the story of a marathon champion. She tells them about Carol, sixty-two, who came in for back pain and now climbs the stairs without stopping. The women in the class look at one another, and the following week Carol's neighbor signs up too.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a story seems written for you, maybe it really was. Ads choose main characters identical to their audience for exactly this reason. Ask yourself: "Do their results really depend on the product, or on things I don't have?" And ask out loud: "Were they starting from the same place I am?"

TECHNIQUE 190

Bring the Listener into the Story

◆ WHAT IT IS

When a story absorbs us, we stop arguing back. In 2000 Melanie Green and Timothy Brock called this state “narrative transportation”: the more readers lose themselves in the story, the more they absorb its ideas and the less they notice its weak points. Transportation is created with vivid scenes, emotions, and a rhythm that doesn’t break.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Tell the key moments in the present tense, as if they were happening now: “I open the door, and the room is full of smoke.” Use the senses: what you see, hear, touch. Don’t interrupt the story with explanations or numbers: those go before or after. And bring the listener into the scene: “Imagine you’re there...”

◆ EXAMPLE

A disaster-response volunteer speaks at a middle school. He doesn’t list rules. He says: “It’s night. You feel the bed shaking. The light fixture is swinging. What do you do, right now?” For ten minutes you could hear a pin drop in the classroom, and at the end the kids repeat the rules without ever having read them.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Transportation lowers critical thinking, and it does so without your noticing. After a story that hits close to home, think it through again as if you were telling it to someone else, and put off the choice: “You really let me see the scene. Today I’m just gathering information, and I’ll decide at the end of the week.”

TECHNIQUE 191

The Story of Who You Are

➤ WHAT IT IS

Before they listen to what you say, people want to know who you are and why they should trust you. The American consultant Annette Simmons, in her book *The Story Factor*, puts this story first among the ones you need to know how to tell: an episode from your life that shows your values better than any résumé.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Choose a true moment when you made a difficult choice that says something about you: a mistake you admitted, a no that cost you, something you gave up. Tell it in one minute, at the start of an important relationship: a new team, a big client, an audience. Don't brag and don't spell out the moral: let the choice speak.

➤ EXAMPLE

A new branch manager, at his first meeting with the staff, tells them about the time, as a young man, he lost a client because he refused to sell him a product he didn't need. He never says "I'm an honest person." But from that day on, the employees bring him their doubts instead of hiding them.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

This story is also the easiest one to invent or touch up. Listen to it, then look at the results delivered over time, and put the words to the test right away: "I like what you're telling me. Let's see how we work together over the next few weeks."

TECHNIQUE 192

Make the Customer the Hero

♦ WHAT IT IS

In every great story there's a hero who faces a problem and a guide who helps them. Joseph Campbell described it in 1949 in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, his study of myths from all over the world. In 2017 Donald Miller, in his book *Building a StoryBrand*, brought the idea into marketing. The most common mistake companies make is putting themselves at the center. The hero is the customer; you're the guide.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

In your communication, tell the customer's story: what they want, what's blocking them, what their life will be like afterward. You come in as the guide: you show that you understand the problem and know how to solve it, then you offer a simple plan. Cut phrases like "we're the industry leader" and always ask yourself: "Who's the main character of this sentence?"

♦ EXAMPLE

A language school changes its flyer. Before: "For thirty years, the city's most award-winning Spanish school." After: "Want to talk with your Spanish-speaking clients without your anxiety spiking? We'll give you a three-month plan, with classes after office hours." Inquiries go up in the very first month.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When an ad makes you feel like the hero, notice the role it has given itself: the guide who knows the way. Evaluate that guide as you would a professional: ask for results, guarantees, alternatives. Feeling like the main character doesn't obligate you to buy: "I understand what could change for me, but what concrete results have you already achieved with other customers?"

TECHNIQUE 193

The Problem as the Villain

➤ WHAT IT IS

Every story needs an antagonist. The point is that the “villain” shouldn’t be a person, but the problem. In the narrative therapy of Michael White and David Epston, this is called externalization: “The person is not the problem; the problem is the problem.” Giving the problem a name and separating it from the person living with it removes blame and creates an alliance against a common enemy.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When there’s a problem creating tension, give it a concrete name, almost a character: “the Monday chaos,” “the mountain of paper-work,” “the bill monster.” Then talk about that: “How do we beat it, together?” Never give that name to a person or a group: that’s where the common enemy turns into a scapegoat.

➤ EXAMPLE

In one family there’s a fight every evening over homework. The mom stops telling her son “You’re so messy” and starts talking about “Miss Hurry,” who shows up at six and makes the notebooks disappear. The boy laughs, and together they pack his backpack the night before, “to beat her.”

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A common enemy unites people, and that’s exactly why it’s also used to divide them. If the “enemy” of a story becomes a group of people (the immigrant neighbors, the coworkers in another department), stop. You’re not listening to a story, you’re listening to propaganda. Bring the conversation back to the problem: “Let’s leave aside whose fault it is. What’s the practical issue we need to solve?”

TECHNIQUE 194

Criticism Inside a Story

◆ WHAT IT IS

Getting someone to see they're making a mistake without saying it to their face: telling the story of someone else, or your own, who made the same mistake. The listener reaches the conclusion with their own head, and a conclusion of one's own isn't up for argument. It's the method of parables and fables, as old as storytelling itself.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Think of a true story similar to the situation of the person you want to correct, but involving someone else. Tell it calmly, without connecting it explicitly: "I remember a guy who used to work with me..." Then stop. If the other person doesn't make the connection, ask: "What would you have done in his place?" The lesson doesn't need explaining.

◆ EXAMPLE

A plumber with many years in the trade watches her new apprentice overtighten the fittings. Instead of correcting her in front of the customer, she tells her in the van about the time, early on, she flooded a kitchen with a cracked fitting. The next day the apprentice tightens with a light hand, without another word needed.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone tells you the story "of someone else" that looks a lot like your situation, ask yourself whether it's a message for you. If it is, ask for clarity: "Are you telling me I'm doing something wrong? Go ahead and tell me directly."

TECHNIQUE 195

Feel, Felt, Found

✦ WHAT IT IS

A classic sales formula for answering an objection with a little three-part story: “I understand how you feel. Other customers felt the same way. Then they found that...” Instead of contradicting the doubt, it welcomes it and places it inside a story in which other people, with the same doubt, found an answer.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Part one: acknowledge the doubt, without arguing with it. Part two: mention real people who had the same fear, so the other person doesn’t feel like the only one. Part three: share what they found afterward, with a concrete fact. Use only true cases that you can have verified: a made-up story, if discovered, costs you the customer and your reputation.

✦ EXAMPLE

A woman walks into a hearing aid store: “I’m embarrassed. People will see it.” The hearing specialist answers: “I understand. Mr. Martin, from the coffee shop downstairs, said the same thing. Then he realized nobody noticed, and now he can hear his grandkids on the phone again.” The woman asks to try one.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a salesperson answers you with “other people felt the same way,” listen to your doubt, not the story. Ask: “Can I talk to one of them?” And remember that a legitimate doubt stays legitimate even if others got past it.

TECHNIQUE 196

The Springboard Story

◆ WHAT IT IS

A short story about a change that has already succeeded somewhere else, told so that listeners imagine on their own how to apply it to their case. Stephen Denning discovered it at the World Bank: charts convinced no one to share knowledge, but the story of a health worker in Zambia who found an answer about malaria on the internet did. He called it a “springboard story.”

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Choose a true, recent, simple case in which the idea you’re proposing has already worked. Tell it in a few minutes, with a main character and a result, without too many details. The listeners have to fill in the gaps with their own reality. Then ask only: “What if it happened here too?”

◆ EXAMPLE

At one company, nobody wants internal chat to replace email. The HR manager tells the story of a courier in Denver who, using a group chat, tracked down a lost package in half an hour, something that used to take three days of phone calls. Silence, then the warehouse manager: “Imagine if we’d had that with the supplier in Phoenix.”

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A springboard story gets you to imagine success in your own case before you’ve checked it. Ask how the situation in the story differs from yours: “It worked there, but what conditions did they have that we don’t?” A springboard only works if there’s water underneath.

TECHNIQUE 197

Chekhov's Gun

➤ WHAT IT IS

Anton Chekhov used to tell young writers: if there's a rifle hanging on the wall in the first act, it has to go off before the end. In a good story nothing is there by chance, and every detail planted at the beginning becomes useful later on. When it comes back, listeners feel a small satisfaction, like a puzzle piece falling into place. And of the whole story, that return is the part they remember best.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you tell a story, plant a small, concrete detail at the beginning, without explaining what it means. Then go on with the story. At the end, bring it back, and make it the very detail that closes the circle. Cut the details that don't come back, though: every gun that doesn't go off is a distraction.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the party for his parents' fortieth wedding anniversary, the son opens his toast with the old red station wagon they used to take to the beach: always breaking down, and the two of them always pushing it together on the shoulder of the road. Then he talks about the years, the moves, the grandkids. To close: "Forty years later you're still like that: when something stalls, you get out and push together." The relatives give them a standing ovation.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The satisfaction of a circle closing makes the whole story seem true and right. Salespeople and politicians use it to tie an emotional detail to the conclusion that suits them. When a story wraps up perfectly, enjoy the form, but ask yourself whether the conclusion stands on its own: "Nice ending, but looking only at the facts, does the proposal still hold up?"

TECHNIQUE 198

Self, Us, Now

✦ WHAT IT IS

A way of telling stories that moves a group to action. It was developed by Marshall Ganz, a Harvard lecturer and for years an organizer in labor and civil rights struggles. Three stories in a row: the story of self, which explains why you care; the story of us, the values and experiences the group shares; the story of now, the urgent challenge and the choice to be made right now.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Start with a short episode of your own: why this cause matters to you. Move on to “us”: what unites us, what we’ve already overcome together. Close with “now”: what happens if we do nothing, and what the first concrete step is, with a date and a time. Without the third part, the story moves people emotionally but doesn’t move anyone to act.

✦ EXAMPLE

A mom wants to reopen the neighborhood’s abandoned playing field. At the community meeting she tells them it’s where she learned to ride a bike. Then she reminds them of the end-of-summer parties everyone had on that field. And she closes: “Saturday at nine we bring the rakes. The city said if we clean it up, they’ll put us in charge of it.” On Saturday, forty people show up.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

This structure works for good causes and bad ones. When you hear a story of “us” that asks you to act immediately, ask yourself who decided that “us,” who’s left out, and what would really happen if you waited a week. Out loud: “Let’s take a few days. If it’s right today, it’ll still be right a week from now.”

TECHNIQUE 199

The Embedded Metaphor

➤ WHAT IT IS

Describing a complex situation with a metaphor that shows only part of it. A metaphor simplifies, but it also chooses: it lights up some aspects and hides others. Once accepted, it becomes the frame inside which everyone thinks, and getting out of it is hard. If the economy is a pie, when one slice grows another has to shrink; if it's a muscle, the more it's trained, the more it grows for everyone.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before an important discussion, choose the metaphor that leads naturally to your solution. If you want collaboration, talk about a "team" or a "rope team on a mountain"; if you want urgency, about a "leak in the boat." Use it early, before someone else does, and bring it back several times. It will become the way everyone describes the problem.

➤ EXAMPLE

In a family business, two brothers are fighting over the books. Their accountant says: "The business is a rowboat. If one of you rows one way and the other rows the other way, you go in circles." From that evening on, nobody argues about who's right: they argue about how to row together.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you're given a metaphor, ask yourself what it lights up and what it hides: "In what ways is our situation not like a boat?" The strongest defense is to propose another one: "It seems less like a boat to me and more like a house with two tenants and a single meter."

TECHNIQUE 200

RED FLAG

Rewriting the Personal Story

♦ WHAT IT IS

A closed group pushes its members to reread their entire lives through the lens of its ideology. The past before joining becomes empty, unhappy, wrong; even happy memories are reinterpreted as illusions. The goal is to erase the earlier identity and replace it with the one the group provides: outside the group, the person would no longer know who they are.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the sentences about the past: “Before, you were living in the dark,” “That wasn’t real happiness,” “Your family was holding you back.” Members are asked to tell their life stories in front of the others, with the new interpretation. Old friends and relatives become part of the “old self,” something to distance yourself from. Anyone thinking of leaving is afraid of becoming that empty person again.

♦ EXAMPLE

A forty-year-old man joins a personal growth group after his divorce. A year later he describes his twenties, the vacations with friends, his first job, as “years wasted in a lie.” He stops talking to his brother, who “belongs to that life.” When the group starts asking for money, he no longer has anyone to ask for advice.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Your story is yours: no one has the right to rewrite it. Growing means integrating the past, not erasing it. Stay in touch with people who knew you before, friends, siblings, former coworkers: they’re the witnesses of your real story. And be wary of any group that asks you to be ashamed of the person you were: “My life before had good things and mistakes, but it’s mine, and I don’t disown it.”

PART III

THE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE

CHAPTER 9 Scarcity and Urgency

CHAPTER 10 Authority and Social Proof

CHAPTER 11 Liking, Reciprocity, and Commitment

CHAPTER 12 Time as a Weapon

CHAPTER 09

Scarcity and Urgency

Whatever is about to run out looks more valuable to us, and whatever has to be decided right now looks more important. In this chapter you'll see how to use scarcity and deadlines honestly, and how to spot the people who invent them to make you decide before you think.

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TECHNIQUE 201

Scarcity

◆ WHAT IT IS

Things seem more valuable to us when they're about to run out. We use rarity as a shortcut for judging value, and the fear of missing out on an opportunity moves us more than the desire to gain something. That's why "only a few left" and "tonight only" still work, even when we see them for what they are.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Scarcity only works if it's real and stated precisely: how many spots are left, until when, and why. "Last three spots in Saturday's class, because the room holds twenty" is convincing. "Hurry, it's almost gone!" sounds fake. Fake scarcity burns through people's trust in you the first time someone catches on.

◆ EXAMPLE

A downtown restaurant doesn't take reservations on Saturdays: the only way in is to wait in line. The line on the sidewalk becomes its best advertising, and the people who wait forty minutes rate the dinner as better.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you feel the urgency, try the full-shelf test: "Would I still want it if there were a hundred of them and I could buy one a month from now?" If the answer is no, the only thing pulling you in is the fear of going without. To anyone rushing you: "If it sells out, oh well. I never buy on the spot."

TECHNIQUE 202

RED FLAG

Only a Few Left

➤ WHAT IT IS

Making something look limited when it isn't. "Only one room left at this price," "limited spots," "five other people are looking at this deal." The reasoning that kicks in is automatic: if there are only a few left, lots of people want it, so it must be good. And the fear of going without shuts down any comparison with the alternatives.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Counters ticking down, red lettering, alerts that pop up while you're looking at the page. Limited seats for an online course, where the chairs don't exist. Shelves left half empty on purpose, "exclusive" limited runs that get reprinted the following month. The scarcity is never explained: it's just there.

➤ EXAMPLE

You're booking a hotel in Myrtle Beach for August. A message pops up on the screen: "Only 1 room left at this price!" You book it in two minutes, without checking any other sites. The next day, out of curiosity, you open the page again: the same room, at the same price, is still "the last one."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Check before you believe: open another site, look at the hotel's own website, or come back the next day. Ask yourself whether the limit makes sense: who could actually keep track of how many rooms are left, or how many people are looking? When the scarcity can't be verified, treat it as if it weren't there and decide on price and quality: "I don't buy something because it's the last one. If it's still there tomorrow, I'll take it."

TECHNIQUE 203

Sudden Scarcity

◆ WHAT IT IS

Something that suddenly becomes scarce attracts us more than something that has always been scarce. In 1975 psychologist Stephen Worchel had volunteers taste cookies taken from a jar. Cookies from a jar holding two were liked more than cookies from a jar holding ten. But the highest rating went to cookies from a jar that had gone from ten to two right before their eyes, especially when they had run out because other people had wanted them.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Tell the story of the drop, not just where things stand. Not “we have three,” but “in September we had thirty, and there are three left.” The drop has to be real and verifiable. It works for seasonal products, seats at an event, open dates on your calendar. If the reason is demand from other customers, say so.

◆ EXAMPLE

A plant nursery outside Chicago emails its customers on a Thursday: “On Monday we had two hundred Brandywine tomato seedlings. Today there are fifteen left.” On Saturday the last ones are gone before noon, and someone asks to reserve next year’s.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself why the thing ran out. If it ran out because lots of people like it, that tells you nothing about whether it’s right for you: other people’s taste isn’t yours. And when you can, check that the drop is real: “How come they sold out so fast?”

TECHNIQUE 204

Someone Else Is Interested

➤ WHAT IT IS

Scarcity gets even stronger when there's a rival. If someone else wants the same thing, we no longer just want to have it: we want to make sure we don't lose it to somebody else. Auctions, the housing market, and clearance sales all run on this push, which drives up desire and, often, the price.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

If the competition is real, show it with facts, without drama: "There are two more showings this week. If you're interested, it would be smart to make an offer by Friday." Arrange things so the interested parties see each other. Never invent the rival: it's easy to find out, and whoever finds out doesn't come back.

➤ EXAMPLE

A real estate agent in Philadelphia schedules all the showings for a one-bedroom apartment on the same Saturday morning, one every fifteen minutes. The couples pass each other in the hallway, size each other up, and get the message. On Monday there are two written offers on her desk at the agency.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Decide your top price ahead of time, at home, and write it down. When you hear about the rival, go back to that number and don't budge. You can also ask: "Is there already a written offer?" If there isn't, the bidding war exists only in your head.

TECHNIQUE 205

The Forbidden Fruit

◆ WHAT IT IS

When a freedom is taken away from us, we want it back, and the forbidden thing becomes more desirable. In 1966 American psychologist Jack Brehm called this reaction psychological reactance. It's the reason a banned book sells more copies, and why parents forbidding a relationship makes it matter even more to their kids.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

It works in two directions. If you want to make something desirable, put it behind a small, real barrier: "reserved for people who've taken the basic course," "members only." If instead you want someone to let something go, don't forbid it outright. The ban makes it more precious. Give a rule that leaves room for a choice.

◆ EXAMPLE

A mom and dad in Columbus have been fighting with their son for months over a video game: the more they forbid it, the more he thinks about it. They change course: half an hour a day after homework, and he decides when. Two weeks later the boy plays it less than before, because it's no longer a battle to win.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you want something precisely because you've been denied it, ask yourself: "Would I still want it if it were allowed?" And look at who put the ban in place: sometimes "forbidden" is just window dressing.

TECHNIQUE 206

The Sneak Peek

➤ WHAT IT IS

Information follows the scarcity rule too. Confidential news carries more weight than the same news read in every paper. “It isn’t out yet,” “I’m telling you before anyone else knows”: whoever receives exclusive information considers it more important and more likely to be true, and feels like part of an inner circle.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Give real, useful information to a few people first: to loyal customers before the public, to the colleagues who matter before the meeting. Say clearly that it’s a sneak peek and why it’s coming to them in particular. It can’t be a fake secret: it has to genuinely arrive first, with a small, concrete advantage.

➤ EXAMPLE

A stationery store in Boston texts its loyalty card customers on August 25: “The new school planners arrive tomorrow. Before we put them in the window, we’ll hold them for you until Saturday.” The next day there are parents outside the store with their kids’ supply lists in hand.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When “confidential news” comes your way, separate the exclusivity from the content: “If I’d read this on a flyer, would it still seem this important?” And ask yourself who gains from you treating it as a secret. Then buy yourself some time: “Thanks for the tip. Let me check a couple of things and I’ll get back to you.”

TECHNIQUE 207

The Waitlist

◆ WHAT IT IS

Lining people up before you've even started selling. Anyone who joins a waitlist has already taken a small step and said "I'm interested," and the wait makes the desire grow instead of fading. Apps, restaurants, courses, and new products all use it.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before the launch, open only the sign-up for the list: name and contact info, no payment. Give a date, or at least a time frame. During the weeks of waiting, send the people on the list short updates about what's coming. On opening day, the people on the list get in first, with a real advantage: early access, first pick of time slots, a launch price.

◆ EXAMPLE

A new gym in San Antonio, six weeks before its grand opening, puts a sign in the window: "Opening list: sign up and get first pick of class times." The list grows through word of mouth among the neighbors. On opening day, the evening classes are already full.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A waitlist only organizes interest; it says nothing about quality. When your turn comes, judge the offer as if you'd stumbled on it by chance, without the weight of all the weeks you spent waiting: "Could you text me a breakdown of the costs? I want to compare it with another option."

TECHNIQUE 208

RED FLAG

The Invented Deadline

➤ WHAT IT IS

Setting a deadline that has no real reason behind it, just so you don't have time to think, compare, or ask for a second opinion. "This price is only good if you sign today." Under time pressure we decide with our gut: the fear of missing out weighs more than reasoning, and a decision made in a hurry almost always favors the person pushing for it.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes with stock phrases: "Today only," "if you walk out that door, the offer's gone," "tomorrow it goes back to full price." The deadline always shows up together with the discount, and almost never in writing. It appears in relationships too, as an ultimatum: "Either we decide by the end of the month, or we're done."

➤ EXAMPLE

A mattress saleswoman does a demonstration at your parents' house, then announces: "The promotional price is only good tonight. Tomorrow I'm off to another territory." Your father already has the pen in his hand. You ask for the offer in writing, with the deadline on it. The saleswoman changes the subject. Two weeks later, a flyer shows up in the mailbox with the same price.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask why: "What changes for you if I sign tomorrow?" Have them show you where that date appears on the form, then set the timeline yourself: "Before I sign, I'm going to talk it over with my family. Let's touch base early next week." A good offer is still good the next day. If it disappears, you've dodged a trap. In Chapter 16 you'll find The 24-Hour Rule.

TECHNIQUE 209

The Calendar Deadline

◆ WHAT IT IS

The honest version of the deadline: tying the decision to a date that really exists, outside the seller's control. The end of an incentive program, the start of the school year, the arrival of cold weather, December 31 for a tax-deductible expense. A deadline with an outside reason pushes people to decide without any fake pressure.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Find the real date that matters to your customer and put it front and center. Not “decide today,” but “if you want the job finished before winter, the order has to be in by October 15, because after that delivery times get longer.” Always explain why, and name a specific day, not a vague “soon.”

◆ EXAMPLE

A piano tuner in Indianapolis writes to the local music schools at the end of July: “Lessons start back up in September and requests pile up. Book your tune-up by August 25 and you pick the day and time.” His late-summer calendar fills up, and in September the emergency calls disappear.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Check that the date exists and that it actually applies to you: an expiring rebate doesn't matter if you never qualified for it. Ask: “Where can I read the official text with the deadline?” Then check it on your own.

TECHNIQUE 210

Tiered Pricing

➤ WHAT IT IS

The price goes up in steps, on fixed dates announced from the start: the earlier you move, the less you pay. It's the "early bird" rate for courses, conferences, concerts, and trips. It works because every step is a small, real deadline, and the cost of waiting is right there in black and white.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Set two or three tiers, with dates and prices published from day one, and always stick to them: the day after the deadline, the price really goes up. Send a reminder a few days before the change. If you extend the discount "by request" even once, next time nobody will believe you.

➤ EXAMPLE

A community association in Detroit runs a pan pizza class: \$120 until April 30, \$150 until May 31, \$180 after that. On April 29 and 30, more people sign up than in the whole rest of the month. In May, the same thing happens in the last two days.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself whether you really need the course or the trip, or whether you're buying the discount. Before you pay early, check what happens if you can't make it after all: savings that come with a nonrefundable deposit can cost more than full price. Always ask: "If something comes up, how long do I have to cancel and get a refund?"

TECHNIQUE 211

The Bonus for Deciding Now

◆ WHAT IT IS

An extra gift tied to a short window: whoever confirms by a certain date gets something that won't be there afterward. The price stays the same; what you get changes. Unlike a discount, it doesn't lower the product's value: it rewards speed.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Pick a bonus that's useful and fits what you sell, something that costs you little and is worth a lot to the customer: free delivery, an extra session, an accessory. State the deadline and the reason, and when the date comes, really take it away. A bonus that's always there becomes part of the price.

◆ EXAMPLE

In March, a bike shop in Portland puts up a sign: "Order an e-bike by Sunday and your first tune-up and basket installation are included." The price doesn't change, but people who've been thinking about it for weeks finally get the push to come into the store.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Take the bonus out of the equation and ask yourself whether you'd still buy. Then give the gift its real value, not the one on the sign: it often costs the seller next to nothing. And try: "I don't need the gift. If I sign today, can you take it off the price instead?"

TECHNIQUE 212

Enrollment Windows

➤ WHAT IT IS

Opening sales for just a few days, then closing them until the next round. It's the model for many courses and programs: doors open, doors closed. The closing is real, and that's exactly why people decide during the days the door is open, instead of putting it off forever.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Announce the opening and closing dates in advance. In the days leading up, build anticipation with useful content. Keep enrollment open for a short time, send a reminder about the closing the day before and on the last day, and when the deadline hits, really close. Anyone who comes later goes on the list for the next window.

➤ EXAMPLE

A yoga teacher in Austin opens enrollment for her fall program only from September 1 to 7. The rest of the year, she gives everyone who writes to her the same answer: "I'm reopening in January. I'll put you on the list." In January, many of the people on that list sign up on the first day.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A closed window isn't an opportunity lost forever: it reopens. Ask yourself whether you need it now or can wait, and decide on the program, not the countdown: "I'd rather wait for the next opening. In the meantime, could you send me the full program?"

TECHNIQUE 213

The Timed Free Trial

◆ WHAT IT IS

Giving something away free for a period, then letting it expire. In 2009 researchers Joann Peck and Suzanne Shu showed that simply touching an object, or imagining it as your own for a few minutes, is enough to increase the sense of ownership and the value we place on it: after a few days of use, giving it up feels like a loss. The end of the trial creates a natural urgency, with no need to invent one.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Offer a real, complete trial, long enough for the product to become part of people's routine. A few days before it ends, send a notice reminding the person what they'll lose: their saved files, the program they've set up, the lessons they've taken. Never a hidden paid renewal: always give notice before you charge.

◆ EXAMPLE

A digital newsstand offers a free month of newspapers and magazines. In the third week, a message arrives: "In seven days you'll lose access to your papers and your saved articles." Anyone who's gotten into the habit of reading every morning over coffee renews without thinking twice.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Mark the end of the trial on your calendar the same day you start it. Before it runs out, ask yourself: "Would I buy this if I'd never tried it?" And cancel in time anything you won't use. If it's offered to you in person: "When the trial ends, does it stop on its own, or do I have to cancel?"

TECHNIQUE 214

Hold Your Spot

➤ WHAT IT IS

Lowering the cost of deciding now. Instead of asking for everything right away, you ask for a small step that locks in the opportunity: a no-obligation reservation, a small deposit, an option that's good for a few days. People who have held their spot stop looking elsewhere and, very often, end up confirming.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When the customer is interested but wants to think it over, suggest a small, reversible step: "I'll hold the date for you until Friday, no obligation," or a small, refundable deposit. Make it clear when the hold expires and what happens after that. The step has to be truly light: if it weighs on people, it turns into pressure.

➤ EXAMPLE

A wedding venue outside Savannah, on an engaged couple's first visit, offers to hold a Saturday in June for ten days without them paying a cent. The couple, relieved, cancels the other two tours they had lined up. Ten days later they sign the contract.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before you hold anything, read the terms and ask: "If I change my mind by Friday, will you refund the entire deposit with no penalty?" A "no-obligation" hold shouldn't stop you from shopping around: keep looking at the alternatives until you've truly decided.

TECHNIQUE 215

The Price of Waiting

◆ WHAT IT IS

Showing how much not deciding costs. Every month of waiting has a price: higher bills, a problem that gets worse, an opportunity that slips away. In 1988 psychologists Marti Gonzales, Elliot Aronson, and Mark Costanzo found that energy auditors in California persuaded far more households to insulate their homes when they showed them how much money they were losing every month through drafts, instead of how much they would save. That's why "what you lose by waiting" moves people more than "what you save by buying."

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Run the numbers together with the customer, using their figures: how much they spend today, how much they'd spend later, how much they lose with every month that goes by. Use real, conservative numbers, never inflated ones. Then let them decide: the urgency comes from the math, not from your pushing.

◆ EXAMPLE

A window installer in Minneapolis, instead of talking about discounts, asks a customer for his heating bills from the last two winters. With a calculator on the kitchen table, they estimate together how much heat is escaping through the old windows. The customer sees that another winter of waiting will cost him more than the down payment. He signs in October.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Redo the math with your numbers, not the salesperson's: "Can I keep this sheet? I want to rerun the numbers at home with my own bills." And in the calculation, include the cost of a wrong choice too, not just the cost of waiting.

TECHNIQUE 216

Parkinson's Law

➤ WHAT IT IS

Work expands to fill the time available for its completion. British historian Cyril Northcote Parkinson wrote it in 1955, in a tongue-in-cheek essay in *The Economist*. A request with no deadline ends up at the bottom of the pile; the same request with a specific date and a reason gets done.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Every time you ask for something, add a date and a reason: "I need the numbers by noon Thursday, because I'm taking them to the client on Friday." A close, reasonable deadline beats a distant one. Break long projects into stages, each with its own date. And it applies to you, too: give yourself small, near-term deadlines.

➤ EXAMPLE

The president of a volleyball club in San Diego has been waiting for months for quotes on new uniforms. She stops writing "as soon as possible" and sends three suppliers the same email: "The board meets on November 14. We'll only consider bids received by the 7th." On the 7th, she has all three envelopes on her desk.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you're handed tight deadlines on things that don't seem urgent, ask the reason for the date. If there isn't one, propose a realistic date yourself: "I can't do it properly by Thursday. I'll have it to you Tuesday morning."

TECHNIQUE 217

RED FLAG

“I Only Have Five Minutes”

✦ WHAT IT IS

Announcing at the start of a conversation that you have very little time, so the other person speeds up, simplifies, and doesn't ask questions. Nobody wants to waste the time of someone who seems important and busy: so people censor themselves, boil complex problems down to a single sentence, and agree in a hurry. And the scarce time makes the speaker seem even more important.

✦ HOW TO SPOT IT

Opening lines like “I’ve got a call in five minutes, make it quick” or “My train leaves in ten minutes, but I wanted to tell you real quick...” The rush shows up precisely when the topic is sensitive. And the conversation often ends up lasting twenty minutes: the hurry was only there to squeeze out room for your objections.

✦ EXAMPLE

You ask the HR manager for a meeting about the raise you were promised. She sees you standing up, by the door: “I’ve got five minutes. Go.” You sum everything up in two sentences, the answer is “Let’s revisit this at the end of the year,” and the matter is closed before it even starts.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If the topic is important, calmly put it off: “Since you’re short on time, I’d rather discuss it properly. Can we find half an hour tomorrow?” If you can’t put it off, prepare a three-point summary and speak at your own pace. And notice if the five minutes turn into twenty: it was a tactic.

TECHNIQUE 218

RED FLAG

Urgency That Doesn't Matter

➤ WHAT IT IS

Presenting something unimportant as urgent, to drain time and energy away from what really matters. The brain reacts to urgency before importance. In 2018 researchers Meng Zhu, Yang Yang, and Christopher Hsee named this phenomenon the “mere urgency effect”: we tend to pick tasks with a close deadline even when they’re worth less than the important ones.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Emails with “URGENT” in the subject line for trivial matters, the coworker who swoops down on your desk, phone calls that can’t wait, red notification badges. Someone doing it on purpose, or a boss who can’t manage priorities, keeps everyone busy putting out small fires, and the real projects never move forward.

➤ EXAMPLE

You’re finishing the financial statements that have to reach the bank by 5 p.m. A coworker rushes over: “Urgent! We need to pick the color for the holiday brochure right now.” You lose an hour on samples and opinions. The statements go out at 6, and the bank’s office is already closed.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

For every request, ask yourself two questions: Is it urgent? Is it important? That’s the matrix that bears President Eisenhower’s name. Then ask the other person one: “What happens if we do this this afternoon instead of right now?” Often, nothing. And protect a couple of hours every day for the important things, with notifications off.

TECHNIQUE 219

RED FLAG

The Exploding Offer

➤ WHAT IT IS

In a negotiation, an offer that's good for only a few hours and then "explodes": it disappears. It's different from a store's deadline, because it comes inside a serious deal (a job, a lease, a supply contract) and often leans on an alternative the other side spells out: "I have another offer, and I have to answer within the hour." The goal is to keep you from comparing and from negotiating.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes with good terms, so that saying no hurts. The time allowed is too short for a decision that big. There's often a rival you can't see, and a line like "I can't keep this on hold."

➤ EXAMPLE

A company in Manhattan offers Megan a well-paid job, but wants an answer by the next morning. Megan has another interview on Thursday. Instead of saying yes or no on the spot, she explains that she wants to review the contract carefully and asks for forty-eight hours. The company gives her until Friday.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't answer right away with either a yes or a no; ask for time, with a specific date: "I'm very interested, and I want to give you a serious answer, not a rushed one. Can I let you know Friday morning?" A serious offer can almost always be stretched by a few days. If it really does explode, ask yourself what that tells you about how things work there once you've signed.

TECHNIQUE 220

Last-Minute Concessions

✦ WHAT IT IS

In a negotiation, most concessions come close to the deadline. Whoever has a tight deadline gives up more, because every day that passes works against their goals. Whoever knows the other side's deadline, and keeps their own hidden, has a strong advantage.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Try to figure out when the other side has to close: the end of the month for a salesperson with quotas, the end of the year for a company, a move already scheduled for someone selling a house. Keep your own deadline to yourself. Don't make the important concessions at the start: save them for the last days, when they're worth more to the other side.

✦ EXAMPLE

Tony needs to buy a new oven for his bakery. Instead of negotiating with the supplier in the middle of the month, he stops by the sales rep on the last Friday of the quarter, when sales bonuses are being locked in. In an hour he gets free delivery and a discount he'd been refused two weeks earlier.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't reveal your real deadline: when they ask "When do you need it?" answer "I'm in no hurry. I want to make the right choice." If you do have a tight date, start negotiating much earlier, so time isn't working against you.

TECHNIQUE 221

RED FLAG

The Scarcity Tunnel

◆ WHAT IT IS

When we're short on something, money or time, the mind narrows in on that problem and loses sight of everything else. Economist Sendhil Mullainathan and psychologist Eldar Shafir describe this in their 2013 book *Scarcity*: people living with scarcity think inside a tunnel, and become easier to push toward quick, expensive fixes.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Whoever wants to take advantage of it shows up exactly when you're in the tunnel: easy financing at the end of the month, the "fix everything right now" solution when you're behind, the loan between friends to be paid back "whenever you can" that later turns into a heavy debt. The message is always the same: I'll take today's problem off your hands, and the bill comes tomorrow.

◆ EXAMPLE

It's January, the car needs new tires, and payday is ten days away. At the tire shop there's a sign: "10 easy payments, no worries." You sign up for the financing without reading the interest rate. When all is said and done, the tires cost a lot more than the sticker price.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Learn to recognize the moments when you're in the tunnel: little money, little time, lots of hurry. In those moments, don't sign anything that will outlast the problem. Before you agree, ask just one question: "How much will I pay in total, all said and done?" And get the opinion of someone who isn't in the tunnel themselves.

TECHNIQUE 222

RED FLAG

First Fear, Then Relief

➤ WHAT IT IS

Scaring someone and then immediately taking the fear away. In the wave of relief, the mind runs on autopilot for a few moments, and says yes more easily to the request that comes right after. Polish psychologists Dariusz Dolinski and Richard Nawrat studied this in 1998: drivers who found a slip of paper on their windshield that looked like a parking ticket, but turned out to be an ad, agreed more often to fill out a questionnaire.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The sequence is always the same: fear, relief, request. The bad cop and the good cop in interrogations. A cruel prank followed by a favor. The ad that scares you with a health risk and then presents the product as your salvation.

➤ EXAMPLE

A coworker calls you: “The boss is furious about your report!” Your blood runs cold. Ten minutes later he calls back: “False alarm, it was about somebody else. Oh, while I’ve got you, can you cover my Saturday shift?” You say yes before you’ve even thought about it.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the sequence. After a scare, even one that ends well, don’t decide anything: “Give me a moment. We’ll talk about it later.” And watch out for people who scare you so they can then “save” you. They’re measuring how far you’ll bend.

TECHNIQUE 223

RED FLAG

False Panic

◆ WHAT IT IS

Acting out agitation, stress, or panic to push others to react instead of think. Panic is contagious: faced with someone falling apart, our instinct is to do something right away, not to analyze. Whoever uses it in cold blood gets rushed decisions, dodges an uncomfortable question, or becomes the center of attention.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Heavy breathing, a raised voice, a cry of “There’s no time! We have to decide now!” Or a meltdown right when the hard question arrives. The clearest signal is the timing: the crises arrive, funnily enough, at the moments most useful to the person having them.

◆ EXAMPLE

In a meeting, someone asks a project manager why the budget ran out in June. The manager jumps up, agitated: “We can’t keep up, we’re drowning! If we don’t approve the extra funds right now, it’s a disaster!” The meeting approves the funds, and nobody ever gets back to the original question.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Become the calm anchor in the room: low voice, slow pace. Ask simple, concrete questions: “What exactly is the problem? What’s the next step?” If the panic is always strategic, name it without cruelty: “I understand this is a rough moment. Let’s take five minutes and then pick up exactly where we left off.”

TECHNIQUE 224

The Unfinished Task

➤ WHAT IT IS

When a task we've started gets interrupted, we're left with an inner pull to go back and finish it, even with no reward at all. In 1928 psychologist Maria Ovsiankina, a student of Kurt Lewin in Berlin, interrupted participants while they were doing small manual tasks or puzzles: later left alone in the room, they went back to the task on their own almost eight times out of ten. It's a sturdier effect than the better-known Zeigarnik effect, the one about memory for interrupted tasks, which has had weak replications.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

To help someone finish an application or a program, get them to take the first step right away and make what's left visible: "We've already filled in three items out of four. Shall we finish the last one?" A progress bar or a form that's already started works better than a blank page. Use it only for steps that genuinely serve the other person: leaving paperwork half done as bait to force a purchase burns trust.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a benefits help center in Toledo, many clients brought in their first documents for Social Security retirement and then vanished for months. A caseworker, Diane, starts handing out a folder with four boxes, three already stamped in green and just one left empty: "You're only missing this one." Return visits double.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Online shopping carts, profiles that are "80 percent complete," and quotes saved halfway all exploit that very itch of the unfinished. When you feel the urge to finish, stop and say it out loud: "Taking three steps doesn't obligate me to take the fourth. I'm closing the page and deciding whether I really need it."

TECHNIQUE 225

RED FLAG

The Sudden Acceleration

◆ WHAT IT IS

In a relationship that's still young, suddenly pushing toward the big milestones: moving in, marriage, kids, buying a home together. The rush looks like love and it's flattering, but it serves to bind the other person before they have time to see the warning signs. With a mortgage or a child in the picture, leaving becomes much harder.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Lines like "Why wait?" or "When you know, you know," after only a few weeks. Or, right after a reconciliation, the proposal of an enormous commitment to "prove" they're serious. The strongest signal is the reaction when you ask to slow down: irritation, sulking, playing the victim.

◆ EXAMPLE

Charlotte has been seeing someone she met at the gym for two months. After a weekend at the lake, the proposal comes: "I've realized you're the one. Let's find a place together, right now." Charlotte asks for time. The answer is a long face and one line: "So you don't really care."

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Trust the discomfort: if it feels too soon, it is. Calmly ask to slow down: "Being good together doesn't mean we have to rush. Let's take it one step at a time." Then watch the reaction. People who love you respect your pace; people who manipulate respond with pressure, sulking, or playing the victim.

CHAPTER 10

Authority and Social Proof

When we don't know what to do, we look to people who know more and to what everyone else is doing. In this chapter you'll learn to get recognized as a credible voice and to use other people's example honestly, and to unmask fake experts, invented crowds, and authority used as a weapon.

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TECHNIQUE 226

The Diploma on the Wall

◆ WHAT IT IS

Expertise that can't be seen doesn't exist for the person who has to decide. People judge a professional in a few seconds, from what's in front of them: certificates, years on the job, cases handled. Putting your credentials on display, right where the client decides, gives people a concrete reason to trust you without your having to brag.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Choose three proofs of your expertise (a degree, your years in the field, an award, the number of jobs completed) and put them where the client sees them before choosing: on the office wall, in your email signature, on the first page of the estimate. Facts, no adjectives: "Licensed since 2009" is worth more than "extensive experience."

◆ EXAMPLE

A physical therapist in Tucson notices that many patients don't do their exercises at home. She hangs her diplomas and the certificates from her specialty courses in the treatment room, right across from the table. In the months that follow, patients stick to the program more consistently, and some start asking her advice for their family members too.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A certificate says a person studied something, not that they're good at what you need. Check whether the credentials cover your specific problem, and ask for results, not just titles: "How many cases like mine have you handled in the past year?"

TECHNIQUE 227

The Precise Number

➤ WHAT IT IS

An exact figure looks like the result of a calculation, and the person saying it seems like someone who has studied the matter. “It costs \$4,850” sounds more considered than “It costs \$5,000.” In 2013 Malia Mason and her colleagues at Columbia University saw this in negotiations. People who opened with a precise offer received counteroffers closer to their own, because the other side assumed there was a serious valuation behind it. A round number looks like an estimate; a precise one, like evidence.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you present a price or a figure, use the real number you calculated, without rounding it for convenience: “The job takes 37 hours,” “the savings come to \$212 a year.” Keep the math behind it ready, because someone will ask. The precision has to be real: a precise number that’s made up, if discovered, costs you credibility on everything else.

➤ EXAMPLE

Two photographers prepare quotes for the same wedding in Nashville. The first writes “about \$2,000.” The second writes “\$1,840” and attaches the line items one by one, from the album to the prints. The couple haggles at length with the first; from the second they accept almost everything, convinced that every dollar has its reason.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A precise number isn’t necessarily a fair number. Ask where it comes from: “Can you show me the breakdown, line by line?” And compare it with other quotes: precision tells you someone did a calculation, not that they did it in your favor.

TECHNIQUE 228

Get Someone Else to Introduce You

◆ WHAT IT IS

Speaking well of yourself sounds like bragging. When someone else says it, it sounds like a fact. The researcher Steve Martin, together with the psychologist Robert Cialdini, saw this at a real estate agency in the United Kingdom: when the receptionist, transferring a call, mentioned the agent's years of experience ("Let me put you through to Peter, who has been selling homes in this area for twenty years"), appointments and contracts went up. Nobody cared that the introduction came from a coworker.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before you speak, have someone else speak: a coworker who introduces you, the organizer who reads two lines about you, an introductory email. Write those two lines yourself: concrete facts, years, results. Then step in without repeating them.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a business dinner, you ask the friend who invited you to introduce you like this: "This is the person who got my brother-in-law's company's logistics back on its feet." When you then talk about your work, they're already listening to you as an expert.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone is introduced to you as an authority, separate the introduction from the person. Get to specifics right away: "What projects similar to ours have you handled in the last two years?"

TECHNIQUE 229

“As Seen On...”

➤ WHAT IT IS

Borrowing the authority of well-known names: the newspapers that have written about you, your big-name clients, the awards you’ve received. People transfer onto you a piece of the trust they have in those names, without needing to verify everything else.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Collect only real mentions: the article in the local paper, the radio interview, the well-known company among your clients, always with its permission. Put them in a modest line, “As featured in:”, near the point where people decide. A few of the right names are worth more than many unknown ones.

➤ EXAMPLE

A small brewery in Missoula gets mentioned in an article on craft beer in a national newspaper. It frames the page next to the register and adds “As featured in...” on its website and in its pitch to bars. Liquor stores that used to ignore its emails start calling back.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A logo isn’t a review. Look up the article: often it’s a two-line mention, or a paid advertising page. Check what those names actually say about the product and, if someone cites them to you out loud, ask: “Can you send me the link to the article?”

TECHNIQUE 230

Explain Before You Sell

◆ WHAT IT IS

Whoever explains becomes the expert. When you teach something useful for free, people associate you with the solution to their problem, and when they decide to buy, they come to you. It's the foundation of what's now called content marketing: guides, videos, articles, information nights.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Identify the three questions customers ask you most often and answer them well, in writing or in a short video. Give real advice, including what people can apply without you. Sign everything with your name and contact information, and publish consistently: once a week is worth more than ten times in one month and then nothing.

◆ EXAMPLE

A contractor in Sacramento posts a two-minute video every week on home energy rebates, explained in plain words. After a few months, people around town call him “the rebate guy,” and clients arrive at his office already knowing they want him.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Someone who teaches a lot isn't necessarily the best choice: they're the best communicator. Use the free content to learn, then compare quotes and results as you would with anyone else.

TECHNIQUE 231

Advise Against Something

➤ WHAT IT IS

An expert who advises against their own interest becomes credible. When a salesperson talks you out of the most expensive product, you stop seeing them as someone who wants to sell you something and start seeing them as someone who's helping you. From then on, you listen to their advice differently.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Early in the conversation, sincerely advise against something: a pricier option the customer doesn't need, a service that isn't worth the cost in their case. Do it only when it's true, and explain why in one sentence. Then, when you recommend something, your word carries new weight.

➤ EXAMPLE

In a wine shop in Napa, a customer points to a sixty-dollar bottle for Sunday dinner. The owner shakes his head: "With your mother's roast, I'd go with this eighteen-dollar one. Save that one for a special occasion." The customer buys the eighteen-dollar bottle and five more. From that day on, he always asks for advice before choosing.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A small honest piece of advice at the start can set up a big request later. Appreciate the gesture, but evaluate every later proposal as if it were the first: "Thanks for the advice. On this other thing, though, I want to think it over for a few days."

TECHNIQUE 232

Confidence in Your Voice

◆ WHAT IT IS

We tend to believe people who speak with confidence, often more than people who are right. The speaker's firmness becomes, for the listener, proof of competence. It works well for people who really know their stuff, and it's also why so many charlatans succeed.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you know something, say it without fillers: no "maybe," "I'm not sure if," "I could be wrong." Short sentences, a steady voice, pauses instead of "um." And when you don't know, say so with the same confidence: "I don't know that. I'll check and get back to you tomorrow morning." Calmly admitting a limit makes everything else more credible.

◆ EXAMPLE

Two coworkers present the same plan to management, with the same slides. The first begins: "I'm not sure if this is the right idea, but..." The second begins: "I'm proposing three steps. Here's the first." Management remembers only the second presentation and approves it.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate the tone from the content. When someone speaks with great confidence, ask calmly: "What data is that based on?" Confidence is a way of speaking, not proof.

TECHNIQUE 233

Customer Stories

➤ WHAT IT IS

Using the real experiences of people who have already chosen a product or service, ideally people similar to the one who has to decide. It combines two powerful levers: social proof (“others like me did it and they’re happy”) and the power of stories, because we identify with the main character and imagine getting the same result.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Ask satisfied customers for a sentence with a before and an after: the problem they had, what they tried, what changed. Use their name, city, and occupation, with their permission. The strongest stories start from doubt: “At first I didn’t believe it...” Place them near the point where readers hesitate most.

➤ EXAMPLE

A cleaning company in Columbus drops “professionalism and reliability” from its flyer and puts in three short stories: Mrs. Franklin, the diner on Main Street, the dental office downtown. Each one with the starting problem and a real quote from the customer. New calls come mostly from diners and offices.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Companies show only their best stories. Look for reviews on independent sites, check with a reverse image search that the photos are real, and ask the salesperson: “Is this the best case or the average result? Can I talk to one of these customers?”

TECHNIQUE 234

Imperfect Reviews

◆ WHAT IT IS

A product with nothing but five-star reviews is less convincing than one with a few criticisms. Perfection looks fake. A few low ratings, with small, explained flaws, make all the others credible, and let readers figure out whether that flaw really matters in their case.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Don't delete genuine negative reviews: answer each one, calmly and with facts, explaining what you've changed. On your sales page you can even state a limitation yourself, next to the praise: "Good to know: delivery takes a week." People who know about the flaw beforehand don't complain about it afterward.

◆ EXAMPLE

A bed-and-breakfast in Charleston gets a two-star review: "Beautiful, but the stairs are steep and there's no elevator." The owner thanks the guest and puts the same sentence prominently in the description. Bookings don't drop, and the complaints about the stairs disappear: the only people who come are the ones who've factored in the stairs.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Read the middling and low reviews first: that's where the real picture is. Be wary of pages with only top ratings, all written in the same style and on the same days.

TECHNIQUE 235

The Tip Jar That's Already Full

➤ WHAT IT IS

Nobody wants to be first. An empty tip jar stays empty; one with a few coins in it fills up. People look at what others have done before them, and a small visible start is enough to get the behavior going.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you ask a group for something, make visible who has already done it: the first signatures on the sheet, the first contributions to the collection, the first comments under the post. You can go first, or ask two or three trusted people to sign on first, for real. Never invented signatures or numbers.

➤ EXAMPLE

At an office in Albuquerque, people are collecting money for a gift for a coworker who's retiring. The first envelope goes around empty for two days and comes back almost empty. The next time, the organizer puts in her own share right away, asks two coworkers to do the same, and only then sends the envelope around. In half a day it's full.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you see lots of people signing on, ask yourself whether you'd sign on with a blank sheet. The first signatures may have been planted: decide on the thing, not on the line. "Before I sign, I want to read the proposal carefully."

TECHNIQUE 236

Others Like You

✦ WHAT IT IS

Social proof works much better when the group cited is close to the listener: same place, same situation. In 2008 Noah Goldstein, Robert Cialdini, and Vladas Griskevicius tested different signs in a hotel to persuade guests to reuse their towels. The sign that mentioned the guests who had stayed in that very room worked better than the one about the environment and the one about guests in general.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

When you cite other people, choose the group most similar to your listener. Not “lots of customers,” but “many families in your neighborhood,” “the people in your department,” “people who bought a home in this area.” The closer the group, the more the message seems to speak to that specific person.

✦ EXAMPLE

The public library in Ann Arbor wants more teenagers to get library cards. The poster about reading isn’t working. The new one says: “Lots of students from the high school next door are already studying for finals in our reading room.” Within a few weeks, the new cards are coming from that very high school.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you’re told “people like you do it,” ask yourself whether it’s true and whether that group really has your same needs. Close doesn’t mean the same: “I know a lot of people around here chose it, but I want to see whether it’s right for my case.”

TECHNIQUE 237

Don't Say That Lots of People Do It

➤ WHAT IT IS

If you want to stop a behavior, don't say that lots of people do it: you make it seem normal. It works much better to say that most people do the right thing. Robert Cialdini tested this in Petrified Forest National Park, in Arizona. A sign lamenting the many visitors who took away pieces of petrified wood made thefts go up instead of down.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Describe the positive norm: "Almost everyone in this building recycles," not "too many people throw everything in together." If the wrong behavior belongs to a few, show that they're few. Never end a notice with a list of how many people get it wrong.

➤ EXAMPLE

In the courtyard of an apartment building in Chicago there's a sign: "Enough! Too many people leave cardboard outside the bin." The cardboard left outside increases. The building manager changes it: "Almost everyone here flattens their boxes and puts them in the paper bin. Thank you!" After a month, the courtyard is clean.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

There's an aggressive version too: "No smart person does it that way anymore." It plays on the fear of looking ridiculous. Ask yourself: who are these "everyone" and this "no one"? Is there data? A right choice stays right even when few people make it.

TECHNIQUE 238

The Comparison with the Neighbors

◆ WHAT IT IS

Telling people how their behavior compares with others' changes it, but in two directions. In 2007 the psychologist Wesley Schultz and his colleagues showed households in a California neighborhood their electricity use next to the neighborhood average. Those who used more than average cut back, but those who used less crept back up toward the average. When a smiley face was added next to the figure for low users, the creep upward disappeared.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you compare someone with the average, always add a clear judgment: a compliment for those above, encouragement for those below. Comparison without judgment pushes everyone toward the middle, even the people who were already doing better.

◆ EXAMPLE

A sales manager in Minneapolis sends her team the sales chart every month. After a few months she notices that her top performers are slowing down. She adds two personal lines for those above the average: "Great month. The way you follow up with clients sets the standard for the team." The next month, her top performers are pushing hard again.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you're compared with the average, remember that the average isn't a goal: it's just the middle of the group. You decide your own target: "The team average is useful, but I'd rather measure myself against the goals we set for my work."

TECHNIQUE 239

The Bandwagon Effect

➤ WHAT IT IS

Emphasizing that an idea, a product, or a candidate is gaining ground, to push the undecided to climb aboard. It doesn't just say "many people do it," but "more and more people are doing it." Three things kick in at once: the urge to conform, the fear of being left behind, and the pleasure of being on the winning side.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Show the direction, not just the number: before and now. "The March class filled up in a month; the April class, in two weeks." Use real, recent data, update it often, and put it where people pass by every day.

➤ EXAMPLE

A neighborhood committee in Portland is collecting signatures for a bike lane. Instead of just writing the total, every Monday it updates a poster in the coffee shop on the square: "Last week 120 signatures, today 310." Within a month, even the shop owners who said no at first have signed.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Popularity says nothing about quality: the number of people who believe an idea doesn't make it true. Be wary of numbers that grow too fast, because followers and polls can be bought, and ask yourself: "Would I want it even if nobody else did?"

TECHNIQUE 240

The First Follower

◆ WHAT IT IS

A new idea doesn't become a movement thanks to the person who launches it, but thanks to the first person who follows. In a famous 2010 talk, the American entrepreneur Derek Sivers showed a video of a young man dancing alone on a hillside at a festival. It looks odd, until the first person comes to dance with him. Then a second arrives, and within minutes a crowd is dancing. The first follower turns an oddball into a leader.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you launch an initiative, don't go after everyone right away: look for one person to start with you, and treat them as an equal, in public. Make it easy to follow you both: it has to be clear what to do and when. The second and third people don't follow you: they follow the first person who followed you.

◆ EXAMPLE

A teacher in Omaha suggests in the teachers' lounge a reading group on Fridays after school. Nobody responds. At the next meeting, a colleague says out loud that he likes the idea, signs the sheet first, and the teacher immediately asks him to choose the first book together. By the end of the month, the group has nine people.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you see a group forming, look at who started it and why: the first follower may have been planted. Join if the idea convinces you, not because lots of people are moving by now.

TECHNIQUE 241

Win Over the Influential People First

➤ WHAT IT IS

In every group there are people the others turn to for advice. In 1955 the sociologists Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld described the “two-step flow” of communication: ideas don’t reach everyone directly, but pass first through these “opinion leaders,” who then carry them to the others. Convincing them is worth more than talking to everyone.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before you present an idea to a group, ask yourself who the person is that the others really listen to: it’s not always the person in charge. Talk to them first, privately, listen to their doubts, and improve the proposal with their ideas. When you present it to everyone, you’ll already have the voice that counts on your side.

➤ EXAMPLE

In a condo building in Denver, you want to propose solar panels on the roof. At the HOA meetings, everyone looks to Mr. Barber, a retired engineer on the third floor. You invite him for coffee, bring him the quotes, and ask for his honest opinion. At the meeting, it’s Mr. Barber who says: “I’ve looked at them. They’re solid.” The proposal passes.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When everyone follows the opinion of a single person, ask yourself whether that person has had information you haven’t, or has an interest. Ask to see the same documents and form your own view: “His opinion matters, but before I decide, I want to read the paperwork myself.”

TECHNIQUE 242

Bring a Friend

✦ WHAT IT IS

A friend's recommendation is worth more than any advertising: we know the person, we believe they have nothing to gain, and we trust their taste. "Bring a friend" programs turn happy customers into witnesses, and trust passes from one person to the next.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Ask for word of mouth when the customer is most satisfied, right after a result, not at random. Make it easy, with a ready-to-forward message or a voucher to give away. And reward both, the person inviting and the person arriving: that way the recommendation feels like a gift, not a sale.

✦ EXAMPLE

A Spanish school in San Antonio, at the end of the first term, hands each student two vouchers: "A free trial lesson for anyone you like. If they sign up, a month at a discount for both of you." In January, a large share of the new sign-ups arrive with a voucher in hand.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a friend recommends something with great enthusiasm, it doesn't mean they're lying, but their opinion should be weighed if there's a perk involved. Ask with a smile: "Are you recommending it because you like it, or for the discount voucher?"

TECHNIQUE 243

The Seal of Approval

➤ WHAT IT IS

A seal, an award, a certification printed on the package: “Voted Product of the Year,” “Certified Quality,” “Dermatologist Tested.” The seal borrows the authority of an organization or a panel and transfers it to the product at a glance. It works because no one standing in the aisle has time to check: the sign that someone has already checked is enough. But not all seals are equal. Some are real certifications, with rules and inspections; others are commercial awards that companies pay to enter, or labels that guarantee almost nothing.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

If your product has a genuine recognition, put it where decisions are made: on the package, next to the price, in the first line of the estimate. Explain in a few words who awards it and what it measures: “Certified by an independent lab after three inspections.” A vague or purchased seal, if someone notices, casts doubt on everything else too.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the supermarket, Lucy has to choose between two detergents at the same price. One has a red seal: “Voted Product of the Year by Consumers.” She puts it in the cart without thinking. At home she reads the fine print: the award is a contest that companies pay to enter, and the vote is an online survey.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you see a seal, ask yourself three things: who issues it, what it measured, who paid. If you’re in the aisle and the package doesn’t say, check online before you buy; if a salesperson brags about it, ask: “Who awards this seal, and after what checks?” A serious seal can always be verified.

TECHNIQUE 244

RED FLAG

The Fake Expert

◆ WHAT IT IS

Presenting yourself as an expert without being one: grand but empty titles, lots of followers, luxury on display, and above all jargon. Sometimes the technique arises in the middle of a discussion. Someone who's struggling shifts the conversation to a neighboring field and fills it with technical terms, because nobody wants to look like the one who doesn't understand. They don't win because they're right, but because they speak a language the others don't dare challenge.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Difficult terms used out of place, no data and no concrete example, absolute certainty, irritation at questions. The "guru" who shows off cars and mansions instead of clients' results. The coworker who, when the topic is work schedules, says: "From a neurochemical standpoint, the issue is far more complex."

◆ EXAMPLE

At a meeting at a furniture store, the team is discussing the new campaign. A consultant shoots down the saleswoman's idea: "It ignores the principles of behavioral psychometrics and predictive modeling." Nobody pushes back. Then the owner asks: "Can you explain it with an example, the way you'd say it to my mother?" The consultant can't.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask them to simplify: a real expert can, a fake one can't. Ask for a concrete example and isolate the key word: "What exactly do you mean by that?" Check credentials and results, not followers. And admit without shame what you don't know, then bring the discussion back to ground you know.

TECHNIQUE 245

RED FLAG

The Fake Crowd

➤ WHAT IT IS

Manufacturing social proof that doesn't exist: bought reviews, fake followers and likes, comments written by staff, organized applause. It has an old name, the *claque*: in nineteenth-century theaters, audience members were paid to applaud at the right moment. When it fakes a spontaneous citizens' movement, today it's also called *astroturfing*, after AstroTurf, a brand of artificial grass. It looks grassroots, and it's paid for from the top.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Lots of positive reviews arriving on the same days, with similar wording and profiles with no history. Pages with thousands of followers and very few real comments. At a meeting, the same three people who applaud every speaker from one side and heckle every speaker from the other.

➤ EXAMPLE

A new sushi restaurant in Tampa is among the city's top-rated within a month. Paula goes there for her birthday: mediocre food, an empty dining room on a Saturday night. At home she looks at the reviews again: almost all five stars, written in the same two weeks, by profiles with a single review each.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Read the dates, profiles, and style of the reviews, not just the rating. Look at the comments, not the follower count. And at a meeting, ask yourself whether the applause comes from the whole room or always from the same seats.

TECHNIQUE 246

RED FLAG

The Order in the Boss's Name

◆ WHAT IT IS

Using the name of an absent authority to get people to carry out an order that, coming from a stranger, no one would follow. In 1966 the American psychiatrist Charles Hofling had a fake doctor phone the nurses at a hospital, asking them to give a patient a drug at a dose above the limit printed on the package. The great majority got ready to do it before being stopped. The same lever is behind today's "CEO fraud," the fake-executive scam that targets companies.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It arrives by phone or email, in the name of an executive who can't be reached at that moment. There's always urgency, and almost always secrecy: "The CEO is on a flight, the wire transfer has to go out within the hour, don't mention it to anyone: it's a confidential deal."

◆ EXAMPLE

One morning in August, Olivia, in accounting at a company in Milwaukee, gets an email that seems to come from the CEO, who's traveling: a wire transfer to an overseas supplier is needed right away. Olivia notices that one letter in the address is different. She calls the CEO at the number in her contacts: he knows nothing about it.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

For every unusual order, verify it through a different channel from the one it came on: call the number you already have, not the one written in the message. At work, set a written rule: no urgent payment without two confirmations. Urgency and secrecy together are the alarm signal: "I'll process it as soon as I have the CEO's confirmation by phone. That's the procedure."

TECHNIQUE 247

RED FLAG

The Fake Official

➤ WHAT IT IS

Showing up in the name of an institution or a trusted figure (the police, the city, the gas company, a relative's lawyer) to get money, jewelry, or access to the house. It's the scam that hits older people above all: it combines the authority of the uniform or title with fear and haste.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

A phone call or visit without warning. Frightening news: a relative involved in an accident, a gas leak, an urgent inspection. A request for cash, jewelry, or to come inside right away. And the instruction not to call anyone, "so we don't lose time."

➤ EXAMPLE

Gene, eighty, gets a phone call: "This is Sergeant Russell. Your grandson caused an accident, bail is needed right away, and an officer is coming by to pick it up." Gene heads for the safe. Then he remembers his daughter's advice, hangs up, and calls his grandson: he's at work and perfectly fine.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

No law enforcement agency asks for money over the phone or sends someone to pick up cash or jewelry. Hang up, and call your relative or 911 yourself. Don't open the door to anyone you didn't call. And talk about it with your parents and grandparents before it happens: people who know the pattern recognize it in the first minute.

TECHNIQUE 248

RED FLAG

Outside Opinion as a Weapon

➤ WHAT IT IS

In an argument between two people, citing an outside authority (a therapist, a doctor, “a study,” a book) to shut the other person up. Often the opinion is reported out of context, or is based only on the version given by the person citing it. Borrowed authority turns a conversation between equals into a lecture from above.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Sentences like “I talked to my therapist, and he thinks you have an anger problem too” or “I read a study that says you’re doing everything wrong with the kids.” The source can’t be checked, and the line arrives right when the discussion gets difficult. Afterward, it feels like you’re arguing with science, not with a person.

➤ EXAMPLE

During a fight about raising their son, the discussion is shut down like this: “My sister’s pediatrician says you’re spoiling him this way. So I’m right.” The pediatrician has never seen either the child or you.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Remember that the expert heard only one version: “Your therapist knows your account, not me.” Ask for the source: “Send me the study. I’d be glad to read it.” Bring the discussion back to the two of you: “Leave everyone else out of it for a moment. What do you think, and how do you feel?” And value your own experience: you know your son every day.

TECHNIQUE 249

RED FLAG

The Pedestal

➤ WHAT IT IS

Putting someone on a pedestal, praising them and making them seem special, not out of love or respect but to control them. In a relationship it's the idealization of the early days: "I've never met anyone like you." At work it's the "golden child," promoted and shown off to everyone, while the person who picked them keeps one of their mistakes in reserve as a weapon. The fall, which sooner or later comes, is the real tool: whoever stands on the pedestal lives in fear of disappointing.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Huge, premature praise not based on any real knowledge of you. A person who becomes your only source of approval. The feeling of walking on eggshells so as not to break the spell. Then, suddenly, devaluation, often in front of others.

➤ EXAMPLE

David joins an agency in Atlanta, and the owner introduces him to everyone as "the future of this company." He brings him to important meetings and praises him in public. One day David turns down an unpaid weekend of work. In front of the team, the owner brings up a mistake from a year earlier: "I thought you were different."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of praise that's too big and too soon: real esteem grows over time. Remind yourself that you're a normal person, with strengths and flaws. Show a small disagreement and watch the reaction. If blackmail about the past arrives, don't engage: "We dealt with that mistake at the time. Let's stick to today." And never tie your worth to the approval of a single person.

TECHNIQUE 250

Pluralistic Ignorance

◆ WHAT IT IS

In a group, everyone keeps quiet, thinking they're the only one who disagrees or didn't understand, and so all together they approve what, in private, almost nobody wants. Each person's silence becomes, in the others' eyes, proof that everything is fine. In 1993 Deborah Prentice and Dale Miller, in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, demonstrated this at Princeton University: almost all the students were uncomfortable with heavy drinking on campus, but each believed their classmates were fine with it and went along.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you lead a group and see blank faces nodding along, break the mirror yourself before the vote. Have people write their doubts anonymously on slips of paper, or be the first to voice the reservation no one dares to say: "Before we approve this, let's name one real risk of this choice." As soon as one person discovers the doubt is shared, the spell breaks for everyone. The ethical line is never to fake a consensus that comes only from embarrassment.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a farm co-op in Iowa, the president proposes a new night shift. No one says a word. Then the agronomist, Val, asks for a secret ballot on folded slips: sixteen members out of eighteen vote against, surprised not to be alone.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People who want to push something through count on nobody wanting to look like the only one against it. Ask the first question out loud yourself, without attacking: "Maybe I'm not the only one wondering this: can we hear from each person before we call it approved?"

CHAPTER 11

Liking, Reciprocity, and Commitment

We trust people we like, we repay people who give us something, we keep the promises we've made. These are the three rules that hold social life together, and that's exactly why they're the most widely used levers of persuasion. In this chapter you'll learn to use them respectfully and to recognize them when someone uses them against you.

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TECHNIQUE 251

The Liking Effect

◆ WHAT IT IS

We say yes more easily to people we like. Liking is a shortcut: instead of evaluating the request, we evaluate the person making it. And we like people who resemble us, who pay us a sincere compliment, who work with us toward the same goal, whom we associate with things we love. That's why saying no to a friend costs much more than saying it to a stranger.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before you ask, build the connection. Look for real common ground: the same town, kids at the same school, the same team. Give a specific compliment, about something the other person chose or did, not about some generic quality. If you can, take their side on a concrete problem: "Let's figure out together how to solve it." The request comes only afterward, and it comes from an ally.

◆ EXAMPLE

The kitchen gadget isn't presented by a salesperson: it's presented by Lucy, in her own home, to five friends, with coffee and cake. None of them came to buy. But by the end of the evening, saying no to the product feels like saying no to Lucy, and almost all of them sign the order form.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone you like a lot asks you for something, separate the two things: "Would I say yes if a stranger asked me?" Evaluate the product or the favor for what it is. You can care about someone and say no to their proposal: "Our friendship isn't in question, but this product isn't for me."

TECHNIQUE 252

The Thank-You That Multiplies Help

➤ WHAT IT IS

A well-said thank-you doesn't close one favor: it opens another. In 2010 the psychologist Adam Grant asked some students to help a stranger edit a cover letter. Those who received a sincere thank-you in return agreed to help again much more often, even a different person. The reason: thanks make us feel useful and appreciated, and people who feel useful want to stay that way.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Say thank you specifically, saying what that help changed: not "thanks so much," but "thanks, with your spreadsheet I finished the estimate in half an hour." Do it soon and, if you can, in front of others. A written thank-you, even two lines in a chat, is worth more than one tossed off in the hallway.

➤ EXAMPLE

Your neighbor on the second floor picks up a package for you while you're at work. That evening you leave him a note: "Thank you. My mother's medications were inside. You saved my week." The next month he's the one who offers: "If you're expecting more packages, I'll grab them."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

It's a healthy technique, but thanks can also be used to load you up with favors. If the thank-yous always come with a new request, enjoy the thanks and evaluate the request on its own: "I'm glad it helped, but this time I can't."

TECHNIQUE 253

Ask a Favor of the Person You Want to Win Over

◆ WHAT IT IS

It sounds strange, but to get someone to like you, asking them for a favor works better than doing them one. It's called the Benjamin Franklin effect: Franklin said he won over a political opponent by asking to borrow a rare book from him. People who do us a favor have to explain to themselves why they did it, and the most comfortable answer is: "Because I like this person." In 1969 the psychologists Jecker and Landy measured it in the lab: participants who had given back their winnings at the researcher's request ended up liking him more.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Choose a small favor, easy to do, that showcases the other person: some advice, a book, an opinion on their specialty. "You know about this stuff. Which one would you choose?" Then thank them and tell them how it went when you followed their advice. Don't turn it into a chain of requests: one favor is enough.

◆ EXAMPLE

A new manager arrives at the office, cold with everyone. Michelle asks him the title of the project management book he keeps on his desk, and whether she can borrow it for the weekend. On Monday she returns it with two questions about chapter three. From that day on, the manager greets her by name and asks her opinion in meetings.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you notice that you like someone only because you helped them, stop: you did a favor, you didn't sign an alliance. Judge them by how they behave, not by what you did. And if they come right back asking for more: "I was glad to help you last time, but I can't do this one."

TECHNIQUE 254

First Ask How They're Doing

➤ WHAT IT IS

People who have just said out loud how they're doing, and heard "I'm glad to hear it" in response, are more willing to say yes. In 1990 the American psychologist Daniel Howard tested this with phone calls for a hunger-relief fundraiser: when callers began with "How are you feeling this evening?" and waited for the answer, people agreed to the request more often. Playing on the foot in the door, he called it the "foot-in-the-mouth": a little conversation creates a little relationship, with its own rules.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before you ask, ask a real question about how the other person is doing, and really listen to the answer. Respond to what you hear: "Good, I'm glad," or "Rough day? Then I'll keep it short." Only after that comes the request. If they answer that things are bad and you plow ahead, you've only shown that you don't listen.

➤ EXAMPLE

The secretary of the youth sports club needs to find parents to drive the team to Sunday's away game. Instead of writing in the group chat, she calls three families and starts with: "How's Tommy's knee doing?" After two minutes of chatting, she asks about the ride. Two families out of three say yes.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A "How are you?" on the phone from a stranger is often the first step of a sales pitch. Answer politely, then ask right away: "What's the reason for your call?" That way the request arrives without the little bit of intimacy that made it harder to refuse.

TECHNIQUE 255

The “Because” Technique

◆ WHAT IT IS

A request accompanied by a reason is accepted much more often, even when the reason is weak. In 1978 the psychologist Ellen Langer, at Harvard, asked people waiting in line for a copy machine to let someone cut ahead in three ways: with no reason, with a real reason (“because I’m in a rush”), and with an empty reason (“because I have to make some copies”). For small requests, the empty reason worked almost as well as the real one: for five pages, yes came 60 percent of the time with no reason, 94 percent with the real reason, 93 percent with the empty one. When it hears a “because,” the brain goes on autopilot: it hears a reason and stops weighing it.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Every time you ask for something, add the why. A real, concrete reason is best, said in a few words: “Can you send me the figures by three, because at four I’m presenting them to the general manager?” Careful: with big requests people start really listening again, and there the reason has to hold up.

◆ EXAMPLE

There’s a line at the pharmacy. A woman asks: “Can I go ahead for a second? I just need to pick up a prescription, because I’m double-parked.” Two people let her through without argument. Without that “because,” the same request would have earned dirty looks.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you hear a “because,” listen to what comes next and ask yourself: “Is this reason really enough to justify the request?” Often the answer is no, and you can say so calmly: “I understand, but I’m in a hurry too.”

TECHNIQUE 256

But It's Your Call

✦ WHAT IT IS

Reminding the other person that they can refuse makes them more willing to accept. In 2000 two French psychologists, Nicolas Guéguen and Alexandre Pascual, stopped passersby to ask for some change for the bus. Those who added a sentence reminding people of their freedom to say no got many more yeses. It works because it removes the feeling of being pushed: when nobody's forcing us, we stop defending ourselves and listen to the request on its merits.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Make your request clearly, then hand back the choice with a short, sincere sentence: "But it's your call," "If you'd rather not, no problem," "The choice is yours." Mean it, don't say it as a formula: if you push after a no, the sentence loses all its value, and next time nobody will believe you.

✦ EXAMPLE

A tailor in Philadelphia has an undecided groom try on a wedding suit. Instead of pressing, he closes like this: "I think this cut looks great on you, but take your time deciding. If it doesn't feel right, we'll try another fabric." The groom, relieved, books the second fitting for the following Saturday.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

It's a respectful technique, but it's still a technique: its purpose is to get you to say yes. Take it literally. If the choice is yours, really use it, without guilt: "Thanks, I appreciate that the decision is mine. Not for now."

TECHNIQUE 257

Even a Penny Helps

◆ WHAT IT IS

Declaring that even the smallest contribution is welcome takes away the listener's excuse for saying no. In 1976 Robert Cialdini and David Schroeder went door to door collecting for a charity: adding the phrase "even a penny will help" made many more people donate, and the individual donations stayed at normal amounts. Nobody actually donates a penny: the phrase only serves to get past the first no.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you ask for help, lower the bar out loud: "Even five minutes would be enough," "Even just a quick opinion," "Even just a dollar." The request has to seem so small that refusing would sound stingy. Then let the other person decide how much to give: they usually give more than the minimum.

◆ EXAMPLE

Outside the supermarket, volunteers from the parish are collecting food for families in the neighborhood. The sign says: "Even a single box of pasta makes a difference." Many people come out with a whole bag: a single box of pasta, on its own, seemed too little.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Decide in advance which causes you want to give to and how much. When someone stops you for a cause that isn't one of yours, answer with a smile: "Thanks, I already have the organizations I support." You don't need to justify saying no to a small request: small or large, the choice is still yours.

TECHNIQUE 258

The Small Unexpected Gift

➤ WHAT IT IS

Receiving something, even of little value, creates the need to give back. What weighs most is the gift we weren't expecting and that seems meant just for us. In 2002 David Strohmetz and his colleagues tested this in an American restaurant: candies brought with the check increased tips. But the biggest increase came when the waiter walked away, came back, and left another one "just for you." Same candy, different value.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Give first, without asking for anything in return and without announcing it. Make the gesture personal: a detail that shows you thought about that particular person. Small is perfectly fine, because what counts is the surprise, not the price. The gesture has to be sincere: if the other person realizes it's bait, reciprocity turns into suspicion.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a family restaurant in Boston, at the end of dinner, the owner sits down at the table for a moment and pours an after-dinner drink "on the house, since it's your first time here." Nobody had asked for it. That family comes back the next month with friends, and leaves a review mentioning the owner by name.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Go ahead and accept the gift, but know that a small debt has opened up inside you. When a request then arrives, ask yourself: "Would I say yes even without that gift?" A gift isn't a contract, and you can say thank you without buying: "Thank you, that's really kind, but I'll pass on the purchase."

TECHNIQUE 259

The Handwritten Note

◆ WHAT IT IS

A request that shows a little personal effort gets more responses than a standard one. In 2005 the psychologist Randy Garner mailed out a long, tedious survey. People who found it with a sticky note and a handwritten request responded more often, faster, and more carefully than people who got the same survey with a printed message. The sticky note said silently: “A real person spent a minute on you.”

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When a request matters, add a handmade touch: two lines in pen, the person’s name, a real signature. Even better if the message is personal: “Jenny, thank you! I know it’s long, but we really need your opinion.” Don’t use it for everything: save it for the requests you care about, or it loses its value.

◆ EXAMPLE

A veterinarian in Madison gives every client, along with the prescription, a small handwritten note: “Thanks for trusting us, Mrs. Collins, and a pat on the head for Toby. If you get a chance, would you leave us a couple of lines online?” Within a year, the clinic’s reviews outnumber those of every other practice in the area.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

A handwritten message makes you feel like a person and not a number, and that’s pleasant. But the writer’s effort doesn’t change the weight of what they’re asking: respond if the request makes sense to you, not to repay the gesture. Or close politely: “I saw the note, very kind, but I don’t have time to fill all this out.”

TECHNIQUE 260

Show the Effort You Put In

➤ WHAT IT IS

We value a service more when we see the work behind it. The Harvard researchers Ryan Buell and Michael Norton call it the “labor illusion”: in 2011 they showed that a travel website that displayed, step by step, the airlines it was checking was rated better than one that gave the result instantly, even though the wait was longer. Visible effort creates gratitude, and gratitude wants to give back.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Don’t hide the work: describe it briefly. List the steps you took, the options you ruled out, the time you spent, without complaining. “I compared six suppliers, ruled out four because of delivery times, and these two are left.” That way the client or the boss stops paying for a result and starts recognizing an effort.

➤ EXAMPLE

The mechanic returns the car with the invoice and, next to it, the old part in a bag: “Here’s the belt I replaced. Look how worn it was. I checked the brakes too, and those are fine.” The customer pays without arguing, and next time comes back to him.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate the effort from the value. Ask yourself: “Would I pay the same amount if the result came in five minutes?” The work on display can be real and still too expensive, or inflated on purpose to look like more: “I understand the work behind it, but what matters to me is the final price.”

TECHNIQUE 261

Respond to Thanks the Right Way

◆ WHAT IT IS

When someone thanks us, their sense of indebtedness is at its peak. Almost everyone wastes that moment with a “No problem, it was nothing,” which erases the favor. Robert Cialdini suggests using it to make the exchange visible, with a sentence that recalls that people help each other. That way the favor stays alive, and reciprocity has a name.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you hear “thank you,” respond warmly and add the bond: “Of course, that’s what coworkers do. I know you’d do the same for me.” Don’t ask for anything in that moment, and don’t use the sentence as a bill to present. Its value lies precisely in the fact that it stays there, unspoken, for when you need it.

◆ EXAMPLE

Simone covers the Saturday shift for Andrew, who has his nephew’s First Communion. On Monday he thanks her. She smiles: “Of course. I know you’d do the same.” Three weeks later, when Simone needs a last-minute swap, Andrew offers before she’s even finished asking.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you often hear “I know you’d do the same for me,” keep an honest tally: are the favors going both ways? Returning a favor is fair, but a small favor shouldn’t be repaid with one ten times bigger: “I’ll gladly return the favor next time, but this is too much for me.”

TECHNIQUE 262

The Foot in the Door

➤ WHAT IT IS

Asking first for something small, almost impossible to refuse, and only afterward for the big thing. People who have said yes once want to stay consistent with the self-image that yes created. In 1966 two Stanford psychologists, Freedman and Fraser, asked some homeowners to display a small road safety sticker; two weeks later, 76 percent of those who had agreed also said yes to a huge sign in their yard, compared with 17 percent of those who hadn't received the first request.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Break your request into steps. The first should cost almost nothing: an opinion, five minutes, a signature. Thank them for the yes, let some time pass, then ask for the next step, linking it to the first: "Since you already helped me with..."

➤ EXAMPLE

A coworker asks you for "just a quick look" at his presentation. A week later: "Since you already know it, would you present it at the meeting?" Backing out, at that point, feels inconsistent.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before you say yes to something small, ask yourself where the next step leads. Evaluate each request on its own, as if it were the first: "I was glad to help you last time, but this is something else."

TECHNIQUE 263

The Foot in the Mind

◆ WHAT IT IS

Before the request comes a harmless question that leads the other person to describe themselves in positive terms: “Would you say you’re a generous person?” “Do you like a challenge?” After claiming a quality, generosity, courage, precision, nobody wants to contradict it a minute later. The request that follows right after becomes the way to prove it.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Choose the quality your request needs and turn it into a question: to ask for help, willingness to help; to propose a difficult project, a taste for challenges. Ask the question lightly, wait for the yes, then link the request to that very quality: “Precisely because you’re so thorough, I’d ask you to review the contract.” No over-the-top praise. The question has to sound like curiosity, not flattery.

◆ EXAMPLE

The personal trainer asks a new client: “Are you the kind of person who, once you start something, sees it through?” “Yes, I’d say so.” “Then the annual membership makes sense for you, not the monthly one.” Refusing, at that point, would mean contradicting himself, and the client signs up for the year.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a flattering question about you comes from someone who’s about to ask you for something, give a nuanced answer: “It depends on the situation. Why do you ask?” And remember that your identity isn’t an obligation: being generous doesn’t require you to give to every cause you come across. You decide how and when to express it.

TECHNIQUE 264

The Yes Set

➤ WHAT IT IS

A series of questions whose answer is obviously yes, followed by the question that really matters. After three or four yeses, the next one comes out almost automatically: saying no would break the rhythm and create a little discomfort. It's a classic sales technique, and it works like a snowball: once it's rolling, it's hard to stop.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Prepare three real, simple questions that describe the other person's actual needs: they have to be sincere yeses, not traps. Then make your proposal as the natural consequence of those yeses. "You were telling me your furnace is more than fifteen years old, right? And that your heating bill is high in the winter? And that you want this off your mind for a good long while? Then let's look at the quote for a new one together."

➤ EXAMPLE

At the gym: "You're here because you want to get back in shape, right?" "Yes." "And you'd rather train with someone who keeps you on track?" "Yes." "And you want to see results by summer?" "Yes." "Then let's start today with the personal trainer package." Melissa signs before she's read the price.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you hear a string of obvious questions coming, slow down. Pause before each answer: silence breaks the momentum. Then evaluate the last question on its own, as if it were the first. Wanting to get back in shape doesn't mean you have to buy that particular package: "We agree on everything else, but I'll think about the package at home."

TECHNIQUE 265

Active Involvement

✦ WHAT IT IS

We believe what we do more than what we're told. When a person performs an action, even a small one, they feel involved. They've put something of themselves into it, and the mind justifies the effort by deciding they really like the thing. On top of that, physical experience is more vivid than any description, and it creates a sense of ownership even before the purchase.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Instead of explaining, get people to take action. Put the product in their hands, have them sit in the driver's seat, have them try the mattress, have them pick the color. In meetings, instead of presenting your solution, have everyone write an idea on a sheet of paper and build the proposal from there. "Imagine if..." questions work like a mental test drive: people who imagine already using something feel they own it a little.

✦ EXAMPLE

At the furniture store, the saleswoman doesn't list features. She says: "Have a seat, take off your shoes, put your feet up on the ottoman. There, just like in the evening in front of the TV." The customer stays stretched out for ten minutes. When he gets up, he's already thinking about where to put it in the living room.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When people have you try, touch, and choose, remember that it isn't just kindness: it's the first step of the sale. Before you decide, ask yourself: "Would I buy it even without having tried it?" If needed, leave, take a walk, and decide away from the product: "Very comfortable, thanks. I'll sleep on it and maybe stop by tomorrow."

TECHNIQUE 266

Ask When and Where

➤ WHAT IT IS

A generic “yes, I’ll do it” gets forgotten. An “I’ll do it Tuesday at eight, before I go to the office” gets kept much more often. In 1965 the psychologists Howard Leventhal, Robert Singer, and Susan Jones demonstrated this at Yale with a tetanus shot campaign: explaining the risks of the disease got only 3 percent of students vaccinated, but adding a map of the health clinic and an invitation to pick a time in their schedules raised the number vaccinated to 28 percent.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When someone accepts your proposal, don’t stop at the yes: ask when and where. “Great. When can you send me the documents? Thursday morning or Friday?” Offering two concrete options makes choosing easier. Have them repeat the plan in their own words and, if appropriate, send it in writing right afterward.

➤ EXAMPLE

The dentist doesn’t say “See you in six months.” The receptionist asks: “Do you prefer a Tuesday or a Thursday? Morning or afternoon?” Mr. Esposito picks Thursday at nine, before work. Six months later, when the reminder arrives, that time slot is already his, and he shows up on time.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you’re asked to set a day and time right away, know that you’re turning an idea into a commitment. That’s fine, if you want the commitment. If you still have doubts, take your time: “I’ll let you know when.”

TECHNIQUE 267

Have Them Write It Down

◆ WHAT IT IS

A commitment written in your own hand weighs more than one spoken aloud, and much more than one written by someone else. Writing is an active step: people see their own words and feel bound to keep them. The researcher Steve Martin and some colleagues saw this in clinics of the British National Health Service: when patients, instead of the receptionist, wrote the date and time of their next appointment on the card, missed appointments went down.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When someone makes a commitment to you, hand them the pen. Have the person who's committing write down the date, the amount, the task: even on a scrap of paper, or in an email they send themselves. If the commitment is public, even better: in front of others, it's harder to back out.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the end of the town band's meeting, instead of leaving it at "someone will look into a bus for the trip," the conductor passes around a notebook: "Who's taking what? Write your name and the date." Mr. Rich writes in his own hand: "Bus quotes, by the 15th." On the 14th they're all on the table.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before you put a promise in writing, even on a scrap of paper, ask yourself whether you really want to keep it: once it's written, backing out has a cost. If someone puts the pen in your hand too quickly, answer: "Let me think it over, and I'll write it down myself when I've decided."

TECHNIQUE 268

The Loyalty Card with a Head Start

➤ WHAT IT IS

We're more motivated to finish something when it seems we've already started it. In 2006 the researchers Joseph Nunes and Xavier Drèze gave customers at a car wash two kinds of loyalty cards: an empty eight-stamp card, and a ten-stamp card with the first two stamps already on it. The work required was identical, but customers with the card that had a head start completed it much more often, and faster. Progress given as a gift becomes a commitment.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you propose a program, have the other person start with a few steps already done: the first stamp free, the profile half filled in, "By signing up, you've already completed the first module." Always show people where they are and how much is left. The finish line has to seem close and within reach.

➤ EXAMPLE

The pizza place around the corner gives out a card: on your tenth pizza, one free. But the new card already has two stamps on it: "These are for your first order and to welcome you." The Greene family, who usually order from all over, find themselves always calling there so as not to leave the card half finished.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a card, an app, or a course shows you how close you are to the goal, ask yourself who put down the first steps: often nobody earned them, they were given away to hook you. Count only what's really left to do, and ask yourself whether it's worth it: "I don't need the card, thanks. I'll just take this."

TECHNIQUE 269

The Door in the Face

◆ WHAT IT IS

The opposite of the foot in the door: you first ask for something outrageous, which will be refused, and right afterward for what you actually wanted. The second request seems small by contrast with the first, and it sounds like a concession: reciprocity pushes people to return it with a yes. In 1975 Robert Cialdini and his colleagues asked some students to serve as unpaid mentors to troubled kids for two years: everyone said no. Right after, they asked them to take the kids to the zoo just once, and many more said yes than when that was asked directly.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Prepare two requests: the first big but believable, the second the real one. Make the first, accept the no gracefully, then come down: “I understand. Then at least...” The first has to stay plausible: if it’s absurd, you look like you’re acting in bad faith, and the second falls with it. It works best if both requests come from the same person, close together.

◆ EXAMPLE

The sixteen-year-old asks: “Will you pay for me to go to the concert in Chicago, with the train and the hotel?” No. “OK, then can I at least come home at one on Saturday instead of midnight?” The parents, feeling a little guilty about the first no, say yes.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When an enormous request is immediately scaled back, forget the first one and evaluate the second on its own: “Would I say yes to this if they’d asked it first?” And call out the game calmly: “Good. Then let’s start from here and negotiate.”

TECHNIQUE 270

That's Not All

✦ WHAT IT IS

You present an offer and, before the other person answers, you improve it: a freebie, a discount, an extra service. The addition feels like a gift, and gifts are answered with a yes. In 1986 the psychologist Jerry Burger tested this at a bake sale: when customers were told the price of a cupcake and only afterward told that it came with two cookies, sales went up compared with customers who saw the cupcake and cookies together from the start. The offer was identical: only the order changed.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Present the full price, pause briefly, then add the benefit before the answer comes: "And I'll throw in the assembly." The bonus has to have real value for the buyer: a useless freebie sounds like an excuse. One well-chosen addition is worth more than three tossed in.

✦ EXAMPLE

At the bike shop: "This one is \$690." The customer looks at the tag and scratches his head. "And I'll throw in the first tune-up and the lock." The customer had a half-formed objection about the price ready. He doesn't voice it anymore, and asks whether he can pay with his debit card.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Evaluate the starting offer as if the bonus weren't there: do you need it, and at that price? Then evaluate the bonus: "Would I buy it if it were sold on its own?" If the answer is no, it's worth zero to you. And if the addition arrives while you're still thinking, ask for time: "Thanks for the extra, but I'll still think it over and let you know."

TECHNIQUE 271

RED FLAG

The Lowball

◆ WHAT IT IS

You get a yes with very favorable terms, then change the terms for the worse. People who have already decided tend to stick with their decision, even when the reasons that led to it disappear. In 1978 Robert Cialdini and his colleagues asked some students to take part in an experiment, and only after they said yes revealed that it would be held at seven in the morning. Many more showed up than in the group that had been told the time from the start.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

First comes the irresistible offer: the rock-bottom price, the tiny favor. You say yes, and you already picture yourself with the thing. Then, with an excuse, the picture changes: “The manager didn’t approve the discount,” “Oh, there are processing fees,” “While we’re at it, let’s first swing by and pick up a package on the other side of town.” The real cost always comes after the yes, never before.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the dealership, the car costs \$18,000 with the trade-in credit. You sign the purchase agreement. The next day the salesman calls: the credit doesn’t apply to your used car, and the price goes up by \$1,500. By now you’ve already told your family about the new car, and you accept.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before you say yes, ask about everything: “Is the price final? Does it include everything?” If the terms change afterward, evaluate the new offer as if it were the first: “Would I have signed at this price at the start?” If the answer is no, withdraw your yes without guilt: “I said yes to a different offer.”

TECHNIQUE 272

RED FLAG

Good Cop, Bad Cop

➤ WHAT IT IS

Two people on the same side split the roles: one is tough, cold, almost threatening; the other is understanding and seems to be on your side. Next to the bad cop, the good cop becomes likable by contrast, and we give more to people we like. Born in interrogation rooms, it now shows up wherever there's a negotiation: car dealerships, agencies, debt collection.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

In a two-on-one negotiation, the roles have been decided beforehand. The tough one makes the highest demands, reacts badly to objections, then steps out to make a phone call or retreats into silence. The soft one talks to you almost confidentially: "Don't mind my partner. Let's see what the two of us can work out." The reasonable figure they propose isn't a favor. It's the one they both wanted from the beginning.

➤ EXAMPLE

Two business partners are negotiating the lease on a warehouse. The first, brusque, says they wouldn't dream of signing at that price, and steps out to take a call. The second lowers his voice with the owner: "My partner's just like that. If you can come down a hundred dollars or so a month, I'll talk him into it." The owner gives in, happy to have found an ally.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Remember that the good cop and the bad cop play on the same team. Ignore the roles and respond only to the proposals: "I appreciate your flexibility, but my number stays the same for both of you." If needed, call it out with a smile: "Nice duo, you two." The game almost always fizzles right there.

TECHNIQUE 273

The Social Scratch-Off

◆ WHAT IT IS

A reward that arrives unpredictably creates more attachment than a certain one. It's the slot machine mechanism, studied by the psychologist B. F. Skinner: when you don't know whether or when the prize will come, you keep trying. Likes, notifications, messages, surprises: the brain lights up more in the waiting than in the reward itself, and the uncertainty becomes a habit that's hard to break.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

With customers, add small surprises with no fixed schedule alongside the regular benefits: a freebie now and then, an unexpected discount, a personal message when no one is expecting it. Customers come back partly for the chance of a surprise. Use it to reward people who return, never to create dependence: the line is thin, and respect comes first.

◆ EXAMPLE

A neighborhood ice cream shop, now and then and without warning, gives away whipped cream or an extra flavor "because that's how today's going." The kids in the area drag their parents there and not to the place across the street: they never know what will happen, and that's exactly why they want to go.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you check your phone constantly or open an app ten times a day waiting for the next reward or the next notification, ask yourself who's setting your schedule. Remove the unpredictability: turn off sound alerts, check messages at fixed times, and switch off point-based games. To anyone offering you contests and random prizes to get you to buy more: "I'm not interested in drawings. Just tell me the final price without points."

TECHNIQUE 274

RED FLAG

The Initiation Ritual

➤ WHAT IT IS

The harder it is to get into a group, the more valuable the group seems to us. In 1959 the psychologists Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills demonstrated this with a group of female students. Those who had to pass an embarrassing test to join a discussion group later rated it as much more interesting than those who got in without effort, even though the discussion was deadly dull. Admitting you suffered for nothing is unbearable, so the mind raises the value of what you paid for.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Getting in costs something: humiliating tests, hazing, grueling shifts reserved for newcomers, sacrifices of money or relationships. Those already inside tell the story with pride: “We all went through it.” In closed groups and cults, the price grows: donating your possessions, cutting ties with your family. And the more you’ve paid, the harder it becomes to leave.

➤ EXAMPLE

At one company, new hires in the sales department spend three months working the worst shifts and the business trips nobody wants, and they get mocked at meetings. Those who stick it out become the people most loyal to the department, and treat the newcomers the same way.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before you pay an entry price, judge the group by what it does, not by how much it costs to get in: “Would I care about it this much if getting in were easy?” And if you’re already inside, remember that the effort you made belongs to the past: it’s not a reason to stay. And to humiliating tests: “I’m here to do good work, not to be made fun of.”

TECHNIQUE 275

The “We” Out of Nowhere

♦ WHAT IT IS

A tiny similarity, even one invented on the spot, is enough to make us feel part of the same group and push us to favor “our own.” Between 1970 and 1971 the psychologist Henri Tajfel and his colleagues divided boys into two groups, saying the split was based on their preference for paintings by Klee or by Kandinsky, even though the assignment was actually random: asked to distribute small sums of money to other anonymous boys, a clear majority favored members of their own group. It’s the minimal group paradigm.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

Before making a request, bring to light a small piece of common ground that puts you on the same side, no big stories needed: the same trade, the same neighborhood, having stood in line at the same counter. “You’ve got your business on this street too: you know what parking’s like.” Create the “we” to collaborate, never to set one group against another.

♦ EXAMPLE

At a machinery trade show in Cleveland, the exhibitor, Brent, notices on a visitor’s badge the name of a technical school he attended too. He starts there: “We came out of the same shop classes.” The negotiation begins with the trust reserved for old classmates.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone builds an instant “we” right before asking you for a favor or a signature, separate the belonging from the merits of the offer. You can smile at the similarity and hold the line: “Nice to find out we come from the same world, but I’ll evaluate the quote by the same criteria I use for everyone.”

CHAPTER 12

Time as a Weapon

Time is the only resource that never comes back, and whoever controls it holds people in their hands: making them wait, promising a tomorrow that never arrives, throwing the past in their face, taking away their sleep. These are techniques of abuse, and here you'll find them described as they show up: so you can recognize them in time and know how to defend yourself.

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TECHNIQUE 276

RED FLAG

Time as Status

◆ WHAT IT IS

Using time to make it clear who matters more. Always arriving late, making people wait, interrupting and talking over others are ways of saying, without words: “My time is worth more than yours.” In hierarchies, whoever is on top controls time. The department head keeps patients waiting, not the other way around. Manipulators copy this rule to put themselves on top even when they aren’t.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The lateness repeats every time, like a calculated habit, almost never accompanied by a real apology. At meetings, the manipulator walks in when everyone is already seated and asks to start over from the beginning. In conversation they interrupt you mid-sentence, as if what you’re saying can always wait.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the dinner for her in-laws’ anniversary, the sister-in-law shows up at the pizzeria forty minutes late, without letting anyone know. Everyone waits to order, with hungry kids. When she walks in, nobody says a word, and the evening immediately revolves around her stories. Even dinner, by now, starts when she decides.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Set a rule and say it in advance: “We’ll wait until a quarter past one, then we start.” Then really stick to it: starting without the latecomer takes away the power to make people wait. If you’re interrupted, keep talking in the same tone, or stop and say calmly: “Let me finish, then I’ll listen to you.” And name the pattern: “I notice you’re often late. Time matters to me.”

TECHNIQUE 277

RED FLAG

The Strategic Delay

➤ WHAT IT IS

Deliberately putting off an answer, a decision, or an action to gain an advantage. Whoever makes others wait holds the power. The other person is left hanging, the anxiety grows, and to end the wait they're willing to give something up. Sometimes the delay is a punishment; sometimes it's a way to let the situation resolve itself, without having to take a stand.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The important message sits there, read and unanswered, for hours. The boss keeps saying "we'll talk about it later" about a project that's holding you up. The business partner, facing a difficult choice, keeps repeating "let's think about it a little more" until someone else decides for him, or until it's too late. The delay never has a clear reason, and an apology never comes.

➤ EXAMPLE

Frances has been waiting three weeks for her manager to sign off on her August vacation. Every time, the answer is: "Yes, yes, I'll look at it tomorrow." Meanwhile, airfares keep rising. In the end, Frances accepts the dates they offer her, the worst ones, just to get an answer.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Set the deadline yourself, calmly: "I need an answer by Friday at 5 p.m. If I don't get one, I'll go ahead like this." Always have a plan B ready, so you don't depend on a single person. If the delay is a punishment, make it explicit: "When something's wrong, you stop answering. If there's a problem, let's talk about it."

TECHNIQUE 278

RED FLAG

The Endless Monologue

◆ WHAT IT IS

During an argument, the manipulator talks without stopping: jumping from one topic to another, repeating the same things, leaving no room. People who talk like this are aiming only to wear the other person out. Listening to an endless speech drains energy, and after a while the other person just wants it to end. They win by exhaustion, and the original point disappears.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You make a simple request and get a twenty-minute answer about something else: work, something from three years ago, politics, traffic. Every time you try to speak, the voice gets louder or the speech starts over from the beginning. In the end you no longer remember what you wanted to say, and the conversation closes without a decision.

◆ EXAMPLE

Hillary asks her husband to share the school drop-off schedule more fairly. The answer lasts half an hour: how tired he is at the office, his mother, a Christmas fight from two years ago, the price of gas. At eleven at night, Hillary gives up. The schedule stays as it was.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't wait for the end: it won't come. Interrupt with a gesture and a firm sentence: "Wait, I want to say something." Always bring it back to the point, with the same sentence, as many times as needed: "I understand, but we were talking about the schedule." Propose a limit: "Ten minutes, and then we decide." If that doesn't work, get up: "We'll talk about it again when we can really do it."

TECHNIQUE 279

RED FLAG

The Time Loop

➤ WHAT IT IS

The same problem gets discussed endlessly, without ever reaching a solution. Every time a decision is near, a detour arrives: a change of subject, a fight, playing the victim. The next day the problem is identical and everything starts over from zero. It suits the manipulator this way: as long as nothing is decided, everything stays as it is.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You get the feeling you're always having the same conversation. The objections are always the same, the data requested changes every time, the premises are called into question all over again. Eventually resignation sets in: "What's the point of talking about it?" And that's exactly the result being sought.

➤ EXAMPLE

The merchants' association on one street has been discussing shared Christmas lights for two years. At every meeting, the owner of the optician's shop asks for one more quote, then a check on the city permits, then questions whether the expense is worth it at all. The meeting ends without a vote, and the street stays dark that winter too.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Structure the discussion: one topic and a clear goal, stated at the start. When the detour comes, bring it back to the point kindly and firmly. At the end, put in writing what was decided, or why nothing was decided, so the next time you don't start from zero. And if the loop starts again, introduce a consequence: "If we don't find a solution by Friday, I'll decide," or an outside mediator.

TECHNIQUE 280

RED FLAG

Time as an Alibi

◆ WHAT IT IS

Using the passage of time as an excuse not to deal with a wrong. If the person who was wronged brings it up again a few weeks later, they're accused of living in the past, holding a grudge, not knowing how to move on. It's a cliché turned into a weapon: "time heals everything" becomes "you've had enough time, that's enough now."

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The problem was never cleared up, nobody apologized, but every attempt to bring it up again is blocked with lines like "This again?" "That's water under the bridge," "It's been a month." Time becomes a stopwatch deciding how long you're allowed to hurt. The person who did wrong gets absolution without ever paying the price.

◆ EXAMPLE

A longtime friend tells one of Emil's secrets around town. Two months later, Emil tries to clear the air over a beer. The friend laughs: "Come on, that's old news. Life goes on." No apology. And if Emil insists, he becomes the one who can't let it go.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate clock time from emotional time: "For you a month has passed; for me the matter is still open." Remember that time, on its own, doesn't close anything: it takes a real apology and different behavior. And reject the label: "I'm not living in the past. I'm talking about a wound that hurts now."

TECHNIQUE 281

RED FLAG

The Eternal Present

➤ WHAT IT IS

The manipulator lives in a continuous present, where only their needs of the moment count. Yesterday's promises no longer exist; tomorrow's consequences are of no interest. It's impossible to reason with someone who won't accept that the past weighs on the present and that the present shapes the future: every logical argument slides off, and someone else always pays the bill.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Impulsive spending with everyone's money, commitments made and forgotten, decisions that leave the consequences to others. If you point out what will happen, the answer is always the same: "I felt like it right now," "We'll think about the future later," "Why do you always assume the worst?" In the end, you're the one picking up the pieces.

➤ EXAMPLE

The joint account is for the rent at the end of the month. Lydia finds a \$900 charge: a weekend in Las Vegas booked by her partner. "It was a deal, it only comes around once. We'll figure out the rent." The one who figures it out, as always, is Lydia, with her savings.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Stop explaining future consequences: they don't work with someone who lives only in the present. Create immediate consequences: separate your accounts, put the money for fixed expenses in an account that's yours alone. Become the memory and the calendar yourself: write down the promises, pay the fixed expenses in advance. And ask yourself honestly whether you can hold up a home built on this kind of present for long.

TECHNIQUE 282

RED FLAG

The Good-Behavior Credit

◆ WHAT IT IS

A short stretch of good behavior used as a shield for long stretches of bad behavior. It's like depositing ten dollars in the trust account and expecting to withdraw a thousand. The kind gesture comes after a wrong, brings relief and hope, and becomes the proof that "deep down" the person is good.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

After a blowup, you get breakfast in bed. After weeks of coldness, you get one perfect evening. If you try to talk again about what happened, the gesture gets thrown back at you: "I even brought you breakfast. Nothing's ever good enough for you." At work: one month of hard work in January used to justify six months of missed deadlines. The gesture doesn't repair anything: it buys silence.

◆ EXAMPLE

After a fight in which his wife humiliated him in front of the kids, Claude finds his favorite cake in the kitchen. The next day, when he tries to talk about it, he hears: "I even made you a cake! Do you always have to dwell on things?" The cake becomes the end of the discussion.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Add it all up instead of looking at a single day: mark the good days and the bad days on a calendar, and at the end of the month look at the balance. Say thanks for the gesture, but keep the two things separate: "The cake was kind. But it doesn't erase what happened yesterday, and I want to talk about it." Insist on consistent respect, not isolated gestures.

TECHNIQUE 283

RED FLAG

Suspended Time

➤ WHAT IT IS

The manipulator creates a special bubble of time, a vacation, a party, a business trip, in which the rules seem suspended. Inside the bubble, anything goes: cheating, wild spending, excesses, aggression. Outside the bubble, they insist that everything be forgotten, because “it was a special moment” and “it doesn’t count.”

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The lines are recognizable: “We were on vacation,” “At Christmas you’re allowed to overdo it,” “What happens on a business trip stays on the business trip.” Anyone who tries to talk about it is accused of ruining the memory, or the party. The bad behavior gets shut away in a drawer, as if it belonged to another person.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the New Year’s Eve dinner, Josie drinks too much and insults her brother-in-law in front of everyone. On January 2, when her husband asks her to call him and apologize, the answer is: “It was New Year’s Eve! Do you really think you have to watch every word on New Year’s Eve?” The apology never comes.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Respect doesn’t take a vacation. Say it clearly: “I don’t care where we were: what happened, happened to us.” Don’t accept two versions of the same person: often it’s precisely inside the bubble, when people think the rules don’t apply, that you see who someone really is. And the consequences exist: they get dealt with here, now.

TECHNIQUE 284

RED FLAG

The Fake Anniversary

♦ WHAT IT IS

Deliberately forgetting or ruining the other person's important dates, birthdays and anniversaries, and then accusing them of being shallow if they complain. The message is double: "You don't matter enough for me to remember" on one hand, "You're wrong to be hurt" on the other. The second part is the heavier one, because it makes the person ashamed of their own needs.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It doesn't happen once: it's a pattern. The birthday goes by without a message, or the anniversary dinner ends in a fight over something trivial right in the middle of the evening. If you point it out, the answer comes: "With all the work I have...", "It's a day like any other," "You're not really that materialistic, are you?"

♦ EXAMPLE

On his fortieth birthday, Maurice gets wishes from coworkers and friends, but not from his partner. That evening, when he mentions it, the answer is: "Oh, come on, at our age birthdays are for kids." The year before the same thing had happened, and the anniversary had ended with a slammed door.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If it's a pattern, stop believing in forgetfulness: it's a choice. Don't fight to get attention: it makes you look demanding, and that's exactly where the argument wants to take you. Close the subject calmly: "Today matters to me: I'll celebrate it with people who are happy to be there." Organize your own celebrations, with people who love you. And ask yourself seriously: "Do I want to spend my life with someone who ruins my happy days?"

TECHNIQUE 285

RED FLAG

Time Chaos

➤ WHAT IT IS

Deliberately creating an unstable, unpredictable environment: plans that change at the last minute, promises made and then denied, moods that flip from one hour to the next. People living next to this chaos stay on constant alert, trying to predict the next move. All their energy goes there, and none is left to think, decide, or leave.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The weekend planned for weeks gets canceled an hour before departure because of a “bad mood.” Or, the opposite, a sudden trip that expects you to drop everything. One day affection, the next day accusations. You never know which version you’ll find when you get home, and you start walking on eggshells.

➤ EXAMPLE

On Saturday morning, Ron has his suitcase packed for the beach, booked a month ago. At eight, his partner announces she’s not going anymore: “I’m not up to it.” At eleven she changes her mind. They’re going, but to the mountains, and right now. Ron cancels, rebooks, repacks. By evening he has no energy left, and the blame for the ruined trip, somehow, is his.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Stop looking for logic: chaos has none, and its whole purpose is to confuse you. Stop walking on eggshells: it doesn’t prevent the explosions. Build islands of stability that don’t depend on the other person: a regular class, nights out with friends, your own routine. And set clear boundaries: “If it gets canceled at the last minute again, next time I’m going anyway.”

TECHNIQUE 286

RED FLAG

Time Theft

◆ WHAT IT IS

Methodically sabotaging the other person's time: making them late, interrupting them while they work, creating emergencies that swallow their evenings. The goal is to take away their own life, interests, friendships, work, until all their attention stays on the manipulator. Stealing time means stealing a life, one piece at a time.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The crises always arrive at the wrong moment: on the morning of the job interview the car keys disappear, or a fight breaks out. While you're working from home, someone comes in every five minutes with a question. Every time you have a free hour, a two-hour phone call full of complaints arrives. Once is an accident. Three times is a pattern.

◆ EXAMPLE

On Thursday Miriam has her road test for her driver's license. On Wednesday night her brother, who shares the apartment with her, starts a fight about money that lasts until one in the morning. On Thursday morning the car keys can't be found. Miriam arrives flustered, at the last minute, and at the first four-way stop she misjudges the right of way.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the pattern: if the "crises" always happen before your important commitments, it's not bad luck. Create protected zones and announce them: "From 9 to 11 I'm working. Interrupt me only for a real emergency." Prepare for sabotage: spare keys, clothes laid out the night before, leaving early. And don't get drafted into the drama: "I'm sorry, I can't right now. We'll talk about it tonight."

TECHNIQUE 287

RED FLAG

The Grueling Pace

➤ WHAT IT IS

Imposing a pace of work or activity that can't be sustained, with no breaks, with urgent requests and overlapping deadlines. People who are always running have no time to think: they stop seeing the big picture, planning, questioning orders. Exhaustion makes people docile, and burnout, the collapse from overwork, becomes a way to keep people in their place.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Everything is urgent and nothing is planned. Priorities change in the middle of the day, emails arrive at eleven at night marked "for tomorrow morning," being on call becomes total. Every week there's a new emergency that wipes out the previous one. People working inside it always feel inadequate, never fast enough.

➤ EXAMPLE

At an accounting firm, the owner gives Cindy three "extremely urgent" files on Monday, adds two more on Tuesday, and on Wednesday asks why the first isn't ready yet. Cindy skips lunch, then her evenings, then her weekends. After six months she no longer has the energy even to send out a résumé.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the system: if you can't keep up, it's not because you're worth little, but because it's built to make you collapse. Answer urgencies with priorities: "I'm working on this, which you asked for yesterday. I'll start the new one tomorrow, or do you want me to change the order?" Turn off your work phone after hours. And use the energy you have left to prepare your exit: résumé, contacts, legal advice if needed.

TECHNIQUE 288

RED FLAG

The Immediate Future

◆ WHAT IT IS

Keeping the other person so busy with today's urgencies that they can never lift their head toward tomorrow. Chores, errands, and constant small deadlines fill every moment. People who live like this stop making plans: going back to school, changing jobs, changing their life remain thoughts for "when I have time," that is, never. A full present serves to keep the future empty.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The to-do list never empties, because someone keeps filling it: a new task, a criticism that forces you to redo everything, a commitment added at the last minute. Every time you talk about a plan of your own, the answer is: "Now's not the time. First we have to deal with this." The time never comes.

◆ EXAMPLE

Anne would like to go back to college, which she left two classes short of her degree. But at home there's always something: her mother-in-law to drive around, the tax return, the garage to clear out, dinner for her husband's coworkers. Every evening her husband reminds her what still needs doing for tomorrow. Six years have gone by.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Put a standing appointment with your future on your calendar, even just one hour a week, and defend it like a doctor's appointment. If an hour is too much, start with fifteen minutes a day. Free up space in the present: what can you delegate, postpone, do less perfectly? And to anyone adding tasks: "Today I'm handling this. The rest can wait." A slightly less tidy house can be worth one more exam passed.

TECHNIQUE 289

RED FLAG

The Promised Future

➤ WHAT IT IS

Making grandiose promises about the future, with no intention of keeping them, to get something now: forgiveness, money, obedience, free labor. It's called future faking. The person receiving the promises becomes attached not to today's situation, but to that promise, told in lots of detail: the house in the country, the wedding, the promotion, the shares in the company. For that future, they put up with a present full of sacrifice. The bright tomorrow is always just around the corner, and it never arrives.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The promises come mostly after a wrong, or when the other person is about to leave: "It won't happen again. Let's get married," "As soon as we close this project, you're a partner." They're big, vague, with no dates. And every time the deadline approaches, a new reason to put it off pops up.

➤ EXAMPLE

For three years, Johnny has been working Saturdays and Sundays at his cousin's small company, for little pay. "When we sell the brand, half is yours." Every year the sale is "almost done." Meanwhile his cousin has bought a beach house, and Johnny keeps waiting.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Judge today's actions, not tomorrow's promises. Ask for a concrete, immediate first step: "Good, let's put it in writing this week." Be wary of movie-style promises: real things get built in small steps. And set a deadline of your own: "If I don't see anything concrete by March, I stop waiting." Then stick to it.

TECHNIQUE 290

RED FLAG

Time as Proof of Love

◆ WHAT IT IS

Measuring love only by the amount of time the other person devotes. Every hour spent with friends, family, or passions becomes proof of indifference, almost a betrayal. To avoid arguments and guilt, the person on the receiving end gives up pieces of their own life, until their world shrinks down to the couple. The ultimate goal is isolation.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The evening out with friends is punctuated by constant texts: “What time are you coming home?” “What are you doing?” The next day comes the bill: “If you really loved me, you’d want to come home earlier.” A new hobby becomes a rival: “I see you prefer your pottery class to me.” And often, during the time spent together, the person demanding all that attention is on their phone.

◆ EXAMPLE

Leo has started playing pickup soccer again on Tuesday nights. From the second Tuesday on, his partner sulks until the next day: “Apparently two hours with your friends are worth more than me.” By the third month, Leo stops going. On Tuesday nights, at home, his partner watches her show in the bedroom.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Reject the equation: love is measured by the quality of time, by respect, and by support for the other person’s growth, not by hours. Share your plans as information, not as requests for permission: “Tonight I’m seeing Angela and George. I’ll be home around midnight.” Don’t justify yourself. And look at the quality of the time you spend together: people who demand all your time often don’t fill it.

TECHNIQUE 291

RED FLAG

Time as Debt

➤ WHAT IT IS

Turning time spent together into a debt to be repaid. Years of relationship, work, or help become an investment for which the manipulator demands reimbursement: “I gave you the best years of my life.” But time can’t be given back, and so the debt is never paid off. It remains a moral obligation that pins you down.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Every request for change or freedom is rejected with an accounting of the past: “After ten years, you do this to me?” “After everything I’ve done for you.” At work: “I taught you everything, and now you’re asking for a raise?” There’s no specific wrong to discuss, just an open account that never closes.

➤ EXAMPLE

After eight years at a small agency, Margaret asks for a proper employment contract. The owner is offended: “When you got here you didn’t know how to do anything. I taught you the business. And now you’re talking to me about contracts?” Margaret goes back to her desk with a guilt she can’t explain, and the contract never comes.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Reject the loan metaphor: “We spent those years together. It was a choice we both made.” Remember that everyone is responsible for how they spend their own time. Turn the ledger around, if needed: “My years count too.” And shift the question from the past to the future: not “How much time have we spent?” but “How do I want to spend the time I have left?”

TECHNIQUE 292

RED FLAG

The Irreversible Past

◆ WHAT IT IS

Convincing the other person that a choice they made in the past has closed off every path: “It’s too late now.” It’s the sunk cost trap applied to life: everything already invested (years, money, sacrifices) becomes a reason to stay on a road that’s making them suffer. The past becomes a cage for the future.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The lines are resignation dressed up as realism: “You made your choice,” “We have the mortgage and the kids. You can’t change your mind now,” “You’ve put in three years. You can’t quit now.” In closed groups it becomes: “You left everything for us. There’s nothing left for you out there.” Every doubt is crushed under the weight of what has already happened.

◆ EXAMPLE

In his third year of law school, Tom realizes he wants to be a nurse. His father, who has paid the tuition, is adamant: “You want to throw away three years? Finish now, and then we’ll see.” Tom gets his law degree at thirty, and at thirty-two he enrolls in nursing school.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask the question that sets you free: “Knowing what I know today, would I make this choice again?” If the answer is no, the past isn’t a good reason to keep going. What you’ve spent is already spent: you don’t get it back by throwing away your future too. And reject “too late”: some people change careers at fifty and go back to school at seventy.

TECHNIQUE 293

RED FLAG

Selective Memory

➤ WHAT IT IS

Remembering every one of the other person's mistakes perfectly, even from years ago, and forgetting just as precisely one's own broken promises and misdeeds. Memory becomes a one-way archive: infallible for other people's faults, empty for one's own. The person on the receiving end always ends up in the wrong.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You point out a problem from today, and one of your mistakes from five years ago arrives: "Oh yeah? What about that time when...?" You bring up a promise and hear that it was never made. Every discussion shifts to your past, never to the manipulator's behavior. Over time, that person comes across as the patient one, and you as the one who always gets it wrong.

➤ EXAMPLE

Danielle points out to her mother that she told the relatives about Danielle's problems at work, after promising to keep them to herself. Her mother: "Promised? Me? Never mind that. Do you remember when you were eighteen and disappeared for a weekend without telling anyone?" The discussion ends there, on a weekend from twenty years ago.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

After every important verbal agreement, immediately send a three-line recap by text, so there's a record of the date and the commitment. When the old mistake comes up, bring it back to the present: "We already talked about that years ago. Now let's talk about today." When a promise is denied, don't back down: "You told me on Tuesday, in the kitchen. I remember it well." For important matters, keep texts and emails.

TECHNIQUE 294

RED FLAG

Freezing the Past

◆ WHAT IT IS

Refusing to see the other person's growth and continuing to treat them as they were years ago: younger, more insecure, more fragile. Progress, new skills, maturity get ignored. The hidden message is: "To me you'll always be the person you were back then, and only I really know you." That way the manipulator keeps a position of superiority the facts no longer justify.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Childhood nicknames in front of everyone, unsolicited advice on how to dress or spend money, jokes about flaws from twenty years ago. Every success gets cut down to size: "Sure, but with you there's always been something to worry about." Your decisions are treated as whims. It happens above all in families, and with people who knew you during a fragile time.

◆ EXAMPLE

Lawrence is forty-two and runs a department of thirty people. In the car on the way back from the beach, his mother reminds him to put on his sweater "because you'll catch cold," and as soon as they arrive at his aunt and uncle's house, she tells everyone about the time he got a D in math at school. Every time, Lawrence comes home ten years younger, and on Monday he struggles to find his confidence again.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Show through your actions who you are today, without seeking approval: decide and inform, don't ask permission. Answer jokes about the past calmly: "I was fifteen. Today I'm forty-two." Set a limit on unsolicited advice: "Thanks, I've got it." And cultivate relationships with people who know you as you are now.

TECHNIQUE 295

RED FLAG

The Doorknob Bombshell

➤ WHAT IT IS

Bringing up the serious news, the accusation, or the thorny request in the last two minutes of a meeting, when the other person already has a hand on the doorknob. Doctors call it the “doorknob” moment, described in 1976 by Patrick Byrne and Barrie Long in *Doctors Talking to Patients* after analyzing over two thousand consultations: the patient saves the real problem for the doorway. Manipulators make the same move not out of embarrassment, but to take away the other person’s time to check, think, or respond.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

For the whole hour, the talk is about light matters. Then, as people get up and gather their bags, the line arrives in a casual tone: “Oh, I almost forgot, I already canceled the contract,” “By the way, tomorrow I’m signing with your competitor,” “Anyway, I’m leaving at the end of the month.” Then the speaker checks the time, says goodbye, and vanishes, leaving the others with the emotional weight or the urgency.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a glassworks, the junior partner waits until seven o’clock on Friday, while the bookkeeper, Chester, is shutting down the computers to leave, and tosses it out from the doorway: “Oh, I promised the supplier we’d pay everything Monday morning.” Then he hurries down the stairs.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t accept decisions or discussions in the doorway. Stop the scene without chasing the topic: “Something like this doesn’t get settled with our coats on. We’re done for now. Monday at nine we sit down and go over it from the top.” If the person leaves anyway, immediately send a message putting everything on hold until the meeting.

TECHNIQUE 296

RED FLAG

The Date Holdup

◆ WHAT IT IS

Waiting until an important shared event is so close that canceling it would be extremely costly, in money, reputation, or emotional effort, and making a new demand right then. In economics this mechanism is tied to the hold-up problem, studied by Oliver Williamson in 1975 and then by Benjamin Klein, Robert Crawford, and Armen Alchian in 1978: when one party has already made investments it can't recover, the other can exploit the lock-in to change the deal.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

For months everything goes smoothly: deposits are paid, invitations are sent, deliveries are scheduled. Then, a few days before the wedding, the closing, the departure, or the opening, a condition pops up that wasn't there before: "If your sister comes, I'm not showing up," "Either we sign this side agreement, or I'm not coming to the closing on Wednesday." The person doing the holdup knows that stopping everything, at that point, is scarier than giving in.

◆ EXAMPLE

Three days before a restaurant opens in Santa Fe, with the tables booked and the kitchen staff hired, Edward's business partner tells him: "Before we open, I want sixty percent of the shares. Otherwise, on Saturday, the doors stay shut."

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Giving in to the date holdup teaches that the lever works and sets up the next holdup. Count the cost of stopping everything too, and show it coolly: "I'd rather move the date and lose the deposit than change the agreement three days before signing."

TECHNIQUE 297

RED FLAG

The Reverse Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

➤ WHAT IT IS

Constantly and groundlessly accusing the other person of some bad behavior: “I know you’re going to cheat on me,” “You’ll leave anyway.” Under constant pressure, the accused person may end up actually doing what they’re accused of, because the situation has become unbearable. At that point the accuser exclaims: “See? I was right.” The prophecy didn’t predict it: it built it.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Constant phone checks, scenes over a glance, interrogations after every night out. No proof of loyalty is ever enough. At work: the manager who delegates nothing and controls every move, until the team stops taking initiative, and in the end can say: “See? Without me they don’t do anything.”

➤ EXAMPLE

For two years, Emma checks Nick’s phone every night and accuses him of having someone else. Nick, cut off from his friends by now and worn down by the scenes, starts confiding in a coworker who listens to him, and something grows between them. When Emma finds out, she has her confirmation: “I knew it from the start.”

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the dynamic: constant, unfounded accusations serve only to keep you under control. Don’t try to prove your innocence: the more you try, the more the control increases. Name the mechanism: “It’s your accusations that are pushing me away.” And if the situation doesn’t change, end it before you reach the breaking point, with a clear conscience.

TECHNIQUE 298

RED FLAG

The Stolen Future

◆ WHAT IT IS

During a breakup or a fight, the manipulator doesn't stop at attacking the present: they try to destroy the other person's hope of a happy future without them. "Nobody will ever want you," "Your time has passed." It strikes at the most fragile moment and aims at the deepest fears: loneliness, failure, not deserving love. The goal is for that voice to keep talking afterward, inside the other person's head.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The lines sound like predictions, but they're curses: "With your personality, who's going to put up with you?" "At your age, you don't start over," "You'll fail again, like always." They come mostly when the other person is about to leave, or after a defeat, exactly when support is needed.

◆ EXAMPLE

As Alex packs his bags to leave the house, his partner follows him from room to room: "Go ahead. At fifty, with two kids and your problems, who do you think is going to take you? You'll end up alone." For months, every time he meets someone, that sentence comes back to him.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the line for what it is: not a prediction, but a last attempt to control you. Answer in a firm voice, or even just inside your head: "That's your fear, not my future." Surround yourself with different voices: friends, family, a therapist who remind you who you are. Write a concrete list of your resources and successes. And take a step toward the future you were told was impossible: a class, a trip, dinner with new people.

TECHNIQUE 299

RED FLAG

Sleep as a Weapon

➤ WHAT IT IS

Methodically sabotaging the other person's sleep: fights at midnight, noise while they sleep, wake-ups on trivial pretexts. Sleep deprivation has always been used as a form of torture, because it works: people who sleep little think worse, remember worse, have unstable moods, and make bad decisions. An exhausted person doesn't have the energy to defend themselves, or even to plan a way out.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Arguments start when the light is already off and go on for hours. The night before an important commitment come the loud TV, the slammed doors, the loud phone calls, always with an excuse: insomnia, nerves, "I needed to talk about it now." The next day, the fatigue is used against the person who suffered it: "There's no talking to you," "You're always in a bad mood."

➤ EXAMPLE

On Tuesday at eight, Arthur has his interview for the new job. On Monday at eleven-thirty at night, in bed, his wife starts a discussion about his parents that "can't wait any longer." It goes on until three. Arthur arrives at the interview with puffy eyes and an empty head.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Set a firm rule: "After eleven, I don't argue. We'll talk about it in the morning." If the other person insists, change rooms. If the sabotage is systematic, sleep somewhere else: sleep is worth more than the habit of sleeping together. Use earplugs and a sleep mask when you can't move. And recognize how serious it is: deliberately depriving someone of sleep is a form of abuse, not rudeness.

TECHNIQUE 300

RED FLAG

The Induced Flashback

◆ WHAT IT IS

Knowing about the other person's trauma and deliberately reawakening it, with situations or words that recall it, to provoke panic or an emotional collapse. Right afterward, the person who caused the crisis often presents themselves as the one who comforts and protects. That way the tormentor and the rescuer become the same person, and a trauma bond forms that is extremely hard to break. It's one of the cruelest forms of abuse.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

During fights, the very words, gestures, or situations tied to the deepest wound keep coming back: speed for someone who's been in an accident, darkness for someone afraid of it, the phrases of a violent parent. Then, when the fear explodes, the hug arrives: "See? I'm here to protect you." The comfort is the second half of the attack.

◆ EXAMPLE

After her accident on the interstate, Victoria can't stand speed. During an argument in the car, her partner accelerates until she's crying with panic. Then he slows down, takes her hand, and says softly: "It's OK, I'm here." Victoria, shaking, clings to the very person who frightened her.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the behavior for what it is: using a trauma to hurt someone crosses a line that no justification makes acceptable. Don't confuse rescue with love: whoever lights the fire and then brings the water is still the one who lit it. Work on your traumas with a professional, to take power away from the people who use them. And get yourself safe: plan your exit with people you trust and, if needed, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233), free and open day and night.

PART IV

ADVANCED AND DEFENSIVE TECHNIQUES

CHAPTER 13 Space and Environment

CHAPTER 14 Groups and Crowds

CHAPTER 15 Logical Traps

CHAPTER 16 Defenses and Countermoves

CHAPTER 13

Space and Environment

Before the words even start, we're won over by the place where we hear them: the light, the music, the chair, the distance. In this chapter you'll see how surroundings steer choices in stores and offices, and how, inside the home, space can become a tool of control. The first techniques are for using; the last ones are for learning to recognize.

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TECHNIQUE 301

Manipulating the Light

◆ WHAT IT IS

Light changes people's mood and pace before they even notice. Bright, cool light keeps us alert and makes us hurry; low, warm light relaxes us and invites us to stay. That's why fast-food places are lit up like noon and fine restaurants by candlelight: the first want the table back, the second want you to order another bottle.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

First decide what state of mind you need. For a working meeting where decisions have to be made fast, pick a bright room, ideally with natural light. For a delicate conversation or a negotiation you want to close calmly, turn off the overhead lights and switch on a warm lamp off to the side. If you're showing a product, light it from the side: raking light makes surfaces stand out. Never aim light straight into the other person's face: it makes them uncomfortable, and they notice.

◆ EXAMPLE

A hairstylist in Denver swaps the fluorescent tubes in her salon for warm spotlights over the mirrors. Clients like how they look after the cut, take more photos to post online, and book color treatments more often.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before you buy clothes, look at them near a window, not in the fitting room: fitting-room lighting is designed to make you look in great shape. Ask: "Can I see it in daylight for a second?" And be wary of places with no windows and no clocks, like casinos and some shopping malls. They're designed to make you lose track of time.

TECHNIQUE 302

Music and Sound

✦ WHAT IT IS

Music reaches our emotions without passing through our reasoning: rhythm slows our steps or speeds them up, and melody calls up memories and moods. In 1997, three British psychologists, North, Hargreaves, and McKendrick, played French or German music on alternating days in the wine section of a supermarket. With the accordion playing, more French wine sold; with Bavarian music, more German wine. Very few shoppers, asked on their way out, thought the music had made any difference.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Choose the background music based on what you want people to do. Slow, quiet music makes them slow down and stay; fast music brings energy and hurry. Music that matches the product makes it more believable: a wine shop playing classic Italian songs is selling an idea of tradition. Keep the volume below conversation level: if people have to raise their voices to talk, the music is working against you.

✦ EXAMPLE

The owner of a bookstore in Portland plays slow jazz on Saturday afternoons instead of the usual Top 40 station. Customers linger longer among the shelves and come to the register with two books instead of one.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you suddenly find yourself in a great mood in a store, ask whether the mood is yours or the playlist's. For big purchases, run the bare-room test: "Would I still buy this in a silent, white room?" If you're heading out for a big shopping trip, headphones with your own music are a simple defense.

TECHNIQUE 303

Environmental Consistency

◆ WHAT IT IS

People behave in ways that fit the place they're in. A well-kept space says "rules are respected here"; a neglected one says "nobody here cares." That's the idea behind the broken windows theory, proposed in 1982 by American scholars James Wilson and George Kelling: one broken window that nobody fixes invites people to break more.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you want a certain behavior, set up a space that already tells that story. Want order and punctuality at the office? Clear desks, a clean conference room, no forgotten mugs on the table. Want customers to handle a product with care? Display it somewhere well kept, with room around it. Fix the small signs of neglect right away: the crooked sign, the burned-out bulb, the stain on the wall. They cost little, and they set the tone.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a neighborhood library in Philadelphia, the entrance is cluttered with flyers and backpacks dumped on the floor. The director has the walls repainted, installs a row of hooks, and puts out a bin for paper. Within a month, the flyers on the floor are gone, without a single notice on the bulletin board.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Remember that your behavior shifts with your surroundings even when you don't notice: in a luxury store, people spend more just to feel worthy of the place. Bring your own standards and your own budget with you, whatever the setting. And if luxury intimidates you: "Today I'm just looking. I never buy on the first visit."

TECHNIQUE 304

The Mirror Environment

• WHAT IT IS

We trust people who are like us, and places that are like us, too. A space that reflects our tastes, passions, or values makes us feel at home, and when we feel at home, we lower our guard. It's the liking principle applied to objects instead of people.

• HOW TO USE IT

Before an important meeting, find out about the person you'll be hosting: where they're from, what they love, what their style is. Then prepare the room with one or two genuine details, never a stage set: a book you both love, coffee made the way your guest takes it, a photo of the team if you root for the same one. The details have to be sincere: if the other person discovers it's all staged, their trust turns into its opposite.

• EXAMPLE

A landscape architect in Charlotte knows that the couple coming to his office has two small children. Before the meeting, he leaves photos on the table of gardens with treehouses and safe lawns to play on. The couple spends the whole appointment imagining where to put the swing set.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you walk into an office that seems made just for you, ask yourself whether that's a coincidence. Then separate the setting from the offer: "Would I still like this offer in any ordinary room?" The same question works for online ads that seem to read your mind, built directly from your browsing data.

TECHNIQUE 305

Status Symbols

◆ WHAT IT IS

Judging someone's competence takes time; looking at how they present themselves doesn't. That's why we use status symbols (clothes, cars, titles, offices) as shortcuts for deciding whom to trust. In 1968, psychologists Anthony Doob and Alan Gross had either a luxury car or an old compact sit at a green light: drivers stuck behind it honked at the compact much sooner.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Dress one step above the setting, not ten: an accountant who meets clients in a blazer inspires more trust than one in a tracksuit, but a gold watch on a construction site pushes people away. Put the signals that matter in your line of work where people can see them: the real certificate, your professional license, a well-kept sign, a well-made business card. Status should confirm competence, not replace it.

◆ EXAMPLE

A plumber in Cleveland starts showing up with a clean van, a polo shirt with the company name on it, and estimates printed on letterhead. His prices stay the same. Requests for discounts, on the other hand, go down.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

You can't judge a book by its cover, or a professional by their German sedan. Before you trust someone, ask for concrete results in that specific field, not signs of wealth: "Can you show me two cases similar to mine?" Be wary of people who flaunt too much: the great con artists, like Bernie Madoff, kept their image flawless precisely because their image was what vouched for them.

TECHNIQUE 306

Sacred Spaces

➤ WHAT IT IS

Some places are built to make us feel small in front of something bigger: high ceilings, silence, symbols, someone seated higher than everyone else. The cathedral, the courtroom, the CEO's office on the top floor. In a space like that, we lower our voices, move carefully, and more readily accept whatever the person in charge of it says.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

For moments that need to stick in people's memory, pick a place that sets them apart from the everyday. A major company announcement happens in a different room from the usual meetings, with the chairs neatly lined up and a few seconds of silence before anyone speaks. An important agreement gets signed somewhere chosen with care, not at the coffee shop downstairs. The place says it all by itself: "This matters."

➤ EXAMPLE

The president of a farm co-op in Iowa presents the new plan to the members not in the equipment shed, but in the old restored farmhouse, with photos of the founders on the walls. Nobody interrupts, and the plan passes to applause.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you need to negotiate as an equal with someone more powerful, stay out of their sacred space: suggest a neutral room or a coffee shop. "Let's meet at the coffee shop downstairs. We can talk more easily there." And if you do end up in their space, remember that the marble and the enormous desks were chosen by another human being, precisely to have that effect on you.

TECHNIQUE 307

Choice Architecture

◆ WHAT IT IS

The way you present options often decides which one gets picked, even when all of them remain available. Economist Richard Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein called this a “nudge” in their 2008 book *Nudge*. In 2011, researchers Eran Dayan and Maya Bar-Hillel showed in *Judgment and Decision Making* that on restaurant menus, dishes placed at the top or bottom of each category get ordered more often than those in the middle.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Put the option you want to favor in the easiest spot: first, preselected, at eye level, on the shortest path. The others remain available, but they take an extra step. It works for the public good as well as for sales: fruit next to the cafeteria register, the item on sale placed at eye level. Use it for options that are genuinely worth choosing: a nudge that hurts the customer gets found out and is never forgiven.

◆ EXAMPLE

A company in Pittsburgh wants its employees to join the company 401(k). Instead of asking who wants to sign up, it enrolls everyone, with the option to opt out by sending an email. Almost nobody opts out, and at the end of the year a few people say thank you.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you’re faced with a form, look first at the boxes that are already checked and the “recommended” options: who put them there, and why? Slow down and consider the options that are hard to reach, too. Often the best one for you is the one tucked away at the bottom. In person, ask for the full list: “Before I choose, can you tell me all the other options available?”

TECHNIQUE 308

The Forced Path

➤ WHAT IT IS

Someone designs a path where each step leads to the next and turning back takes effort. Once we've started, we keep going out of inertia and to stay consistent with our first decision. The most famous example is the winding route through big furniture stores: to get to the candles, you walk past every kitchen, every sofa, every lamp. Online it works the same way, with pages that lead you step by step from the ad to the checkout.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Build the sequence in small, clear steps, one at a time, each with a single call to action. Remove distractions and unnecessary exits along the way, but always leave a visible way out: the path should help, not trap. On a website, in a professional office, at an event, ask yourself at every stage: "After this step, what does the person need to do?"

➤ EXAMPLE

A dental office in Columbus reorganizes how it welcomes patients: the form at the entrance, then the waiting room with videos about prevention, then the exam, and on the way out the receptionist suggesting a date for the next checkup with the calendar already open. Far more patients leave with their next appointment already booked.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Go in with a list and a limit. At every junction, stop and ask yourself: "Do I really want to take the next step, or am I just going along?" Each step is a new decision, not the automatic consequence of the one before. Shortcuts almost always exist: look for them.

TECHNIQUE 309

The Competitive Environment

◆ WHAT IT IS

When we're put in a competition, we stop asking what something is worth and start asking how to beat everyone else. Absolute value disappears; only the comparison is left. That's why people at auctions sometimes pay more for an item than it costs in a store: the urge to win outweighs the math.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Bring in a visible, honest comparison: a leaderboard, a team goal, a prize for the month's best result. It works best when the contest is short, the rules are clear, and everyone can win something. In sales, letting people know that others are interested, if it's true, helps them decide faster. Avoid contests that pit colleagues against each other on tasks that require cooperation: you gain speed and lose the team.

◆ EXAMPLE

The manager of a chain of gyms in Austin posts a monthly ranking on the bulletin board showing how many memberships each trainer brought in. The next month, sign-ups go up, and the two trainers at the bottom of the list ask to take a sales course.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before an auction, a negotiation with other bidders, or a prize contest, write down your top limit and stick to it. When you feel the adrenaline rising, ask yourself: "Do I really want this, or do I just not want the other person to get it?"

TECHNIQUE 310

RED FLAG

The Uncomfortable Room

➤ WHAT IT IS

Physical discomfort drains energy from the mind. Someone who wants to weaken you in an important conversation can choose, or create, an uncomfortable setting: too hot or too cold, a low chair, the sun in your eyes, background noise. Part of your attention goes to managing the discomfort, and meanwhile the urge to wrap things up fast, on any terms, keeps growing.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The negotiation always takes place in the other person's room, where your chair is lower or has no back. The light from the window hits you in the face. The heat is cranked up, and nobody offers you a glass of water. In families, the serious conversation always gets brought up in a crowded coffee shop or with the TV on, where you can't really talk.

➤ EXAMPLE

Sarah goes to see the purchasing manager of a company in Milwaukee to renegotiate a contract. They keep her waiting in the hallway, then seat her on a low chair facing the window, in an overheated room. After half an hour she accepts a discount she hadn't planned on, just to get out of there.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Listen to your body: if you feel uncomfortable, ask yourself whether it's an accident. Then change the setting without any drama: "Do you mind if I lower the blinds?" "Can I take that chair?" "Can we turn off the TV?" If the other person objects, postpone: "I can't concentrate in these conditions. Let's pick this up tomorrow."

TECHNIQUE 311

RED FLAG

The Wrong Seat

◆ WHAT IT IS

Where you sit tells people who you are, and tells you, too. In 1961, sociologists Fred Strodbeck and Harmon Hook, writing in the journal *Sociometry*, observed that on juries, whoever sat at the head of the table was chosen as foreperson far more often, and spoke up more, than those seated along the sides. Central seats signal importance; seats on the edges signal a supporting role. Someone who wants to diminish you without saying a word puts you in the wrong seat.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

At the meeting, your chair is in the corner, outside the circle, or somewhere you can't see the screen. At dinner you're at the far end of the table, away from the people who matter. At the event your name isn't at the head table, even though the project is yours. Nobody says anything, but everyone sees.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the lunch celebrating the opening of the new department, the general manager seats Adam, who oversaw the work for a year, at the vendors' table. At the head table sits someone who joined two months ago. Adam spends the lunch smiling politely, and in the meetings over the next few days, he speaks up less and less.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't assume the seating is random: look at the arrangement. If the seats are open, choose a central spot yourself, facing whoever is leading. If you're assigned a bad one, ask casually: "I'll sit here. I can't see the screen from there." And when you speak, use a steady voice: your tone makes up for the chair.

TECHNIQUE 312

RED FLAG

The Bureaucratic Maze

➤ WHAT IT IS

A process is made so complicated, long, and contradictory that people give up what they're entitled to. Companies that don't want to pay a refund use it, and so do exes in the ugliest divorces, who want to wear the other person down with hidden documents and endless postponements. In this game, the winner is simply whoever holds out longest.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Online forms that don't work. Different representatives giving different answers. "You'll need to send the request by certified mail," then "Certified mail isn't enough. It has to be notarized." Documents that vanish, deadlines that change, appointments that keep getting pushed back. Each obstacle is small; the sum is designed to make you say, "Forget it."

➤ EXAMPLE

Doug asks his phone company to refund a wrong charge. In three weeks he talks to six representatives. One tells him to send an email, another to fill out a form, another to wait for the next bill. By the seventh try he's ready to give up. Then he sends a written complaint and files one with the FCC: the refund arrives before the case goes any further.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Treat the maze like a project: a folder and a log with the date, time, representative's name, and answer. On the phone, ask for a reference: "Can I get your employee ID and a case number?" After every call, send a recap email: "As we agreed on the phone today..." Then escalate: a formal complaint, a consumer protection agency, a lawyer. Get there before you're worn out, not after.

TECHNIQUE 313

RED FLAG

The Audience as a Weapon

◆ WHAT IT IS

The attacks only come in front of other people. In public, the person on the receiving end is trapped: if they react, they're the one making a scene and ruining the evening; if they stay quiet, they've taken the hit and the message has landed. The audience becomes both a shield and a weapon for the attacker.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes as a joke, a "funny" story, a loving piece of advice said out loud: "That jacket really doesn't do anything for you," "Tell everyone how long it takes you to park." In private, though, everything is fine. That's the key signal: the criticism only comes when there are witnesses, and it always goes after sore spots.

◆ EXAMPLE

At dinner with friends, Ryan's wife laughs as she tells the story of the time he burned the roast in front of her parents, imitating his face. Everyone laughs. Ryan smiles too, so he won't come across as touchy. In the car on the way home, his wife is in a great mood. At the next dinner, there's another story.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't laugh if it isn't funny to you: a straight face is often enough to stop the chorus. Then ask a calm question: "Why are you telling that story now, in front of everyone?" If it happens often, talk about it afterward with one or two of the friends who were there. And remember that you can also get up and leave: your dignity is worth more than one evening.

TECHNIQUE 314

RED FLAG

The Perpetual Guest

➤ WHAT IT IS

A guest who arrives “for a few days” and then never leaves, using the house as if it were theirs and contributing nothing. They exploit a rule almost all of us learned as children: you don’t throw out a guest. The more time passes, the more normal the situation becomes, and the harder it is to bring up.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The initial request is vague and full of urgency: “Just until I find a place.” Then come the ever-new excuses, one problem after another, every time leaving comes up. Meanwhile, the guest uses your things, never buys groceries, changes the household routines, and takes offense at the smallest request.

➤ EXAMPLE

Laura’s cousin goes through a separation and asks to sleep on her couch “for two weeks.” Four months later, his shoes are in the entryway, he has friends over on Saturday nights, and he’s never paid a single bill. Every time Laura hints at it, there’s a make-or-break job interview “next week, for sure.”

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Set a date from the start: “You’re welcome to stay until Friday the 15th.” If the date passes, bring it up right away, before it becomes a habit: “We said Friday. What have you lined up?” Offer help finding an alternative, not an extension. If kindness isn’t enough, put a final deadline in writing and stick to it.

TECHNIQUE 315

RED FLAG

Contested Territory

• WHAT IT IS

Bit by bit, someone takes over the other person's spaces until there's no corner left that's truly theirs: the desk, their side of the bed, their favorite armchair, the drawer. The message is silent but clear: I'm in charge here, nothing is yours. Losing your own space means losing a piece of your sense of safety.

• HOW TO SPOT IT

Behind what looks like mess, there's a real advance. The other person's things always turn up in your spaces, never the other way around. Your study becomes the place for their phone calls. At the office, a coworker leaves files on your desk, uses your chair, moves your things. If you protest, here comes the accusation: "You're so territorial!"

• EXAMPLE

Since she started working from home, Rick's partner has taken over his study: monitor, binders, the chair adjusted her way. Rick works in the kitchen with his laptop on his knees, and when he asks to at least have the desk back, he's told he's being selfish.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Make the boundary clear in words and in actions: "I need this desk kept clear. Keep your things on yours." Then move the items yourself, calmly, every time. Choose at least one space, even just an armchair, that is yours and yours alone, and defend it. Having a space of your own isn't selfish: it's a normal need.

TECHNIQUE 316

RED FLAG

Clutter as a Weapon

➤ WHAT IT IS

Clutter used deliberately to punish, wear down, and belittle the person you live with. That chaos left in plain sight sends a specific message: “Your rules don’t apply to me.” It works especially well against a tidy person, who faces a choice with no way out: clean up for two or live in a place they hate.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Dishes sit in the sink for days, even after a hundred requests. As soon as you clean, everything goes back the way it was, almost as if to erase your work. And the mess gets worse on exactly the days that matter: when your parents are coming, when you have guests, when you’ve got a hard day ahead.

➤ EXAMPLE

Olivia shares an apartment with a roommate. On the evening she’s invited her coworkers to dinner, she comes home to find the living room covered in clothes and open boxes. “I didn’t realize it was today,” the roommate says, and doesn’t move a thing. It’s the third time in two months.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Stop cleaning up after the other person: as long as you do, they have no reason to change. Put out a basket and announce it just once: “Starting today, anything left in the shared spaces goes in here.” Then no comments. Divide up the space where you can, and set a few clear rules instead of fighting every day. If the contempt is constant, ask yourself whether this is about tidiness or about respect.

TECHNIQUE 317

RED FLAG

The Fake Shared Space

✦ WHAT IT IS

Someone insists on entering every private space of the other person in the name of “total transparency”: the bathroom, the phone, the mail, the diary. It looks like a relationship ideal; it’s a violation of boundaries. Whoever refuses comes across as someone with something to hide, and so privacy becomes a fault.

✦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes with phrases that turn discretion into suspicion: “There are no secrets between us,” “If you’ve got nothing to hide, why won’t you give me your phone?” “Come on, what’s the big deal if I come into the bathroom?” Then every request you agree to becomes the habit the next one builds on: the password, location sharing, email.

✦ EXAMPLE

After a year of living together, Ashley’s boyfriend asks for her phone passcode “as proof of love.” Ashley gives it to him. A month later, she’s being interrogated about a text from a coworker. When she changes the code, she becomes the problem: “So you are hiding something.”

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate privacy from secrets: “Having a space of my own doesn’t mean I’m hiding something from you.” Close the bathroom door, keep your passwords to yourself. Calmly turn the logic around: trust doesn’t need to check up. And take the signal seriously: someone who demands that you give up all privacy usually doesn’t stop there.

TECHNIQUE 318

RED FLAG

The Domestic Panopticon

➤ WHAT IT IS

The panopticon is the ideal prison designed in the late eighteenth century by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham: a central tower from which every cell is visible, without the inmates knowing when they're being watched. In the end, they behave as if they always were. At home, the same effect comes from inspections, constant criticism, and, in the most serious cases, high-tech surveillance.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

When they get home, they inspect the surfaces, the fridge, the laundry, hunting for a mistake. The standards of tidiness are impossible and keep changing. Cameras appear “for security,” along with apps that report your location and questions that reveal they've read your messages. People who live like this start watching themselves, even when nobody else is home.

➤ EXAMPLE

Every evening, the mother-in-law who lives with Matt and his wife runs a finger along the furniture and leaves notes on the table: “Dust.” “Sink.” Matt starts cleaning at night. One morning he discovers that the camera installed “for burglars” is pointed at the kitchen, not the front door.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Refuse impossible standards: “The house is clean as it is. If you want more, you can do it yourself.” High-tech surveillance is nonnegotiable: hidden indoor cameras and spyware on your phone are abuse and can be a crime. Photograph everything and talk to a lawyer or a domestic violence advocate. In the meantime, carve out moments free of surveillance: a walk, a call from a different phone.

TECHNIQUE 319

RED FLAG

Environmental Sabotage

♦ WHAT IT IS

Someone damages the other person's things, or makes them disappear, right when they're needed: the keys on the morning of the job interview, the document on the day it's due, the new outfit ruined in the wash. Often insult gets added to injury: "As usual, you can never find anything." The sabotage becomes gaslighting: the person on the receiving end starts to doubt their own memory.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

The "accidents" cluster right before important events. Things disappear and then reappear in places you've already checked. The things that get ruined are always the ones you care about most. And every time, the explanation shifts the blame onto you: you're scatterbrained, you're in a hurry, your head's in the clouds.

♦ EXAMPLE

On the morning of his civil service exam, Ethan can't find his driver's license or his admission letter, which were on the desk the night before. His brother watches him search for half an hour, then "finds" them behind the couch: "Well, look at that, you left them here." It's not the first time, and it always happens before a test.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When the mishaps only hit your deadlines, stop calling them coincidences. When someone plays absentminded, call it out right away: "These keys were right here last night." Take a photo of the documents on the table the night before, so you'll have proof you're not imagining things. Keep documents, spare keys, and valuables in a place only you know about. And recognize how serious this is: someone who ruins your things on purpose isn't joking.

TECHNIQUE 320

RED FLAG

Food as Control

➤ WHAT IT IS

Food touches deep needs: health, pleasure, body image, care. Someone who uses it to control strikes deep: they comment on every plate, sabotage diets, use food as a reward or punishment, or decide how much and what the other person may eat. In the most serious cases, it's part of domestic and economic abuse.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Constant comments about the plate and the body: "Pasta again?" "Just a salad? How depressing." Dessert pushed on you and then thrown back in your face: "See? You've got no willpower." A grocery budget so tight it only allows cheap, poor-quality food, while the other person eats out. A meal skipped as punishment after a fight.

➤ EXAMPLE

Michelle is on a diet prescribed by her doctor. At every family dinner, her mother piles food on her plate "because you look so run-down," then remarks in front of the relatives that "you can't lose weight without a little backbone." Michelle goes home feeling guilty every time, and the diet falls apart.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Set a clear boundary: "What I eat and my body are not up for discussion." If someone offers you a dish just so they can throw it back at you later, turn it down with a firm smile: "No, thanks, I'm good." Where you can, handle your own groceries and meals. If the control has affected your relationship with food, talk to your doctor or a therapist: this isn't something to face without help.

TECHNIQUE 321

RED FLAG

The Stolen Spotlight

◆ WHAT IT IS

Someone organizes, or goes along with, a party in another person's honor and turns it into a stage for themselves. Birthdays, graduations, promotions: the day that was supposed to belong to someone else becomes a celebration of the person hijacking it, or the theater for their drama. It's typical of people who can't stand the spotlight pointing anywhere else.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The guests are mostly the organizer's friends. The closing speech talks about "our" successes and mentions the guest of honor in passing. Or, at the best moment, there's a fight, a theatrical fainting spell, a crying fit, and the whole room turns the other way.

◆ EXAMPLE

At Caitlin's graduation party, her father takes the microphone for a ten-minute toast about his own sacrifices and his own career. Caitlin's name comes up twice. When her aunt tries to bring the attention back to the graduate, he takes offense and walks out: the party ends with half the family out in the yard consoling him.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If it's a pattern, stop hoping it will change: celebrate your milestones with people who are happy for you. If their presence can't be avoided, ask a trusted friend to keep an eye on things. When someone steals your moment, take it back with a smile: "Thanks for the toast. Now let's get back to celebrating." When there's a scene, don't chase after anyone: stay in the room with your guests. And if the party was ruined, throw it again the next day, your way.

TECHNIQUE 322

RED FLAG

The False Empty Nest

➤ WHAT IT IS

A parent who doesn't want to lose control over their adult children creates crises, illnesses, or dependencies every time the children try to become independent. They present it as need or bad luck, but the result is always the same: the son or daughter stays, or comes back. The name plays on "empty nest syndrome," the pain parents feel when their children leave home.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The crisis arrives with perfect timing: the new job offer, the move, the wedding. Sudden ailments the doctors can't find. A showy helplessness with simple things, like paying a bill online or using the washing machine, that means someone has to stop by every other day. And guilt as the glue: "After everything I've done for you."

➤ EXAMPLE

Brian gets a job offer in Chicago. A week later, his mother starts having "terrible" dizzy spells and refuses to see a doctor. Brian turns down the job. A month later, the dizzy spells are gone, and nobody mentions them again.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Take the problems seriously, but verify them: go with your parent to the doctor and ask to sit in on the appointment. Offer help that builds independence, not dependence: teaching them to pay bills online, setting up grocery delivery, a home aide. Set the boundary with love: "Nothing changes between us, and I'll always be there for you, but I'm going ahead with this move." The guilt will pass.

TECHNIQUE 323

RED FLAG

The False Need for Space

◆ WHAT IT IS

In a relationship, someone suddenly announces they “need space” or “a break to think things over,” not to figure something out, but to grab power. The other person is left on the bench, waiting and anxious, while the one who asked for the break does whatever they want, often including seeing other people.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes in mature-sounding words that are hard to argue with: “I need to figure out what I want,” “It’s not you, it’s something I’m going through.” Anyone who objects comes across as smothering. The break has no end date and no rules, and it often comes after a fight, as a more elegant punishment than the silent treatment, or as the first step in a breakup that’s already been decided.

◆ EXAMPLE

Eight months into the relationship, Josh’s girlfriend tells him she needs “a little space.” Josh waits, doesn’t text so he won’t bother her, and skips a trip with his friends. Three weeks later, he finds out from photos online that the break was a weekend in the mountains with someone else.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t accept limbo: “I understand. Take all the time you need. But for me, this isn’t a break, it’s an ending. If someday you know what you want, we’ll see if I’m still around.” Then actually live: go out, see your friends, do your own thing. Almost always, someone who asks for space with no rules has already decided.

TECHNIQUE 324

RED FLAG

The Useless Open Door

➤ WHAT IT IS

Someone offers the other person a choice they can't actually make, to look reasonable and dump the blame for that person's situation on them. The door is open, but it opens onto nothing. It's a cruel form of control: the person on the receiving end ends up thinking, "I could leave, so if I stay, it's my own fault."

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

"If you don't like it, there's the door," said to someone with no job, no income, and nowhere to go. "If you don't like the project, you can always go back to the records department," said by a boss to someone who spent years working their way out of the records department. The alternative is always humiliating or impossible, and the person offering it knows that perfectly well.

➤ EXAMPLE

Donna left her job ten years ago to raise the kids. When she asks to see the household finances, her husband answers calmly: "Nobody's forcing you to stay. You can leave whenever you want." Donna says nothing, and that night she feels guilty for not having the courage to do it.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Call it what it is: "That's not a choice, and you know it." There's no need to fight: put your energy into building a real door. Set aside some savings, get back in touch with people, learn about your rights from a domestic violence advocate or a lawyer. When your exit is ready, don't announce it: use it.

TECHNIQUE 325

RED FLAG

The False Refuge

♦ WHAT IT IS

Someone offers an escape route to a person going through a hard time: a job that weighs on them, a rigid family, a relationship that's gone flat. But the refuge turns out to be a worse prison, with more isolation, more control, more dependence. The jailer shows up wearing the face of a rescuer, and that's exactly why they're so hard to recognize.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It arrives at the moment of greatest vulnerability, with big, vague promises: "With me, everything will be different," "Leave it all behind. I'll take care of everything." It pushes for a quick decision and for cutting ties with the old life: the job, the friends, the city. Only later, when going back is hard, does the tune change.

♦ EXAMPLE

Melissa is unhappy in her job at a bank. A whirlwind new boyfriend convinces her to quit and move into his house in the country, "far away from all that stress." A year later, Melissa has no income, rarely sees her friends, and every purchase has to be approved.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of rescuers: healthy people look for partners on equal footing, not someone to save. Before a big choice, take your time and check the promises against the facts: "I'm not deciding on the spot. Let's see how things go for a few months." Never cut ties with friends and family. They're your way out if the refuge closes in. And remember that the most solid exit is the one you build yourself.

CHAPTER 14

Groups and Crowds

Inside a group, we think and decide differently than when we're on our own. The need to belong is an enormous force: it holds teams together, but it can push people toward silence, conformity, and obedience. We start with the techniques for leading a group honestly and arrive at those used by cults, to be recognized in time.

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TECHNIQUE 326

Symbols and Uniforms

◆ WHAT IT IS

A uniform, a logo, or a badge tells people at a glance which group you belong to and what role you play. They strengthen team spirit in those who wear them and spark respect or obedience in those who see them. In 1974 the American psychologist Leonard Bickman had people make trivial requests of passersby in New York, like picking up a paper bag or moving away from a bus stop: requesters in a guard's uniform were obeyed much more often than those in ordinary clothes.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

If you lead a team, give it a visible, shared sign: the T-shirt at the event, the volunteers' pin, the logo on the van. The symbol has to be the same for everyone and tied to something real, a project, a value, a result. If you work with the public, recognizable clothing gets you treated like a professional before you even open your mouth.

◆ EXAMPLE

The volunteers at a small town's harvest festival in Vermont have always worked any which way. This year the committee gives everyone a red apron with the town crest. Shifts get covered more easily, and visitors ask anyone wearing the apron for information, without hesitating.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate the symbol from the person: a uniform indicates a role; it doesn't guarantee competence or honesty. The door-to-door scam of the fake gas company technician works exactly this way. Before you obey a uniform, ask for ID and check with a call to the company: "Just a moment while I call the company to confirm the appointment."

TECHNIQUE 327

The Goal That Unites

➤ WHAT IT IS

Two groups in conflict don't make peace through lectures or dinners together, but when they have to solve a problem neither can solve without the other. The psychologist Muzafer Sherif demonstrated this in 1954 with the Robbers Cave experiment, at a summer camp in Oklahoma: two teams of boys who had become rivals stopped hating each other only when they had to cooperate, for example to fix the camp's drinking water supply together.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When two departments, two families, or two factions clash, stop looking for who's right. Find, or bring to light, a goal that matters to both and that requires everyone's effort. Make it concrete, with a deadline, and divide the work so that each side depends on the other. Cooperation changes opinions more than words do.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a company in Indianapolis, sales and the warehouse blame each other for delays. The general manager doesn't call the usual clear-the-air meeting. She gives the two department heads, together, the job of keeping the biggest client, who's threatening to leave. After three weeks of making calls as a pair, the two are on a first-name basis.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Watch out for the flip side: the same mechanism works with an invented common enemy. If the person leading a group only unites it against someone, and never to build something, ask yourself whom that enemy serves, and ask it out loud: "Fine, we've found the culprit. Now what are we proposing?"

TECHNIQUE 328

The Social Timer

◆ WHAT IT IS

An urgency that doesn't come from a deadline, but from comparison with others: "everyone's already making their move, and you're falling behind." It combines social proof with the fear of missing out. Comparison with our peers is one of the strongest engines we have: in 1954 the psychologist Leon Festinger described it in social comparison theory, our habit of judging ourselves by looking at others.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Show, honestly and verifiably, that people similar to your listener are already taking the step you're proposing. Not "millions of people," but the right group: colleagues in the industry, the neighbors, local businesses. The closer the group, the harder it pushes. Never invent names or numbers: a false comparison is quickly uncovered and costs you your credibility.

◆ EXAMPLE

An installer in Boise doesn't talk about rebates or savings. He tells the customer: "On this street, three families have already put in a heat pump. If you'd like, I can ask them to show you their system." The customer looks out the window at the neighbors' roofs, and asks for a quote.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you feel the anxiety of falling behind, ask yourself: "Does this urgency come from a need of mine or from the comparison?" Remember that with other people you see the milestones, not the debts and the doubts. The only useful comparison is between you today and you a year ago. To anyone rushing you: "Good for them. I'm going at my own pace."

TECHNIQUE 329

RED FLAG

Diffusion of Responsibility

➤ WHAT IT IS

The more people are present, the less responsible each one feels to act. In 1968 the psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané showed that people who believe they're the only witness to an emergency step in far more often than people who know there are other witnesses. Anyone who wants to avoid a decision exploits this mechanism: they spread the responsibility over everyone, so that it rests on no one.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Impersonal phrases: "Somebody should do something," "Let's all decide together," "Let's hear from the others too." Meetings that multiply, committees, opinions asked of everyone, until the decision is so watered down or so late that it's no longer any use. The person using it seems democratic: in reality, they don't want to put their name on it.

➤ EXAMPLE

In the town band's group chat, everyone writes that the van for away trips has had a flat tire for a week. "Somebody should take it to the tire shop," writes the secretary. Ten days go by. Then the clarinetist, Mrs. Reynolds, writes: "I'll take it tomorrow at nine. Carl, leave me the keys." The van is ready in two days.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Cut through the fog with names and tasks: not "someone call 911," but "You, in the blue jacket, call 911." In meetings, always ask who's doing what, and by when. If nobody steps forward, volunteer: "I'll take care of it. We'll check in on Friday."

TECHNIQUE 330

RED FLAG

False Unanimity

◆ WHAT IT IS

To get an idea through, you make people believe that “everyone else” already agrees. Anyone who disagrees feels like the only voice out of tune and, so as not to be in the minority, stays quiet. It’s a form of social pressure built on a lie: the majority exists only in the words of the person announcing it.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

“I’ve already talked to almost everyone, we’re aligned.” “Everybody’s coming, you’re the only one missing.” “The rest of the family agrees with me.” Generic phrases, with no names, said at the start of the discussion, before anyone can speak. Often that “everyone” is two people the proposer trusts.

◆ EXAMPLE

The marketing manager opens the meeting like this: “I’ve checked with pretty much everyone, and I think we’re agreed on the new logo.” Nobody objects. Afterward, in the office elevator, four coworkers out of six admit under their breath that none of them likes the logo.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask for names, calmly: “When you say everyone, who do you mean? Let’s hear from each person.” Before important meetings, talk with your coworkers one at a time: you may discover you’re in the majority. And if you disagree, say so first and with arguments: your voice often opens the way for others.

TECHNIQUE 331

RED FLAG

Pressure to Conform

➤ WHAT IT IS

The group pushes its members to think, say, and do what everyone else does, and anyone who strays gets looked down on, mocked, or sidelined. In the 1950s the psychologist Solomon Asch put people in a room with confederates who all gave, together, an obviously wrong answer to a simple comparison of lines. Three participants out of four went along with the group's mistake at least once.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The condescending looks when someone asks a question. The jokes about the person who "always has to be different." The invitations that stop coming. No explicit threat is needed: fear of judgment is enough to make people censor themselves, and the more people stay silent, the stronger the pressure on those who remain.

➤ EXAMPLE

Ilene, newly hired at a law firm in Boston, notices that nobody gets up from their desk for lunch. Nobody has ever forbidden it. After two weeks, she's eating a sandwich in front of her computer too, and the first time a new coworker goes out to lunch, she catches herself giving her a dirty look.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself: "Do I really think this, or am I going with the flow?" Look for an ally: Asch himself noted that a single confederate giving the right answer was enough to make conformity drop sharply. Express your doubt as a question: "What if we tried doing it another way?" Questions divide less than accusations.

TECHNIQUE 332

RED FLAG

Groupthink

♦ WHAT IT IS

When a tight-knit group cares more about harmony than about truth, it ends up making wrong decisions with great confidence. The psychologist Irving Janis described it in 1972 in his book *Victims of Groupthink*, studying political disasters like the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion: Kennedy's advisers, brilliant one by one, raised no doubts about a plan full of flaws.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

The group feels invincible and morally in the right. Outside critics "don't understand" or are "working against us." Inside, nobody wants to spoil the mood: doubts are kept private, silence is taken for consent, and someone takes it upon themselves to keep inconvenient news away from the boss. Whoever raises a problem hears: "Are you with us or not?"

♦ EXAMPLE

The board of a small local bank unanimously approves opening three new branches, proposed by its very charismatic CEO. Two board members have doubts about the numbers, but nobody wants to be the one putting on the brakes. Two years later, the branches close.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you lead a group, openly ask for objections and protect the people who raise them. Give one person the official role of devil's advocate, on a rotating basis. Have two separate subgroups work on the same problem and compare the results. And before a big decision, plan a second meeting devoted only to doubts, or propose one yourself: "We're agreeing too fast. Let's take ten minutes to say what could go wrong."

TECHNIQUE 333

RED FLAG

Fake Team Spirit

➤ WHAT IT IS

Invoking “the good of the group” to get a sacrifice from someone that mainly benefits the person asking for it. Loyalty to the team, the family, or friends becomes a weapon: whoever says no comes across as selfish, and almost nobody wants that label.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

“We’re a family,” “We have to show we’re a team,” “We’re doing it for everyone.” The words are noble, but the numbers don’t add up: the side paying, in time, money, or effort, is always the same, and the side collecting the benefit is another. Often the “group” turns out to be the bonus, the project, or the convenience of the person talking.

➤ EXAMPLE

In November, the owner of a travel agency in Miami asks his employees for three unpaid Saturdays: “For the good of the agency. We’re a team.” In January it comes out that those Saturdays were for closing a contract that earned a bonus for the owner alone.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Always ask: “The common good of whom?” Separate loyalty from unfair sacrifice: “My commitment to the job shows every day; for the extra Saturdays, though, I need to be paid overtime.” Propose a fair alternative instead of a flat no. And if “team spirit” is always used to justify one-way requests, maybe it isn’t a team.

TECHNIQUE 334

RED FLAG

Collective Responsibility

♦ WHAT IT IS

Everyone is punished for one person's mistake. That way, whoever's in charge no longer has to watch anyone: the members of the group watch one another, afraid that the person next to them will trigger the general punishment. Whoever made the mistake becomes the weak link to hate, and the group turns into its own guard.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

"Until somebody confesses, nobody goes out." "Since one person came in late, starting tomorrow everyone clocks in at eight sharp." In cults, one person's doubt "lowers everyone's energy." The key signal is that the group's anger shifts from the person punishing to the person who made the mistake.

♦ EXAMPLE

At a call center in Tampa, an operator botches an important contract. The manager takes away the bonus for the whole shift. The next day nobody says hello to that coworker anymore, and from then on everyone checks one another's files, silently and suspiciously.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the game: the one responsible for the atmosphere isn't the person who made the mistake, but the one who chose to punish everyone. Don't take it out on your coworker: support them. Then talk to the person in charge as a group, not one at a time: "Punishing everyone for one person's mistake only breeds resentment." Everyone answers for their own actions, not for other people's.

TECHNIQUE 335

RED FLAG

Invalidating Dissent

➤ WHAT IT IS

Faced with a legitimate criticism, you don't respond to its substance but attack the way it was said: "It's not what you're saying, it's how you're saying it." This is called tone policing. The problem raised disappears, and what's left in its place is the supposed emotional flaw of the person who raised it.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

"Calm down, we can't talk like this." "If you use that tone, I'm not listening." "You're getting too worked up." The discussion shifts from the injustice to the reaction to the injustice. It hits most often those with less power in the group, who are asked for perfect calm, while those in charge can raise their voices as much as they like.

➤ EXAMPLE

In a meeting, Frances points out with frustration that this is the third time one of her proposals has been ignored and then picked up by a coworker. The manager answers: "If you want to be taken seriously, you need to learn to control yourself." For the rest of the meeting the talk is about her temperament, never about the proposal.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't justify your tone: it's a reaction to a real problem. Bring the conversation back to the point: "Can we get back to the substance? The problem is that my proposals are being ignored." If the other person insists, name the tactic calmly: "We're talking about the how so we don't have to talk about the what."

TECHNIQUE 336

RED FLAG

The Designated Confidant

◆ WHAT IT IS

Someone with power picks one person in the group and makes them feel special: confiding doubts, weaknesses, secrets, asking for “an honest opinion.” In reality, they use that person to gather information, to sound out the group, or to spread their own version of events through a voice that seems spontaneous.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

“I trust your judgment more than the others’,” “I’m only telling you because it’s you.” Lunch invitations for two, confidences about coworkers, questions that seem personal but are about other people: “You know them. How did they take it?” The person receiving this attention feels privileged and lets their guard down.

◆ EXAMPLE

The new principal of a high school often calls Mr. Black into her office: she asks his advice and tells him about her difficulties with the faculty. Mr. Black, flattered, tells her who’s against the new schedule. At the next faculty meeting, those colleagues are sidelined one by one. And in everyone’s eyes, the snitch becomes Mr. Black.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Accept the esteem, but ask yourself: “Why me, and why now?” Never pass on your coworkers’ opinions to get on the good side of those in charge. Give opinions about facts, not people. If you’re asked to judge others: “I’d rather you talk about it directly with the person involved.” And remember that the role of confidant lasts only as long as you’re useful.

TECHNIQUE 337

RED FLAG

The Social Projector

➤ WHAT IT IS

Accusing others of exactly your own flaws: liars see liars everywhere, aggressive people accuse the group of hostility, cheaters suspect cheating. Projection is a defense mechanism described by psychoanalysis, but here it's used as a diversion: while the accused person defends themselves, nobody looks at the accuser.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Accusations that seem absurd because they describe the accuser perfectly. The boss who yells and then scolds the team for "not knowing how to communicate respectfully." The coworker who pads her expense reports and insinuates that it's others who pad theirs. The accusation often comes first, before anyone notices the real behavior.

➤ EXAMPLE

The site foreman at a construction company in Louisville, known for his outbursts, writes to the owner that Ivan's crew "is hostile and won't cooperate." Ivan spends a week defending himself with emails and statements. Nobody, meanwhile, asks about the outbursts.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When an accusation seems like a portrait of the person making it, stop: it probably is. Don't defend yourself point by point, because that puts you in the defendant's chair. Send the ball back with a question about facts: "Can you give me a specific example? When, and with whom?" And bring the facts yourself, calmly, to the people who have to decide.

TECHNIQUE 338

RED FLAG

The Scapegoat

◆ WHAT IT IS

The group unloads all its blame, fears, and frustrations onto a single person, or onto an outside group. That way the others feel absolved and united again. The name comes from the ancient ritual described in the Bible, in Leviticus. A goat was symbolically loaded with the sins of the people and sent out into the wilderness. The person leading the group gains twice: nobody questions their choices, and everyone fears being next.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Whatever goes wrong, the blame falls on the same person, even when they have nothing to do with it. In families it's "the black sheep," at work it's whoever "always slows everything down," in politics it's the minority of the moment. Complex problems become simple: there's a culprit, and you just have to get rid of them.

◆ EXAMPLE

A project for an important client falls through. In the meeting, the manager reconstructs the events so that every delay leads back to Simon, the youngest member of the team. Simon is transferred to another department. Three months later the delays continue exactly as before, but by now nobody talks about them.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you're the target, don't accept the label: "I'm not the problem, I'm the lightning rod." Calmly point out the pattern to people who can listen: "Have you noticed that every problem ends up on me, even when I have nothing to do with it?" If you see someone else in the crosshairs, don't join the chorus. And if the group needs a culprit to stay standing, getting out is often the healthiest choice.

TECHNIQUE 339

RED FLAG

Workplace Bullying and Ostracism

➤ WHAT IT IS

Whoever disagrees or gets in the way becomes the group's target, often at the urging of those in charge: isolation, gossip, exclusion, sabotaged work. Ostracism is the extreme form: treating the person as if they didn't exist. In 1990 the work psychologist Heinz Leymann, who called it mobbing, catalogued these systematic hostile actions in Sweden in the journal *Violence and Victims*, showing how prolonged psychological harassment at the office leads to severe post-traumatic symptoms and drives people out of their jobs.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Meetings held without you. Information that arrives late or never. Greetings that disappear, jokes behind your back, humiliating assignments or no assignments at all. It almost always starts after a specific episode: a report, a refusal, a criticism of those in charge.

➤ EXAMPLE

Antonia reports an irregularity in her department's overtime to HR. From that day on, the department head stops passing her files, her coworkers go to lunch without inviting her, and in the group chat nobody answers her messages. After two months, her doctor puts her on leave for stress.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't take the blame: it's a group attack, not a flaw of yours. Document everything: dates, names, words, emails. And put the exclusions in writing: "I didn't get the invitation to this morning's meeting. Could you send me the summary?" Look for support outside the group: family, friends, your doctor, your union, an employment lawyer. And calmly prepare a way out, without impulsive moves: your health is worth more than that job.

TECHNIQUE 340

RED FLAG

The Smear Campaign

◆ WHAT IT IS

Before, during, or after a breakup, the manipulator tells friends, relatives, and coworkers an upside-down version of the story: they present themselves as the victim, and the real victim becomes the unstable, violent, or “crazy” one. The goal is to isolate the other person and make sure no one believes them when they speak up.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It arrives early, before you can speak. It’s made of small distorted truths and accusations that flip reality around: the person who was controlling accuses the other of being controlling. It often comes with tears and a wounded air, very convincing. The signal: friends who suddenly turn cold, with no explanation.

◆ EXAMPLE

After the separation, Hugh’s ex-wife calls all their mutual friends. She says she left because Hugh was “obsessive” and “unstable.” When Hugh seeks comfort from an old friend, he hears: “Look, I don’t want to get into this stuff.”

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t launch a counter-campaign: calling everyone to give your version looks obsessive and confirms the story. Talk calmly with the two or three people who really know you. To everyone else, this is enough: “That’s not how it was, but I don’t want to drag you into it.” Accept that some people will believe the other version: you can’t convince everyone. Time is on your side, because a mask doesn’t hold up for long.

TECHNIQUE 341

RED FLAG

Controlling the Social Calendar

➤ WHAT IT IS

Taking charge of the couple's or the family's social life: whom to see, whom to avoid, where to go. Only people who admire the one making the decisions get invited, and the people who could open the other person's eyes are gradually pushed away. The result is a bubble: nobody inside will ever say "you know this isn't normal."

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Every one of the other person's friends has a flaw: "Corey is boring," "Greta's a gossip," "your sister always turns us against each other." Every outing with them becomes a chore, with sulking, delays, and excuses. Evenings with the decision-maker's friends, on the other hand, are always "more fun." In the end, to keep the peace, you stop seeing your own.

➤ EXAMPLE

In two years of marriage, Anita has stopped seeing her high school friends. Her husband never forbade it: there was simply, every time, a lunch at his parents', a dinner with his coworkers, a sudden headache. When a friend texts her for her birthday, Anita realizes she hasn't talked to her in eight months.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't give up your friends: someone who criticizes all of them doesn't have a problem with them, they have a problem with your network. Ask for a clear alternation: "Last Saturday we saw your friends; this Saturday we see mine." Keep going out with them on your own too, and if the other person tries to get in the way, keep the contacts alive: that network is your anchor.

TECHNIQUE 342

RED FLAG

Group Gaslighting

◆ WHAT IT IS

It's gaslighting multiplied: it's no longer a single person telling you that you remember wrong or that you're overreacting, but an entire group of friends, relatives, or coworkers won over by the manipulator. Faced with ten people, including people you love, doubting yourself becomes almost inevitable. It's one of the harshest forms of psychological abuse.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Everyone, one after another, uses the same words: "You seem down," "That's not how it happened," "You've been too sensitive lately." Sometimes it takes the form of an affectionate "intervention," in which the assembled family asks you to get help. The manipulator's version of events reached everyone before yours did.

◆ EXAMPLE

After months of fights, Monica's partner convinces his parents and even Monica's sister that she's "depressed and unstable." One Sunday, at lunch, everyone takes turns telling her they're worried and that she needs to see someone. Monica goes home wondering whether she really is the problem.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Lock down reality right away: save messages in a secure folder and send an immediate account of each episode to a trusted person outside the circle. Remember that you're not going crazy: you're under coordinated pressure. Find at least one person outside the system who will listen to you: a psychologist, a faraway friend, a domestic violence advocate. When they close in on you, cut it short: "I know what I saw and heard, and I'm not discussing it any further." Without outside support it's nearly impossible to hold out, and often the only way is to leave the system.

TECHNIQUE 343

RED FLAG

The Wall of Silence

➤ WHAT IT IS

In a sick group, an unwritten rule applies: problems aren't talked about, not inside and, above all, not outside. "We don't air our dirty laundry." Whoever breaks the silence becomes the traitor and is punished with exclusion. The silence protects those who do harm and leaves those who suffer it without help.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Kids who learn early not to tell anyone at school what happens at home. Employees who know but don't say, because "that's how things have always been done here." Phrases that turn silence into loyalty: "If you talk, you'll destroy the family," "You'll embarrass us in front of everyone." And the facade of normality that has to be kept up at all costs.

➤ EXAMPLE

In a family of shopkeepers in a small Midwestern town, everyone knows the father drinks and hits. Nobody talks about it, not even among the siblings. When the youngest daughter tells a teacher, her mother says she has "betrayed the family," and for months the relatives won't speak to her.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Remember that the secret serves only to protect the abuser, never the family or the company. Choose a safe person who is completely outside: a doctor, a teacher, a psychologist, the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233). Start small: "I'd like to talk to you about something that's hurting me." And prepare for the group's reaction, with your outside network beside you.

TECHNIQUE 344

RED FLAG

The Hierarchy of Privileges

◆ WHAT IT IS

Whoever leads the group creates levels of status, knowledge, or perks, and personally decides who moves up. The members stop seeing one another as allies and start competing for the approval of the top. It's the old "divide and rule": people busy climbing have no time to question the ladder.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Levels with grand names: silver, gold, diamond; "initiates," "advanced," "inner circle." "Restricted" knowledge, revealed only to those who prove their loyalty. Public rewards for whoever brings in the most people or the most money. And the constant feeling of being one step away from the next level.

◆ EXAMPLE

Rita joins a supplement sales network in Orlando. To go from "consultant" to "leader," she has to buy a product package every month and bring in three new people. After a year she has the title, a gold pin, and a basement full of boxes. The real profit, all told, goes to the people higher up.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of anyone promising secret knowledge reserved for the few: real knowledge can be verified. Look at results, not titles: do the people at the top levels really live better, or do they just have more debt? Talk to other members as allies, not rivals. To anyone pushing you to move up a level: "Before I buy anything else: how much does someone at your level really make?" And build your self-esteem outside the group.

TECHNIQUE 345

RED FLAG

Elite Group Identity

➤ WHAT IT IS

The group tells itself it's an elite: smarter, more aware, more evolved than the "masses" out there. Belonging becomes a mark of distinction, and the sense of superiority holds the group together and makes it deaf to criticism. If someone outside criticizes it, it's only because they "can't understand."

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Words that separate: "we who have opened our eyes" and "the others who are asleep." Contempt for family and old friends, described as limited or "still asleep." An inside language only members understand. And constant gratification: every meeting reminds you how special you are.

➤ EXAMPLE

Nick has been attending a "personal growth" group in Los Angeles for a year. At first he finally feels understood. Then he starts calling his coworkers "mediocre" and stops visiting his parents, who "live in fear." When a friend asks him how much he's spent on courses, he answers that some things "an ordinary mind can't grasp."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of anyone who proclaims themselves superior: real wisdom is usually humble. Judge people by what they do, not by the group they belong to. Seek out settings where you encounter ideas different from your own. To anyone who dismisses critics as "people who don't understand": "On the merits, what did they say that's wrong?" And ask yourself honestly: "Do I like this group for what it teaches me or because it makes me feel superior?"

TECHNIQUE 346

RED FLAG

The Cult of Personality

➤ WHAT IT IS

The leader builds around themselves the image of a superior, infallible person, the only one who knows the truth, and demands devotion instead of trust. The expression became famous in 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev, in his secret speech to the Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, denounced the cult built around Stalin. The same pattern turns up in cults, companies, and small groups.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The leader is never wrong: if something goes badly, it's the fault of whoever didn't follow the instructions properly. Their photos and their sayings are everywhere. Anyone who leaves is a "traitor." Critical questions are punished or ridiculed. And the money flows in only one direction: the top lives well, the followers give.

➤ EXAMPLE

The founder of a startup in San Francisco insists that every internal presentation open with one of his quotes. Anyone who stays at the office after nine is praised in public; anyone who leaves early for their family "doesn't get the mission." When a manager resigns, the founder forbids employees to talk to her.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

No human being is infallible, and anyone who claims to be is lying. Look at how dissent is treated: a healthy group welcomes doubts; a cult punishes them. Keep your ties outside the group alive. Check where the money goes. If all criticism of the top is forbidden, ask: "Are we evaluating ideas here, or applauding people?" And if you have doubts, look for people who have left: former members' accounts say a lot.

TECHNIQUE 347

RED FLAG

The Demand for a Sacrifice

✦ WHAT IT IS

The group asks for a great proof of loyalty: donating your savings, cutting off your family, giving up a job. The bigger the sacrifice, the stronger the attachment, because admitting you gave everything for nothing hurts too much. In 1966 the psychologists Harold Gerard and Grover Mathewson, in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, showed that people who had received stronger electric shocks to join a boring discussion group later rated it much more highly than those who had received mild shocks.

✦ HOW TO SPOT IT

The request arrives as an honor: “It’s time to take the leap.” It’s presented as a test of maturity or faith, not as a cost. It’s often irreversible, and it often burns exactly the bridges you’d need to go back: money, family, your résumé.

✦ EXAMPLE

To reach the “master level” of her spiritual group, Georgia is asked to write her parents a letter to “close the door on her materialistic past.” Georgia writes it. From that moment on, she defends the group more fiercely than before, even against the friends who ask how she’s doing.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Real loyalty is built over time, not with a theatrical gesture. Be wary of anyone who asks you to burn bridges: they’re not freeing you, they’re taking away your exits. No irreversible decisions under pressure: talk it over with someone outside the group first. “For a choice this big, I’m taking a month, and I’ll talk about it outside of here.” And if you’ve already given a lot, remember that continuing just to avoid admitting the mistake is only a way to lose more.

TECHNIQUE 348

RED FLAG

Physical and Emotional Exhaustion

◆ WHAT IT IS

The group keeps its members always busy and always tired: little sleep, skipped meals, no free time, activities that go late into the night. A tired brain reasons less, gives in to pressure sooner, and accepts what it's told more easily. All that fatigue serves to switch off critical thinking.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Impossible schedules presented as proof of commitment. Three-day seminars with very short breaks and sessions until dawn. Rest described as laziness, selfishness, or "resistance to change." And guilt over every hour devoted to sleep, family, or yourself.

◆ EXAMPLE

Pete attends an "intensive" sales course at a hotel on Lake Tahoe. It starts at six and ends after midnight, with sandwiches eaten standing up. On the third day, exhausted, he signs the contract for the advanced program without reading it. It costs as much as four of his monthly paychecks.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Sleep is non-negotiable: anyone who systematically takes it from you is attacking your health, whatever the justification. Listen to your body's signals: constant fatigue isn't weakness, it's a warning. Don't sign or decide anything important during these events: "I'm going to bed now. I'll read the contracts tomorrow with a clear head." And if a setting uses exhaustion as a method, the healthiest choice is to leave.

TECHNIQUE 349

RED FLAG

Doctrine over the Person

➤ WHAT IT IS

The group's ideology comes before everything: before feelings, experience, and even loved ones. If reality contradicts the doctrine, it's reality that's wrong. It's one of the eight criteria of thought reform described in 1961 by the American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, who studied people subjected to "thought reform" in Mao's China.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

"If you doubt, it's because you haven't understood yet." Personal experiences reinterpreted to make them fit the theory. Emotions to be suppressed when they don't match the rules. And the cruelest choices presented as consistency: pushing away a child, ignoring a friend in trouble, because "the rule is the rule."

➤ EXAMPLE

Louise's son tells her he's gay. The religious group Louise has belonged to for twenty years asks her not to let him in the house until he "changes his life." Louise obeys for six months. Then one evening she looks at photos of her son as a little boy and realizes she's betraying a person, not a faith.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People come before ideas: if an ideology asks you to be cruel to someone of flesh and blood, the problem is the ideology. Say it clearly: "If your rule asks me to hurt someone I love, the rule is what's wrong." When your experience contradicts the theory, trust your experience. Cultivate empathy, especially toward the people the group teaches you to despise. And accept doubt: a system that has all the answers has usually gotten the questions wrong.

TECHNIQUE 350

RED FLAG

Creating Phobias

◆ WHAT IT IS

The group plants in its members a deep fear of leaving or asking questions: people who leave get sick, fail, lose everything, are punished by God. The American psychologist Steven Hassan, a former member of Reverend Moon's Unification Church, called it phobia indoctrination. The fear becomes a cage that stays standing even years after leaving.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Stories told and retold about former members who ended up badly: divorce, illness, bankruptcy, accidents. The certainty that outside there's only chaos. The anxiety that rises as soon as you think about leaving, or as soon as you read a criticism of the group. And the message, more or less explicit: "Without us, your life is worthless."

◆ EXAMPLE

In a self-help group in Austin, every meeting begins with the story of someone who "left the path" and then lost their job or their health. When Elise thinks about quitting, she wakes up at night with her heart pounding. It takes her a year and a good psychologist to understand that the fear was taught to her.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize that the fear isn't a premonition: it was put there on purpose. Look for evidence outside the group: accounts from former members, organizations that help people leaving cults. Expose yourself one step at a time: a critical article, a call to an old friend. To anyone who keeps saying you'll end up badly outside: "A healthy place keeps me because I'm doing well, not because I'm afraid to leave." Every step without a catastrophe weakens the fear. And build a network before you leave.

CHAPTER 15

Logical Traps

A logical trap is a line of reasoning that seems to hold together but has a hole in it. In this chapter you'll find the most common ones, from those you hear every day at the coffee shop to those hiding behind charts and big words. Recognizing them is the fastest way to avoid being led where you don't want to go.

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TECHNIQUE 351

RED FLAG

The Straw Man

◆ WHAT IT IS

Instead of responding to what the other person actually said, you build a distorted version, more extreme or sillier, and attack that. Demolishing a caricature is easy, and listeners often don't notice the switch. The other person ends up defending a position they never held.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by a fixed formula: "So what you're saying is...", followed by something nobody said. The mechanism is always the same: take the argument, push it to the extreme, put it in the other person's mouth, and tear it down in front of everyone. The bigger the audience, the better it works, because whoever corrects the distortion looks nit-picky and defensive.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the school board meeting, a parent representative, Paula, proposes locking the high school's side gate after 8:15 in the morning. A teacher replies: "So you want to turn the school into a prison, with guards in the hallways?" Half the room laughs, and the proposal about the gate never even comes to a vote.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't defend the caricature: that's exactly what the other person wants. Repeat your real position, in the same words as before: "That's not what I said. I said lock the side gate after 8:15." Then ask them to respond to that. If they insist, point it out calmly: "You're responding to something I didn't say."

TECHNIQUE 352

RED FLAG

The Personal Attack

➤ WHAT IT IS

When you can't take apart an argument, you take apart the person making it: their character, their past, their looks, their education, their private life. In Latin it's called *ad hominem*, "against the person." It works because gossip is understood instantly and reasoning isn't. If the speaker seems unreliable, what they say loses value even when it's right. There's also the "look who's talking" variant (in Latin, *tu quoque*, "you too"): throwing the same flaw back at the critic, as if that canceled the criticism.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes in two forms. The crudest is the insult: "What would you know about it? You didn't even finish school." The subtler one attacks self-interest: "Of course you'd say that. You're the one who profits." In both cases the argument stays right there, untouched, and nobody discusses it anymore.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a parent-teacher meeting, a mother points out that there's too much vacation homework. Another mom replies: "This from the woman whose kid has Grandma do his homework." Laughter, embarrassment, and on to the next item. Nobody has said whether the homework is too much or not.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't defend yourself against the personal attack: if you do, the topic becomes your life. Ignore it and put the point back on the table: "We can talk about Grandma another time. The question is: are forty pages in two weeks a lot or not?" Listeners understand perfectly well who answered the question and who didn't. And if someone throws one of your own inconsistencies back at you: "Maybe I get it wrong too, but the question still stands."

TECHNIQUE 353

RED FLAG

The Red Herring

♦ WHAT IT IS

Tossing a different topic into the discussion, more heated and easier, to make people forget the original one. The name comes from the smoked herring that, according to English tradition, was dragged across a trail to throw hunting dogs off the scent. It's one of the most common traps, because the new topic is almost always more exciting than the old one.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the jump: the question is specific, the answer talks about something else, with more passion. It often arrives with “But the real problem is...”, or with a reproach that shifts attention onto the person who asked. Two minutes later everyone is arguing about the new topic, and the old one has vanished.

♦ EXAMPLE

The manager asks Diego why the quote for the client in Pittsburgh hasn't gone out yet. Diego answers: “The quote? Nobody around here realizes how many hours I put in. On Monday I stayed until nine!” The manager starts talking about overtime. The quote stays stuck.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Do what a good hunting dog does: ignore the herring and stay on the trail. Acknowledge the new topic, set it aside, and go back to the first: “We'll talk about your hours on Friday. It's right that we do. Right now I need to know about the quote: when is it going out?” Repeat the question, calmly, until you get an answer.

TECHNIQUE 354

After It, Therefore Because of It

➤ WHAT IT IS

Thinking that if one thing happened after another, it was caused by it. In Latin it's *post hoc ergo propter hoc*: "after this, therefore because of this." The brain looks for causes everywhere, and two events close together in time immediately seem connected to us. It's the basis of many superstitions and a lot of advertising.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

You place two events side by side, first one and then the other, and let the listener draw the conclusion: "Since the new manager arrived, sales have gone up." There's no need to say "thanks to the manager": the sequence does all the work. It works even better when the second event would have happened anyway.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the pharmacy, a customer says: "I took those herbal tablets, and in a week my cold was gone." The clerk nods and sells three boxes to the woman in line behind her. A cold usually goes away in a week even without tablets.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you hear "ever since... then...", ask two questions. The first: "Would it have happened anyway?" The second: "What else changed in the same period?" Then ask how, exactly, the first thing would have produced the second. If nobody can explain it, they probably just arrived one after the other.

TECHNIQUE 355

RED FLAG

The Appeal to Nature

◆ WHAT IT IS

Claiming something is good because it's natural, or bad because it's artificial. It sounds like common sense, but it doesn't hold up: hemlock and poisonous mushrooms are natural; glasses and antibiotics aren't. The word "natural" calls up an image of purity and health that switches off questions.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up as a label in place of evidence: "100% natural," "chemical-free," "the old-fashioned way." Or as a moral judgment: "It's unnatural." In both cases, the person using it doesn't have to explain why the product works, or why a behavior would be wrong: the word is enough.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the farmers market, a booth sells a supplement that's "all natural: it's not a medicine, so it can't hurt you." Mr. Fontaine, who already takes a blood thinner, buys two jars. Even an herbal extract can interfere with a medication, but the "natural" label made it seem as harmless as water.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Take away the label and see what's left. Ask: "Beyond the fact that it's natural, what evidence is there that it works and that it's safe?" Keep two counterexamples ready, one for each side: arsenic is natural, glasses aren't. And for anything that gets mixed with medications, the right question goes to your doctor or pharmacist, not to the booth.

TECHNIQUE 356

RED FLAG

The Appeal to Tradition

➤ WHAT IT IS

Defending a habit just because “that’s how it’s always been done.” The age of a practice becomes proof that it’s right, and nobody has to explain anymore whether it still works. It plays on three things: the effort of changing, the fear of the unknown, and the need to feel part of a story.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the phrases that close the discussion before it starts: “That’s how we’ve always done it here,” “Back in my day,” “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” There’s no argument against the new proposal: there’s only the weight of the years, used as a shield.

➤ EXAMPLE

Leticia, two months into her job, suggests sending invoices by email instead of printing and mailing them. Her most senior coworker replies: “We’ve been doing it this way for twenty years and we’ve never lost a single sheet.” End of discussion. Nobody has ever calculated how much paper, envelopes, and stamps cost each month.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t attack the tradition: it only makes people angry. Shift the conversation to a concrete comparison: “It’s worked, that’s true. Let’s try both methods for a month, side by side, and see which one costs less.” A trial is harder to refuse than a revolution. And remember that many injustices, once upon a time, were traditions too.

TECHNIQUE 357

RED FLAG

The False Analogy

◆ WHAT IT IS

Explaining a situation by comparing it to another that seems similar but isn't, at the point that matters. Analogies are powerful because they carry ready-made emotions and conclusions: once you accept the comparison, the brain transfers everything from one side to the other without checking.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up as a sentence that makes a conclusion seem obvious: "A company is like a family," "Changing suppliers now is like changing pilots mid-flight." The comparison takes the place of reasoning: whoever accepts it also accepts the conclusion, without noticing that the two situations have enormous differences.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the company Christmas party, the owner says: "We're a family, and in a family, when times are tough, we help each other." In January he asks everyone to work Saturday mornings without pay. Refusing feels like betraying the family. But a family doesn't lay anybody off when the numbers go bad.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Find the point where the comparison breaks down and say it out loud: "Families don't have contracts or paychecks." Then offer a more honest comparison: "We're more like a team: we work together, and the players get paid." An analogy isn't evidence: it's just one way of looking at things, and you can choose another.

TECHNIQUE 358

RED FLAG

False Equivalence

➤ WHAT IT IS

Putting two things on the same level that aren't remotely equivalent, to downplay a wrong or muddy the discussion. It's the rigged scale: something serious on one side, something minor on the other, and the claim that they weigh the same. It gives an air of balance and impartiality, and it avoids the effort of looking at proportions.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by lines like "They're all the same," "Well, you did it too...," "There's blame on both sides." You take a tiny flaw of the other person's, or an opinion with no basis, and place it next to a serious fact as if it were worth the same.

➤ EXAMPLE

The mechanic installed used parts and charged for them as new. When the customer complains, he answers: "Well, last time you paid me a week late. Nobody's perfect." For a moment the customer feels in the wrong. But a late payment and fraud on parts don't belong on the same scale.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Restore the proportions with a simple question: "Do those really seem like the same thing to you?" Acknowledge your share, if there is one, but keep it separate: "The payment was late, and I apologize. Now let's talk about the used parts." And when you hear that "the truth lies somewhere in the middle," remember that sometimes one side is simply right.

TECHNIQUE 359

The Out-of-Context Quote

◆ WHAT IT IS

Cutting a sentence out of the discussion it came from to make it say something different, sometimes the opposite. It works because almost nobody goes to check the source, and a short sentence is easier to remember and forward than an entire argument.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

You take a line, remove what came before and after, and present it as evidence. The classic case is the movie poster: the critic writes “a masterpiece... of boredom,” and the poster keeps “a masterpiece.” In today’s arguments it’s done with messages: you forward only the sentence that suits you, maybe with a cropped screenshot.

◆ EXAMPLE

In the parents’ group chat, Laura writes: “I’d do the field trip in May too, if the problem is the cost. But I still agree with the April date.” Another mom screenshots only the first sentence and sends it to the teacher: “See? Laura wants to move it too.” The next day, Laura has to explain to half the class what she meant.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a quote sounds strange or too convenient, always ask: “What came before and after it?” Go to the source: it almost always takes a minute. And if it’s your turn, respond by pasting the full text, with no comment. The context speaks for itself.

TECHNIQUE 360

RED FLAG

The Genetic Fallacy

➤ WHAT IT IS

Judging an idea by where it comes from instead of by what it says. If you like the source, the idea is good; if you don't like the source, the idea goes in the trash, whatever it contains. It's a shortcut: evaluating the origin is quick and easy, evaluating the content takes effort and expertise.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes in two versions. The negative one dismisses: "It's an idea from the previous administration, so it's wrong." The positive one promotes: "It's made in Switzerland, so it's reliable." In both, the merits are never discussed. The stamp of origin is enough.

➤ EXAMPLE

A proposal arrives at the office to hold meetings standing up, fifteen minutes maximum. Someone comments: "That's some Silicon Valley fad. No way it works for us." The proposal is shelved without even being tried. The fact that it comes from Silicon Valley says nothing about how much time it would save in that office.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Do the unsigned-envelope exercise: imagine receiving the idea without knowing who came up with it. How would you judge it? Then ask openly: "Let's leave aside where it comes from. Does it work or not? What do we need in order to find out?" A good idea can come from an unpleasant source, and a terrible one from a prestigious source.

TECHNIQUE 361

RED FLAG

Poisoning the Well

♦ WHAT IT IS

Discrediting someone before they even speak, so that everything they say will be heard with suspicion. Like poisoning a well: anyone who drinks from it will get sick. It works through confirmation bias: once they've received the negative label, listeners look in the other person's words for exactly the evidence of that label.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It arrives as a warning, often in a friendly tone, just before the other person takes the floor: "Now let's hear from Sandy. You know Sandy, she's against everything." From then on, every one of Sandy's cautions seems like obstruction, and every figure seems like an excuse.

♦ EXAMPLE

At the gym members' meeting, the president says: "Now Clara will present the finances. Remember that Clara wanted to sell the building, so take the numbers with a grain of salt." Clara presents a clean set of books, but the room listens with arms folded, and at the end someone asks who checked the math.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Expose the move as soon as you take the floor, calmly and without resentment: "I got a rather special introduction. I'm only asking you to judge the numbers: they're right here and they can be checked." A touch of irony helps show that you have nothing to fear. And when you're the one listening, ask yourself: "Is this judgment mine, or was it handed to me in advance?"

TECHNIQUE 362

RED FLAG

The Appeal to Force

➤ WHAT IT IS

Getting an idea accepted not with reasons, but with the threat, open or veiled, of unpleasant consequences. In Latin it's called *argumentum ad baculum*, "argument from the stick." When your job, your money, or your peace of mind are at risk, logic takes a back seat. The priority becomes avoiding the harm, and the fastest way to do that is to say yes.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The open form is the ultimatum. The more common form is veiled, disguised as a question or a joke: "We're all agreed, right? After all, we all care about keeping our jobs." No threat is spelled out, so it's hard to report, but the message comes through loud and clear.

➤ EXAMPLE

The department head presents the new weekend shifts and closes like this: "I assume nobody has any objections. Anyway, the temp contract renewals get decided in March." The room goes silent. Nobody discusses the shifts: everyone is thinking about the renewal.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

First of all, separate the two things, at least in your own mind: the threat doesn't make the proposal right. Then assess whether the danger is real and whether the other person really has the power to carry it out. In public, bring the threat into the open: "Are we evaluating a proposal, or is this an order?" Otherwise, put off your answer: "I need to check my commitments for March. I'll get back to you by the end of the week." If the threat is serious, immediately look for allies among your coworkers and get the new shifts confirmed in writing. When there's real danger, protecting yourself comes before being right.

TECHNIQUE 363

RED FLAG

The Gambler's Fallacy

♦ WHAT IT IS

Believing that a random event becomes more likely because it “hasn’t come up in a long time,” or less likely because it just came up. The ball, the die, and the coin have no memory: every spin starts from zero. On the evening of August 18, 1913, at the Monte Carlo casino, the roulette wheel landed on black twenty-six times in a row. With each spin, players bet bigger sums on red, convinced it had to come by now, and the house took in millions of francs.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up in gambling, with “overdue” lottery numbers, tickets that “have to hit by now,” slot machines that “are about to pay out.” But it shows up outside gambling too: the adviser who says “After three years of losses, this year the stock has to go up,” the partner convinced that after three bad deals the next one is sure to work. A past streak gets sold as a promise about the future.

♦ EXAMPLE

At a convenience store, every Saturday Gene plays 47 in the state lottery, a number that hasn’t come up in a hundred drawings. “The longer it waits, the closer it gets,” he tells the clerk. In a year he’s spent more than a thousand dollars, and 47 has exactly the same odds of coming up that it had the first week.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you hear “it’s bound to come up by now,” ask yourself whether the thing really has a memory: a coin doesn’t; a furnace that wears out does. If it’s pure chance, the past doesn’t count. And to anyone who advises you to bet on the overdue number: “The number doesn’t know how long it’s been. But I know how much I’ve already spent on it.”

TECHNIQUE 364

RED FLAG

Circular Reasoning

➤ WHAT IT IS

Proving something by using the thing itself as evidence, said in different words. Aristotle had already described it, and in Latin it's called *petitio principii*, "begging the question." The circle is hidden by the rewording, and listeners come away with the impression of having heard a complete argument.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it because the conclusion is already inside the premise. "This product is the best because it's superior to all the others," "You can trust me because I'm a reliable person," "The rule is fair because the rulebook says so." It works above all when the sentence is said with confidence and in different words from the conclusion.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a violin shop, you ask why that modern violin costs twice as much as the others on display. The salesman answers: "Because it's a higher-tier instrument." You ask what makes it higher-tier. "The fact that it's valued much higher." You've gone all the way around and you're back where you started, but the answer sounded very professional.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Try stripping away the different words and see whether the same sentence remains. Then ask for evidence that comes from outside the circle: "What woods, craftsmanship, or certifications justify this price difference?" A real reason rests on a fact that can be checked, not on the conclusion repeated in a different outfit.

TECHNIQUE 365

RED FLAG

The Slippery Slope

◆ WHAT IT IS

Blocking a proposal by claiming that a small first step will inevitably lead, step by step, to a moral catastrophe: “If we start like this, where will it end?” It doesn’t talk about practical, measurable consequences, but about decay, disgust, the loss of values: big fears, hard to take apart with data.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the chain of steps nobody proves. It starts from something small and reasonable, adds two or three increasingly grim links, and arrives at the final image, which is the one that sticks. Every link seems possible, but none is inevitable.

◆ EXAMPLE

The sixteen-year-old asks to come home at midnight instead of eleven. His father replies: “Today it’s midnight, tomorrow it’s two, then you don’t come home at all, you stop studying, and you end up hanging around with the wrong crowd.” One extra hour has become a ruined life, and the request is no longer up for discussion.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate the links and ask for evidence for each one: “Why would midnight lead to two?” Then propose a clear limit that stops the slide: “Let’s try midnight for a month. If I don’t stick to it, we go back to eleven.” A chain is frightening all together; taken link by link, it usually doesn’t hold up.

TECHNIQUE 366

The Sunk Cost

➤ WHAT IT IS

Continuing to put time, money, or energy into something that isn't working just because you've already put so much into it. Past costs are lost either way, but we hate admitting a loss and we want yesterday's choices to look right. In 1985 the psychologists Hal Arkes and Catherine Blumer observed this with theater season tickets. People who had paid full price went to the shows more often than those who had gotten them at a discount.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Anyone who wants to keep you in a deal, a course, or a project reminds you how much you've already invested: "After everything you've spent, you're going to stop now?" Every new request is presented as the way not to throw away what's already there.

➤ EXAMPLE

The body shop has just fixed the door and bumper on Jane's old compact car. Now they say the clutch needs doing too: "You've already spent so much. It would be a shame to leave it like this." Jane pays. Three months later it's the timing belt. Each repair justifies the next.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask the question from zero: "If I hadn't spent anything yet, would I buy this car, in this condition, at this price, today?" If the answer is no, what you've already spent is not a reason to spend more. Look only forward: how much it costs to continue, and what else you could do with that money.

TECHNIQUE 367

RED FLAG

Moving the Goalposts

♦ WHAT IT IS

Changing the rules after the game has started, or even after it's over: just as the other person reaches the finish line, the finish line moves further away. That way you never win, you stay in constant effort, and the person changing the rules is always the only one who decides whether the result is good enough. It's draining, because it takes away the satisfaction of arriving.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up with a "Yes, but..." that always comes after the result: "Great, you hit the target. But I meant without counting existing clients." Or with a new condition that wasn't there before. In relationships you see it in the list of flaws that never ends: fix one, and another pops up.

♦ EXAMPLE

In January, his manager promises Tim a promotion if he closes the year with a hundred contracts. In December he has a hundred and five. "Good, but now you'd also need to train the two new hires. We'll talk about it again in June." In June, another condition will turn up.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Put the rules in writing before you start: target, deadline, reward, even with a simple recap email. When the goalposts move, don't argue about the new condition: go back to the agreement. "The agreement was a hundred contracts. I did it. Let's talk about how we honor it." If it keeps happening, stop making agreements with that person, and measure your results by the yardstick agreed on at the start.

TECHNIQUE 368

RED FLAG

The Texas Sharpshooter

➤ WHAT IT IS

A Texan fires at random at the side of a barn, then paints a target around the tightest cluster of holes and declares himself a perfect shot. It's the trap of picking the data afterward, only the data that confirms the claim, and ignoring everything else. The picture looks perfect because it was drawn around the shots on purpose.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up as a series of impressive coincidences lined up in a row: three cases, five dates, four quotes. What you don't see are all the cases that don't fit, left outside the target. The neater and cleaner the picture, the more likely it was built that way.

➤ EXAMPLE

A consultant shows the owner of a coffee shop a chart: "On the days you played jazz, sales went up." There were four days, picked out of three months, and three were Saturdays. The owner buys a year's subscription to the "professional" playlist.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask to see all the shots, not just the ones in the target: "What about the other days with jazz? And the Saturdays without it?" Ask how the data was chosen, and whether the criterion was decided before looking at it or after. Be wary of stories that explain everything too neatly: reality is usually messier.

TECHNIQUE 369

RED FLAG

The Fallacy Fallacy

♦ WHAT IT IS

Concluding that a claim is false just because it was badly defended. This is a mistake too: a conclusion can be true even if the reasoning supporting it is wrong. It's often used by people who know the names of fallacies and pull them out as a weapon to end the discussion, not to improve it.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the final leap: "Your example doesn't hold up, so you're wrong." You find the weak point in the argument, take it apart, and slip in the idea that the claim collapsed along with the argument. It sounds very smart, and that's why it works.

♦ EXAMPLE

In the car on the way back from the beach, Aunt Rita says: "We should eat less sugar. Even that actress on TV says so." Her college-age nephew laughs: "Appeal to the wrong authority! So sugar has nothing to do with it." Everyone laughs, and his aunt feels stupid. But the advice to eat less sugar still stands, no matter who said it.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Concede the weak point and save the claim: "You're right, the actress wasn't the best example. But the question remains: is eating less sugar good for you or not?" Then bring a better argument. And when you're the one tempted, remember that finding a mistake in the other person's reasoning doesn't make you right yet.

TECHNIQUE 370

RED FLAG

The False Sage

• WHAT IT IS

Commenting on a conflict from above, as if you were above the fray, with profound-sounding sentences that take no position. People who do this get the image of a balanced person without risking anything and without proposing anything. Their sentences are hard to attack: who can be against “caring about each other”?

• HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the generic formulas that arrive exactly when a choice should be made: “The truth is always somewhere in the middle,” “Those are just labels,” “Everything happens for a reason.” They often come when someone has been wronged, and then they become an elegant way of saying that person’s pain is exaggerated.

• EXAMPLE

Lorraine finds out that a coworker took credit for her project in front of the general manager. She talks to her manager, who smiles: “You know, in the end it’s the team’s results that count, not whose name is on them. You have to learn to let go.” The manager comes out of it looking wise. Lorraine comes out of it with no recognition and no solution.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Bring everything back down to earth with a concrete question: “OK. In practice, what do we do?” If the other person keeps insisting on neutrality, name the specific case: “There’s no middle here: I did the project, and there are emails to prove it.” You’re entitled to your emotions even when someone finds them less than elevated.

TECHNIQUE 371

RED FLAG

Sealioning

◆ WHAT IT IS

Wearing someone down with a barrage of polite questions and endless requests for evidence, while pretending you just want to understand. The name comes from a 2014 comic strip, *Wondermark* by David Malki, in which a sea lion pesters a couple by politely asking them to justify every sentence. The goal isn't to understand: it's to wear the other person out.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The tone is always calm and reasonable, and that's exactly what makes it hard to push back on. Every answer generates a new question: "Can you give me evidence?" "And how do you know the source is reliable?" "What exactly do you mean by that word?" The person answering spends hours; the person asking spends seconds. And in the end, if you give up, "you had no evidence"; if you get angry, "you're being aggressive."

◆ EXAMPLE

After an argument, you tell your roommate: "That comment you made yesterday in front of your friends hurt me." The calm reply: "Which comment, exactly? What were the precise words? And what do you mean by 'hurt'? Can you explain why it should hurt you in particular?" Half an hour later, you're the one justifying yourself.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize that it isn't a good-faith dialogue, and that you're not obliged to answer everything. If you want, give one answer and close: "I told you what hurt me and why. I have nothing else to prove." Online, the most effective defense is also the simplest: stop responding, or block. Silence, here, isn't defeat.

TECHNIQUE 372

RED FLAG

Word Salad

➤ WHAT IT IS

A flood of confused, circular words, full of abstract concepts and big words, that never answer the question. The purpose isn't to communicate, but to confuse and wear down. It works because, faced with a speech we don't understand, almost all of us think "I'm the one who isn't getting it" instead of "this makes no sense."

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It almost always comes after a simple, uncomfortable question. The answer is long, jumps from topic to topic, uses sentences that sound profound ("things are the way they are because they can't be otherwise"), and terms borrowed from psychology or spirituality. In the end there's no yes, no no, no fact.

➤ EXAMPLE

You ask the person you're seeing why they didn't show up to dinner with your parents. The answer: "The problem is that you experience everything in a linear way, while I'm going through a phase of redefining my boundaries, and the dinner was just a symptom of a bigger imbalance between us." Ten minutes later you don't remember what you asked.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Remind yourself that this isn't a comprehension problem on your part. Ask for a simple answer: "I didn't understand. Can you tell me in one sentence?" Then repeat your original question in the same words, like a broken record: "Why weren't you at dinner last night?" If the word salad continues, close it down: "We're not getting anywhere like this. We'll talk again when you have an answer."

TECHNIQUE 373

RED FLAG

The Dog Whistle

◆ WHAT IT IS

Using code words that a specific group understands instantly, while to everyone else they sound harmless. Like a dog whistle, which makes a sound too high-pitched for the human ear. It lets you send a controversial message to your supporters without being accused of having said it.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by vague, respectable expressions that, in a certain circle, have a precise meaning: “defending our values,” “decent folks,” “the way things used to be.” The people using them can always deny it: “I said something perfectly normal.” The real recipients understood perfectly well.

◆ EXAMPLE

In a flyer for the tennis club’s board election, one candidate writes: “The club needs to go back to being a place for families like ours.” To many, it’s an affectionate line. The members who have been complaining for months about the newcomers who joined through the city’s public lessons hear something else, and vote as a bloc.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a vague phrase seems to say more than it says, ask for a translation: “What exactly does ‘families like ours’ mean? Who’s left out?” People speaking in code fear the request for clarity, because the message works only as long as it stays implicit. Asking them to say it openly is already half the defense.

TECHNIQUE 374

The Overton Window

• WHAT IT IS

At any given moment there's a "window" of ideas that the majority considers acceptable. The concept is named after Joseph Overton, an analyst at an American think tank, who described it in the 1990s. The technique consists of moving the window little by little: an unthinkable idea becomes radical, then debatable, then reasonable, then normal.

• HOW TO USE IT

The aim isn't to convince with reasons, but to get people used to it. First the idea is tossed out as a provocation, then it's talked about "just for the sake of discussion," then it's presented with pros and cons, and finally it becomes one of the options on the table. Each step seems small compared with the one before. Often an even more extreme idea is floated too, so the real one seems moderate.

• EXAMPLE

At an HOA meeting, an owner tosses out: "What if we banned dogs from the building?" General outcry. A month later: "It was a provocation, but we do need some rules." Then a draft of "new rules for pets" arrives. By spring, a ban on taking dogs in the elevator seems like a reasonable compromise, because everyone remembers the proposal for a total ban.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Look back every so often: "A year ago, would I have found this normal?" Judge ideas for what they are, not by how often you hear about them. The fact that a proposal has become familiar doesn't mean it has become right. When the fake compromise arrives, name it: "This isn't a middle ground: three months ago we weren't even talking about it."

TECHNIQUE 375

RED FLAG

The Ludic Fallacy

◆ WHAT IT IS

Treating real life as if it were a game with fixed rules and known odds, like dice or roulette. Nassim Nicholas Taleb gave it its name in his 2007 book *The Black Swan*. In games, everything can be calculated; in reality, the rules change, the data is incomplete, and events arrive that no model foresaw.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up with the air of science: numbers, charts, percentages with decimal points. The calculation is precise, but it starts from the idea that the future will behave like the past. People who use it to sell an investment or a project shift attention from the right question, “what happens if it goes badly?” to the wrong one, “how likely is it to go badly?”

◆ EXAMPLE

The financial adviser shows Frank a simulation: “Over twenty years of data, this fund has never lost more than five percent in a year. The risk is under control.” Frank puts all his cash into it, including the money for the renovation. The following year a crisis arrives that wasn’t in the twenty years of data.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Always ask: “And what if something happens that isn’t in the model?” Don’t ask yourself only how likely you are to lose, but how much you can afford to lose without getting hurt. Choose solutions that hold up even when the forecasts are wrong: margins, reserves, never everything on a single card.

CHAPTER 16

Defenses and Countermoves

Every manipulation takes two things from you: the time to think and the freedom to choose. The countermoves in this chapter are for taking them back, from the simplest ways to say no all the way to the tools for ending a relationship that hurts.

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TECHNIQUE 376

The No Without Explanations

◆ WHAT IT IS

People who want to convince you don't need your no: they need your why. Every justification you give is a foothold to be taken apart: "I don't have time" becomes "It only takes five minutes," "I don't have the money" becomes "We can do installments." The no without explanations leaves the other person nothing to work with. It's one of the basic principles of assertiveness: you can refuse without having to prove that your refusal is justified.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Say no with a short, polite, closed sentence: "No, thank you," "I'm not interested," "Not this time." No long excuses, no reasons. If the other person asks why, that's not a question, it's a door: you can answer "That's what I've decided" and stop there. The tone matters more than the words: calm, kind, without raising your voice and without lowering your eyes.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the supermarket, a sales rep stops you to offer a store card for "just two dollars a month." You say "No, thank you," and smile. The promoter insists: "But you'll save on your groceries right away!" You: "I understand. No, thank you." By the third identical no, the conversation ends on its own. If you'd said "I don't have time," the form would have been filled out in a minute, on your behalf.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you're the one getting a flat no, don't keep pressing for the reason: you'll turn it into a challenge. Accept it and leave the door open: "OK, if you change your mind, I'm here." And when you feel the need to justify yourself at length, ask yourself who you're doing it for: often it's just guilt.

TECHNIQUE 377

The 24-Hour Rule

➤ WHAT IT IS

Almost every manipulation needs just one thing: for you to decide now. Haste, strong emotion, and social pressure work only in the moment. The 24-hour rule cuts off manipulation's oxygen: no important decision gets made on the same day it's requested.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Decide in advance, with a cool head, which decisions count as important for you: money above a certain amount, signatures, long commitments, answers that change a relationship. When one of those requests arrives, your sentence is always the same: "I'll think about it and get back to you tomorrow." Don't explain, don't justify yourself. A serious offer can survive one night.

➤ EXAMPLE

A solar panel salesman offers you a huge discount "only if you sign today, because prices go up tomorrow." You tell him you'll think about it until tomorrow. He insists three times. That insistence is already the answer: people with a good offer aren't afraid of one night.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

This is already the defense. The only risk is giving in to the question "Why not right now?" You don't need a reason: "Because it's my rule. I use it for every important decision."

TECHNIQUE 378

Put It in Writing

◆ WHAT IT IS

Spoken words can always be denied, adjusted, forgotten. It's no accident that the most generous promises are almost always made out loud. Asking for an agreement to be written down turns a promise into a commitment, and makes many offers that seemed extraordinary suddenly disappear.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Every time someone promises you something that matters, a discount, a delivery, a raise, a free repair, ask calmly: "Could you put that in writing for me?" If there's nothing to sign, write it yourself: at the end of the call or the meeting, send a recap email or text ("As agreed today: delivery by Friday, assembly included"). Silence means confirmation. A correction tells you the truth before it's too late.

◆ EXAMPLE

The wedding photographer tells you, out loud, that the printed album for your parents is included in the eighteen hundred dollars, "and we'll figure out the page count later." As soon as you leave the studio, you text him: "As agreed today, photography and parents' album included, \$1,800 total." At delivery, no extra charges turn up.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone gets irritated when you ask them to put it in writing, that reaction is information: people acting in good faith have no problem putting in black and white what they just said. "That way we both have a handy reminder and nothing gets forgotten." And if they write everything down but the text differs from what they said, the text is what counts: always reread it before signing, line by line.

TECHNIQUE 379

Bring Someone with You

➤ WHAT IT IS

Many pressure tactics only work one-on-one. A second person in the room changes everything. The salesperson or manipulator can no longer say things they'll deny later, and you have someone next to you who sees the scene from the outside, without your emotions weighing on them. It's one of the simplest pieces of advice for appointments where you'll be signing something important.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

For appointments involving money or long commitments (the bank, the car dealership, the real estate agency, difficult conversations with your boss), bring a trusted person. Agree on their role beforehand: they're not there to talk, they're there to listen and take notes. Set a simple signal that means "let's step outside and talk." At the end, ask: "What did you hear?"

➤ EXAMPLE

At the bank, they offer you a "safe" investment for the family savings. You go with your sister, who doesn't say a word for half an hour. On the way out, she points out something you missed. The banker said "usually pays off" three times and never "guaranteed." The next day you ask for the prospectus with the risks in writing.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone insists on meeting you without witnesses ("it's confidential," "better just between us"), raise your guard: people with an honest offer aren't afraid of an extra pair of ears. "I'd rather have someone I trust here too. For important matters, I always do it that way." And if you're the one tagging along, stay in your role: no judgments in front of the other person, only afterward, in private.

TECHNIQUE 380

Hang Up and Call Back Yourself

◆ WHAT IT IS

Phone and text scams work because you're the one receiving the call: the caller chooses the name, the voice, even the number that appears on your screen. You flip the control with a single move: hang up and call back yourself, at a number you've found on your own. Banks have been saying it for years: no real employee asks you for codes or money transfers over the phone.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When someone calls in the name of your bank, the post office, a delivery company, or a relative and asks you for money, codes, or to hurry, say "I'll call you back" and hang up. Don't use the number the caller gives you. Find the official one on your card, on the website, or on your contract, and call it yourself, ideally from a different phone. If the request was real, you'll find it there. If it was fake, it's already over.

◆ EXAMPLE

You get a call from a "fraud prevention agent" at your bank: there's a suspicious transfer, and you need to move your savings right away to a "safe account." The number on the display is the bank's own. You say "I'll call you back," hang up, and call the number printed on the back of your debit card. No suspicious transfer, no agent: the number was spoofed.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Scammers will try to keep you from hanging up: "If you hang up, you'll lose the claim," "Stay on the line, it'll only take a few minutes." It's the clearest signal of all. An emergency that can't survive a verification call wasn't an emergency. Say "I'm going to check right now with the official number" and hang up.

TECHNIQUE 381

The Family Password

➤ WHAT IT IS

The grandparent scam, or the fake child in trouble, plays on fear and haste: “Grandma, I’ve been in an accident, I need money right away.” Today, with artificial intelligence, a voice can be imitated from short recordings taken from social media. A secret word agreed on within the family is a simple check that no impersonator knows.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

At the dinner table, calmly, pick a word or a question that only you know: the name of your first dog, a vacation spot, a funny family saying. Don’t post it on social media, and don’t use things that are easy to find online. There’s just one rule: anyone calling about a money emergency has to say it. No password, no money, no exceptions.

➤ EXAMPLE

Your mother gets a call in your brother’s voice: he’s at the police station, they need three thousand dollars for “the lawyer,” and someone will be by soon to pick it up. Your mother asks: “What’s our word?” Silence, then the line goes dead. She calls your brother on his own number: he’s at the office and knows nothing about it.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Explain the rule especially to grandparents, who are the favorite targets, and repeat it now and then. Scammers will say there’s no time, the phone is dying, nobody can know about this, and that’s exactly why the password is never skipped: “Without our word I’m not doing anything. I’ll call you back on your number.” And remind everyone that no law enforcement agency sends someone to your home to pick up money or jewelry.

TECHNIQUE 382

Ask What Happens If You Say No

◆ WHAT IT IS

Many pressure tactics live in vagueness: “You’ll regret it,” “Don’t come complaining later,” “There will be consequences.” The fear grows precisely because you don’t know of what. Calmly asking what concretely happens if you refuse forces the other person to name the threat. Often there’s no name, and the pressure deflates on its own.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you feel a push you can’t explain, ask a simple, neutral question: “If I say no, what exactly happens?” Then stay quiet and listen. If the answer is concrete and reasonable (you lose the discount, the spot goes to someone else), you can weigh it with a cool head. If it’s vague, or if the other person changes the subject, you’ve understood that the pressure was made of tone alone.

◆ EXAMPLE

Your manager asks you to stay late for the third night in a row: “You know, people who aren’t available get noticed.” You answer: “Noticed how? What happens if I leave at six tonight?” The manager hesitates: “Nothing, it was just a figure of speech.” You leave at six, and the request never comes back.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you’re the one applying pressure without realizing it, this question may come your way too: answer clearly, it’s a sign of respect. And if the answer you get is a real and serious threat (being fired, retaliation, violence), stop discussing it out loud: “I’d prefer you put that in an email.” Then write everything down and talk to people who can protect you: your union, a lawyer, the authorities.

TECHNIQUE 383

Who Says So, Exactly?

➤ WHAT IT IS

“Everybody says so,” “It’s scientifically proven,” “Doctors recommend it,” “Even the lawyer said so.” Vague sources carry the weight of a real authority, but they can’t be checked. Asking for the source’s first and last name brings the discussion back down to earth. An authority that exists can be cited; an invented one can’t.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When someone uses an authority to shut down the discussion, ask with curiosity, without a challenging tone: “Who said that, exactly?” “Where did you read it?” “Can you send me the link?” If a specific source arrives, go look at it yourself. If more vague words arrive (“but everybody knows that”), you know the weight of that claim is zero, until someone brings something concrete.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a meeting of the street’s merchants’ association, one shop owner says that “by city ordinance” all the awnings have to be replaced by the end of the year. You ask which ordinance, which section, since when. He promises to bring it to the next meeting. Two weeks later the requirement has become “it would be advisable,” and the expense is postponed.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you’re the one citing, do it properly: name, source, where to find it. It makes you more credible and protects you from people who want to tear you down. And be wary of anyone who takes offense at a question about the source: people who are right are usually happy to show it. “I’m not doubting you, but before I decide, I want to read the original text.”

TECHNIQUE 384

Lateral Reading

◆ WHAT IT IS

Faced with an unfamiliar website or post, almost everyone does the same thing: they read it from top to bottom and look at the design, the logos, the quotes. That's exactly the ground where deceivers are most skilled. Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew, at Stanford University, observed that professional fact-checkers do the opposite: they leave the page almost immediately and open other tabs, to see what the rest of the web says about that source.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before you believe a news story or share it, open a new tab and search for the name of the site, the author, or the organization, together with words like “who is,” “reviews,” “scam.” Look at what independent sources say, not the site's own “about us” page. Two minutes is enough. If nobody talks about it, or people speak badly of it, close it.

◆ EXAMPLE

An article is going around the neighborhood group: an organization “for consumer health” advises against drinking your city's tap water. You search for the organization's name in another tab: it turns out to be linked to a company that sells home water filters. The article wasn't information; it was advertising.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't trust polished design: an elegant website costs very little. And watch out for anyone who tells you “don't believe what you find out there, trust only us”: that's the first step toward locking you inside a single source. “Precisely because this matters to me, I'd rather hear more than one side.”

TECHNIQUE 385

Separate the Person from the Proposal

➤ WHAT IT IS

We say yes more easily to people we like, and salespeople know it: compliments, shared interests, jokes, a coffee on them. The psychologist Robert Cialdini, in his 1984 book *Influence*, suggests a simple defense: don't try to resist liking someone, but notice when it grows too fast, and at that point separate the person from what they're asking of you.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you catch yourself thinking "What a pleasant person" in the middle of a negotiation, take a mental pause and ask yourself: "If an unpleasant person made me this same offer, would I accept it?" Evaluate the product, the price, and the terms as if the salesperson weren't there. Liking someone is a pleasure to keep, not a reason to sign.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a trade show booth builder, the sales rep discovers you root for the same team, knows your hometown, and tells you about his grandmother. After an hour you feel like you're among friends. Before signing, you ask yourself the unpleasant-person question, and you remember that this booth costs more than the one you saw yesterday. You leave with the quote in your hand.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

This is already the defense. The risk is the opposite excess: distrusting anyone who's nice. Genuine warmth exists. The signal to watch isn't kindness, it's speed: closeness built in ten minutes in front of a contract deserves a second look. "I really enjoy talking with you: that's exactly why I'll read the quote at home."

TECHNIQUE 386

The Advice You'd Give a Friend

♦ WHAT IT IS

We're great at advising others and terrible at advising ourselves. In 2014 the psychologists Igor Grossmann and Ethan Kross called it "Solomon's paradox," after the wise king who couldn't manage his own life: people reason more wisely about a friend's problems than about the same problems in their own lives. Stepping outside yourself, even just in your imagination, restores clarity.

♦ HOW TO USE IT

When you're under pressure and can't decide, describe the situation as if it were happening to someone you care about: "A friend of mine has a coworker who always asks her to cover for him with the boss. What would I tell her?" Write down the answer, or say it out loud. Then reread it and ask yourself why it shouldn't apply to you too.

♦ EXAMPLE

Your brother-in-law asks you for the third time for a loan "until the end of the month," and the first two never came back. You can't bring yourself to say no. You ask yourself: "If a friend told me this story, what would I advise?" The answer comes right away: "No more money until the first loans come back." On the phone, you say it in almost the same words.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Manipulators try to keep you inside the emotion of the moment, in a hurry, with no room to look at yourself from the outside. When someone keeps telling you "Don't overthink it," that's the right moment for this exercise: "Before I give you an answer, I want to talk it over calmly at home." And if the advice you'd give a friend makes you uncomfortable, it's probably the right advice.

TECHNIQUE 387

Go to the Balcony

➤ WHAT IT IS

In a confrontation, the first instinct is to react: hit back blow for blow, give in to end the tension, or blow everything up. William Ury, a co-founder of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard, in his 1991 book *Getting Past No*, calls the countermove “going to the balcony”: imagining you climb onto a balcony above the scene and watch the discussion from above, like a game being played by others.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you feel you’re about to react, buy time with a neutral sentence: “Let me make sure I understand,” “Let me sum up what you said.” Meanwhile, inside, go up to the balcony: What is the other person doing? What do they want to get? And what do I want to get? If you need more space, ask for a real break: a coffee, a phone call, a short walk. Go back to the table only when you’re watching the scene instead of being swept along by it.

➤ EXAMPLE

In the negotiation over the lease for the store, the landlord raises his voice: “Either you sign today or I give it to someone else.” You feel your voice starting to shake and the urge to snap back. You say: “Give me ten minutes. I need to make a call.” Outside, on the sidewalk, you see the whole scene. The space has been vacant for eight months, and there are no other bidders. You go back in and propose your price calmly.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Manipulators turn up the heat precisely so you can’t go up to the balcony. If someone denies you a break (“What do you need that for?”), take it anyway: “I need it to think clearly. I’ll be back in ten minutes.” A good offer stays good after ten minutes.

TECHNIQUE 388

The Workable Compromise

◆ WHAT IT IS

Not every argument has to be won. When what's at stake isn't your self-respect but only a practical interest, the strongest move is often an agreement that leaves something for both of you. In assertiveness training it's called the workable compromise, and it sits alongside the techniques for saying no.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

First ask yourself: is my dignity at stake here, or just time, money, convenience? If it's your dignity, no compromise. If it's the rest, propose a middle-ground solution yourself, specific and concrete: "Not this week, but I can give you an hour on Thursday," "Not the full price, but half, yes." Propose it calmly, just once, and leave the choice to the other person: accept it or go without.

◆ EXAMPLE

A coworker asks you for the fourth time to cover her Saturday shift. A flat no would cost you a relationship that otherwise works. You answer: "Not this Saturday. We can swap: I'll take your Saturday, and you take my Friday night." The coworker thinks about it and agrees. The favor is no longer one-way.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Manipulators pass off surrender in installments as compromise: "Come on, meet me halfway," while always taking three-quarters. A real compromise leaves something for both sides and never touches your core limits. If every agreement always ends up on the same side, you're not negotiating: you're giving in. "Last time I was the one who gave in. This time it's your turn."

TECHNIQUE 389

Admit the Mistake, and Only That

✦ WHAT IT IS

Manipulators love your real mistakes: they use them to stretch the blame over everything you are. Negative assertion, a classic technique of assertiveness training, teaches you to acknowledge a real mistake calmly, without drama and without punishing yourself, and not to let it become a trial of your whole person.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

When you really get something wrong, say it in one sentence: “You’re right, I forgot to send the quote.” If needed, add the fix: “I’ll send it within the hour.” Then stop. Don’t add “I’m a mess,” don’t list excuses, don’t accept the expansion: if the other person goes from “you forgot the quote” to “you can never be trusted,” go back to the fact: “I forgot that quote. That, not everything.”

✦ EXAMPLE

At the office, your manager points out that the report has an error in the totals. You answer: “That’s true, I got the formula wrong. I’ll fix it this morning.” Your manager tries to go further: “That’s the second time this month.” You: “Yes. I’ll fix the template too, so it doesn’t happen again.” The conversation ends there, and what’s left of that morning is mostly the solution.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you receive an admission this clean, accept it: pushing after a clear apology puts you in the wrong. And if someone always admits everything promptly but never changes anything, look at the facts: an admission without a fix becomes just a formula. “I appreciate you acknowledging it, but now I need to understand how we keep it from happening again.”

TECHNIQUE 390

Ask for Specific Criticism

◆ WHAT IT IS

The hardest criticisms to handle are the vague ones: “This isn’t working,” “You have a bad attitude,” “You always do that.” Negative inquiry, a third technique of assertiveness training, consists of calmly and curiously asking for the criticism to be made concrete. If the criticism is valid, you find out what to fix. If it was just an attack, the person making it finds nothing to hold on to.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Instead of defending yourself, ask questions: “What exactly about my attitude bothers you?” “Can you give me an example of when it happened?” “What would you like me to do differently?” A curious tone, never sarcastic. Let the other person answer fully, and keep asking until the criticism becomes a specific fact, or dissolves on its own.

◆ EXAMPLE

Your neighbor stops you on the stairs: “You people on the second floor always make a ton of noise.” You ask: “Can you tell me when, roughly what time?” “Well, Tuesday night.” “Around what time on Tuesday?” “Around eleven. The washing machine on spin cycle.” Now there’s a real, small problem: you move laundry to the afternoon. The “always” has disappeared.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone asks you questions like these while you’re criticizing them, don’t feel interrogated: it’s your chance to be truly understood. Prepare your examples before you criticize. And if the person attacking you keeps staying vague, close calmly: “When you have a specific example, I’ll be glad to talk about it.”

TECHNIQUE 391

The “How?” Question

➤ WHAT IT IS

Saying no to an absurd request often sparks a fight. Chris Voss, for years an FBI hostage negotiator, in his 2016 book *Never Split the Difference*, proposes an alternative: calibrated questions, which begin with “How” or “What.” The most famous is “How am I supposed to...?”: a no that doesn’t sound like a no, and that forces the other person to look at the problem from your side.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

When you receive an impossible request, don’t refuse and don’t give in: ask the other person to help you solve it. “How am I supposed to deliver on Friday if the materials arrive Thursday night?” “What should I cut to stay within that budget?” A calm tone, never sarcastic. Then stay quiet. The other person has to look for an answer, and in looking for it, they discover the limits of their own request.

➤ EXAMPLE

A client asks you to knock a thousand dollars off your estimate for the electrical work. Instead of saying no, you ask: “How can I do that without dropping the inspections you need for your certificate of occupancy?” The client thinks it over and changes the request: “Then let me pay in two installments.” That works perfectly for you.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone answers every request of yours with “How am I supposed to do that?” don’t take on their problem: offer a single solution and then send the question back: “How do you see it?” And if the question comes every time, even on easy things, it’s no longer negotiation: it’s a way of never saying yes.

TECHNIQUE 392

Name the Tactic

◆ WHAT IT IS

Many unfair tactics work only as long as nobody sees them: fake urgency, good cop and bad cop, the offer that changes at the last minute. Roger Fisher and William Ury, in their 1981 book *Getting to Yes*, advise recognizing the tactic, naming it out loud calmly, and then negotiating the rules of the game, even before the substance.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

When you recognize a tactic, name it without accusing the person, as a simple observation: “I’m sensing a lot of urgency to close today. Why is that?” “I get the feeling we’re playing good cop, bad cop.” Then propose a rule: “I make decisions without artificial deadlines. If the offer is good today, it will be good on Monday too.” Keep the tone light; sometimes a smile is enough.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the travel agency where you’re booking your honeymoon, two agents take turns: one sympathetic, who “would love to throw in the excursion for free,” and a stern colleague, who “can’t take a single dollar off the package.” On the third switch, you say with a smile: “This feels like good cop, bad cop. Shall we go over the numbers all three of us together?” They laugh, and the negotiation goes back to normal.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone names one of your tactics, don’t deny it: smile, admit it (“You’re right, let’s talk about the numbers directly”), and return to the table on honest terms. And when you’re the one naming it, do it only once: repeating it with every sentence becomes an accusation and breaks off the negotiation.

TECHNIQUE 393

The Exit Test

➤ WHAT IT IS

Before entering a contract, a subscription, or an agreement, checking how much it costs to get out: if you get in with one click and get out with a certified letter, the imbalance is already an alarm. In 2018 the Nobel economist Richard Thaler, in an article in the journal *Science*, used the word *sludge* for the collection of obstacles, forms, and waiting deliberately designed to keep people from canceling or claiming a refund. It's the dark twin of the nudge.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Do the emergency-exit test before you sign, not when you already want out. Look in the contract or on the website for “cancellation” or “termination” and count the steps required. They should be as simple as the ones for signing up. If you're the one offering a service to customers, make the exit clear and quick. People who know they can leave without traps sign up more willingly.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a gym in Columbus, they offer Duncan a membership that activates on a tablet in thirty seconds. Before signing, Duncan asks how to cancel. It takes a certified letter with return receipt sixty days before the annual renewal, plus a penalty fee. Duncan says thanks and chooses the month-to-month plan.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you're told out loud “you can cancel anytime,” don't stop at the words: check the real procedure right away. Ask the question before you hand over your card or your signature: “If it activates with one click on my phone, I want to see where I click to cancel it, and if I can't do it the same way, I'm not signing up.”

TECHNIQUE 394

The Ulysses Contract

◆ WHAT IT IS

In the *Odyssey*, Ulysses wants to hear the sirens' song without being shipwrecked. He knows that, in that moment, he won't be able to resist. So he has himself tied to the ship's mast and orders his crew not to untie him, no matter what he says. Psychologists and economists call this gesture "precommitment": deciding with a cool head and making it hard to change your mind in the heat of the moment.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Identify the situations in which you know you'll give in: sales, dinners with the friend who always talks you into things, door-to-door salespeople, betting apps. Before going into them, tie yourself to the mast: bring only the cash you want to spend, leave your card at home, set a departure time with someone who'll call you, turn on spending limits in the app. Make the wrong choice inconvenient before temptation arrives.

◆ EXAMPLE

You go to the home furnishings show "just to look." You know how it ends: last year you signed up for a sofa you didn't need. This time you leave your debit card at home and bring twenty dollars for parking and coffee. At the fourth booth with a "show special, today only," the decision has already been made. You can't put down a deposit even if you want to.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Salespeople know these ties and try to undo them: "Don't worry, you can leave the deposit next time. Just sign for now." Your rule applies to signatures too: "Today I'm only here to get information. I don't sign anything the same day." And don't tie yourself to impossible rules: a commitment that's too rigid snaps at the first tug.

TECHNIQUE 395

Franklin's Algebra

➤ WHAT IT IS

Anyone who wants you to decide quickly puts a single reason in front of you, big and emotional, and hopes you won't look at the others. In 1772 Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to his friend the scientist Joseph Priestley, described his method for difficult choices and called it "moral algebra": one sheet of paper, two columns, a few days' time.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Divide a sheet of paper in two: on one side the reasons for yes, on the other the reasons for no. Leave it where you can see it for a couple of days and add reasons as they come to you. Then weigh them: when a reason for yes is worth as much as a reason for no, cross them both out. If one reason is worth as much as two from the other column, cross out three lines. At the end, look at what's left.

➤ EXAMPLE

You're offered a job in Denver, with a higher salary, and they want an answer by Friday. Under yes you write the salary and the growth. Under no, the move, the kids changing schools, the higher rent, the fixed-term contract. By Wednesday the no side weighs more, and before answering you ask for a longer contract.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

This is already the defense. If someone discourages you ("There's nothing to think about, it's obvious"), get out the sheet of paper anyway: "It's an important choice. I want to think it through calmly." A good offer isn't afraid of two columns. And if the no column is hard to fill, ask a trusted person for help. The reasons against are easier to see for someone who hasn't already decided.

TECHNIQUE 396

Consider the Opposite

◆ WHAT IT IS

When we like an idea, we look only for the evidence that confirms it. People who want to convince us know it, and offer us exactly that. In 2000 the psychologists Thomas Mussweiler, Fritz Strack, and Tim Pfeiffer, in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, showed that asking car experts to list reasons why the seller's price might be wrong sharply reduced the pull of the first offer, compared with experts who skipped the exercise.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Before deciding on something that strongly convinces you, stop and do the reverse exercise: "What are the three strongest reasons I might be wrong?" Actually write them down. Then look for at least one fact or opinion that goes against your idea. If the choice holds up, you make it with more peace of mind. If it doesn't, you've just avoided a mistake.

◆ EXAMPLE

An acquaintance suggests you take over a laundromat franchise in a shopping mall: automatic revenue, zero employees, "it pays for itself." You like the idea. You stop and write down the reasons against. The mall's rent is sky-high, the machines are eight years old, the seller is in a hurry to sell. You ask for the financial statements for the last two years. The answer is vague.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anyone who wants to convince you at all costs will try to discourage you from doing the exercise: "If you think negatively, you'll never make it." That's exactly the signal: "If the deal is solid, a couple of uncomfortable questions won't scare it." Considering the opposite isn't pessimism: it's looking at the whole room, not just the lit corner.

TECHNIQUE 397

The Mental Vaccine

➤ WHAT IT IS

A vaccine exposes the body to a weakened version of the virus, so it's ready when the real one arrives. In the 1960s the psychologist William McGuire showed that something similar happens with ideas: people who are first exposed to a weak attack on their beliefs, along with the counterargument, hold up better against strong persuasion later on. He called it inoculation theory.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before someone you care about runs into a manipulation, show them how it works on a small scale: "They'll call saying it's the bank, they'll tell you it's urgent, they'll ask you for the code. You answer like this." It works on you too: before a meeting or a negotiation, rehearse the objections they'll raise and your answers. When they really come, you'll recognize them instantly.

➤ EXAMPLE

Your fourteen-year-old son has just set up a social media account. Instead of forbidding it, at dinner you show him three typical scam and grooming messages: the free gift, the adult pretending to be his age, the request for photos "just between us." Two months later he's the one showing you a message: "Look, it's one of those."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

The vaccine works if the dose is mild and comes with the response: frightening people with extreme stories paralyzes them; it doesn't protect them. And watch out for people who use the vaccine in reverse: "They'll tell you we're a cult. They always say that." That's a vaccine too, but its purpose is to keep you from listening to real criticism. "I'll hear what they say and think it through for myself."

TECHNIQUE 398

The Short, Firm Answer

➤ WHAT IT IS

With hostile people, every long message is fuel: every extra sentence is a foothold for replying, insulting, escalating. Bill Eddy, an American lawyer and mediator who specializes in the most heated conflicts, developed the BIFF response: brief, informative, friendly, and firm. It's meant for emails and texts with exes, difficult relatives, aggressive coworkers.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Before you answer a provocative message, keep only four things: a polite greeting, the necessary information, a proposal if needed, and the closing. Cut everything else: the defenses, the sarcasm, the explanations about the past, the unsolicited advice. Reread and cut again. Answer what needs answering, not everything that's written.

➤ EXAMPLE

Your ex writes you ten lines of accusations and, at the bottom, asks whether he can pick up the kids at ten instead of nine on Saturday. You reply: "Hi, ten on Saturday works. The kids will be ready with their backpacks. Have a good day." No response to the accusations. There's nothing to grab on to, and the fight doesn't start.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If you get a reply like this and it seems cold, don't read it as an attack: it's a door closed on the fight, not on the person. And don't use it with everyone: with people who love you, short, dry messages can hurt. It's a tool for conflicts, not for healthy relationships. And if someone looking for a fight accuses you of being cold: "I just wanted to give you the information clearly."

TECHNIQUE 399

The Boundary with a Consequence

➤ WHAT IT IS

A boundary without a consequence is just a wish. If you say “Don’t yell at me” and then stay and listen to the yelling, the other person learns that your boundary can be crossed for free. A real boundary has two parts: what you won’t accept, and what you, not the other person, will do if it happens again. It’s one of the principles on which assertiveness and the psychology of relationships agree most.

➤ HOW TO USE IT

Choose a specific behavior and a consequence that depends only on you and that you’re able to follow through on: “If you raise your voice, I’ll leave the room and we’ll talk later,” “If you’re half an hour late, I’ll order without waiting for you.” Say it once, calmly, without threats. Then, the first time it happens, do exactly what you said. Without commentary.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the dinner table, your mother comments on your weight every time. At a calm moment you tell her: “If you bring it up again, I’m going to get up and go home.” The following Sunday, the comment comes during the first course. You get up, say goodbye politely, and leave. The Sunday after that, the comment doesn’t come.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

People used to crossing your boundaries will raise the stakes to see whether you give in: scolding, insults, self-pity. That’s normal, and it’s the moment when staying consistent matters. And distinguish a boundary from control: “If you go out with your friends, I’m leaving” doesn’t protect you; it decides for the other person. If someone uses that on you: “I don’t tell you whom to see, and I ask you for the same respect.”

TECHNIQUE 400

No Contact

✦ WHAT IT IS

With some people, every conversation is a trap: every word you say gets twisted, every kindness gets used against you. When the other defenses have failed, in relationships involving psychological abuse, the people who work in this field often point to a clear-cut way out: cutting off all contact. No calls, no texts, no social media, no news passed along through other people.

✦ HOW TO USE IT

Decide with a cool head, ideally with the help of a trusted person or a professional. Block their number, social media, and email. Let mutual acquaintances know that you don't want to receive news or relayed messages. Prepare a sentence for anyone who insists: "I've closed that door, and I'm not discussing it." If there are children or legal obligations, switch to minimal contact: a single written channel, only for what's necessary, through a lawyer if needed.

✦ EXAMPLE

After years of friendship with someone who humiliates you and then showers you with apologies, you decide to end it. You block their number and profiles. After a week, a mutual friend writes to you: "She's in a terrible state. Call her." You answer: "I'm sorry. I've closed that door, and I'm not discussing it." The first month is very hard. By the second, you notice you're sleeping better.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Expect attempts to reel you back in: sweet messages, fake emergencies, gifts, friends sent as messengers. They're the sign that no contact is working: don't answer, not even to say "leave me alone." If threats or stalking behavior arrive, keep everything and go to the police: in the United States, stalking is a crime in every state.

PART V

DOMINION OVER THE MIND

- CHAPTER 17 Emotional and Relational Manipulation
- CHAPTER 18 Money and Intimacy: Recognizing Control
- CHAPTER 19 The Masks: Fakes in Relationships and at Work
- CHAPTER 20 Traps of Debate and Rhetoric

CHAPTER 17

Emotional and Relational Manipulation

The techniques in this chapter are used on the people closest to us: partners, parents, children, friends, coworkers. They work precisely because there's a bond, and the bond makes them hard to see. Here you'll learn to recognize them as they happen and to defend yourself without losing what matters.

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TECHNIQUE 401

RED FLAG

The Humiliating Comparison

♦ WHAT IT IS

Constantly comparing someone to other people, real or invented, always to their disadvantage. Comparing ourselves with others is a natural habit of the mind: a manipulator turns it into a weapon. The goal isn't to spur the other person on, but to make them feel forever one step behind, and so forever looking for approval.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes in sentences that start with a name and end with a verdict: "Did you see Greg's wife? Always so put together," "At your age, your cousin had already bought a house." The comparison is chosen with care. It hits exactly the spot where you feel most fragile. And as soon as you catch up with the model, the model changes.

♦ EXAMPLE

Rick tells his wife, Connie, about a coworker "who gets everything done at the office in half the time." The next week it's his sister's turn, "who has two kids and still finds time for the gym." Connie starts doing more, without ever feeling good enough. After a few months, she asks Rick whether she's doing something right before she's even started.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't enter the race, and don't answer with a comparison of your own: that puts you on their turf. Calmly reject the comparison itself: "I'm not interested in how Greg's wife does things. If something's bothering you, let's talk about it between us." Then keep count of how often it happens. One comparison is an opinion; ten are a system.

TECHNIQUE 402

RED FLAG

The Child Who Parents the Parent

➤ WHAT IT IS

A role reversal in which a parent, or later a partner, comes across as so fragile, needy, or inconsolable that the other person is forced to mother or father them. In 1973, the psychiatrist Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Geraldine Spark, in their book *Invisible Loyalties*, gave this process a name, *parentification*. The one doing the caregiving learns early that their own needs have no place, because the whole room is taken up by the other person's fragility.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It doesn't use orders or threats. It uses sighs, inappropriate confidences, and emotional breakdowns: "You're the only one who keeps me going," "I don't know what I'd do without you. You have to be patient with me." Every time the child or partner admits to being tired or asks for support, the other person immediately gets worse, and the comforter's role lands right back where it always was.

➤ EXAMPLE

At twenty-six, Lauren, a nurse in Dayton, spends every evening on the phone calming down her mother, who has been unloading her worries about money and loneliness on Lauren since Lauren was a little girl. The day Lauren has a high fever and doesn't call, she gets a text: "Now you've left me alone too."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Handing the other person back their role as an adult isn't abandoning them: it's putting down a weight that doesn't belong to you. Acknowledge the love, but turn down the role of their only crutch, gently and firmly: "I love you and I'm here for you, but this is more than I can carry for you. You need more help than mine. Today I need to rest too."

TECHNIQUE 403

RED FLAG

False Existential Guilt

◆ WHAT IT IS

Making someone feel guilty not for something they've done, but for who they are or what they have: their happiness, their success, their peace of mind. There's no mistake to make right, so the guilt can never be settled. And anyone who feels guilty for being happy gradually stops being happy in front of the person who holds it against them.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up as a moral or wistful remark, always timed to one of your joys: "Must be nice to afford a vacation," "Good for you. I'll just stay here." It doesn't accuse you of anything specific. It makes you feel out of place for something good.

◆ EXAMPLE

Barbara gets a promotion and shares the news at dinner. Her husband, Brian, looks at her and sighs: "Great, so I'll see you even less. But don't think about me. Enjoy it." Barbara spends the evening reassuring him, and the promotion, instead of a celebration, becomes something she has to be forgiven for.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the move: you haven't done anything wrong, so there's nothing to apologize for. Don't justify yourself, and don't shrink your joy to make it acceptable. You can answer calmly: "To me, this is good news. If you're worried about how much time we'll have together, let's find a solution." That moves the conversation from a guilt that doesn't exist to a practical problem that can be solved.

TECHNIQUE 404

RED FLAG

The False Martyr

➤ WHAT IT IS

Bringing up personal sacrifices over and over, often ones nobody asked for or blown out of proportion, to turn them into a debt to be collected. Sacrifice has an aura of sainthood: anyone who questions it looks ungrateful. That's why it works so well in families, where the debt is never paid off.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Lines like "I gave up everything for you" or "I never once thought about myself, it was all for you," pulled out exactly when the other person makes a decision they don't like. The sacrifice isn't brought up out of love, but as a price: in exchange, obedience is expected.

➤ EXAMPLE

Matt tells his parents he's found a job in Chicago. His mother gets up from the table: "I quit my job to raise you, and now you're abandoning me like this." For months, Matt puts off the move. Every time he tries again, the sacrifice comes back, bigger than before.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate gratitude from obedience: you can acknowledge what the other person did without paying for it with your choices. "Thank you for everything, truly. But this decision is about my life." A real gift isn't thrown back in your face: if it's used as a lever, it was a loan nobody asked you to sign. Be prepared for someone to call you ungrateful: that's the price of your freedom, not proof that you did something wrong.

TECHNIQUE 405

RED FLAG

Fake Vulnerability

◆ WHAT IT IS

Telling a sad story early on, true or inflated, to stir the other person's compassion and lower their defenses. When we're in front of someone who's suffering, we stop seeing a danger and see someone to protect. From then on, every bad behavior gets read through that wound: "They don't mean it. They're hurting."

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Early on, when you're just getting to know each other, very intimate and very painful confidences come out, often with the same conclusion: "Everyone has hurt me." Later the story comes back as an excuse: after a show of disrespect, the hard past becomes the justification for the present.

◆ EXAMPLE

On their second date, Stephanie tells Dan she's been cheated on in every relationship she's ever had. Dan is moved and wants to be the one who's different. When, a few months later, Stephanie goes through his phone and insults him, the explanation is ready: "I'm sorry, it's because of what I've been through." Dan forgives her, and the next time he forgives her again.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Keep compassion and responsibility apart: a hard past explains; it doesn't excuse. You can feel tenderness for the wound and still ask for respect today: "I'm sorry for what you went through, but it doesn't excuse the way you talk to me now." Weigh the present more than the stories about the past: how does this person treat you today? And remember that healing someone isn't your job: if there are wounds, they call for a professional and a choice on the other person's part, not your sacrifice.

TECHNIQUE 406

RED FLAG

Weaponized Incompetence

➤ WHAT IT IS

Pretending to be incapable of simple tasks, or doing them badly on purpose, so that the other person takes them over. Sooner or later, the more responsible one says the line the manipulator has been waiting for: “Never mind, I’ll do it.” From that moment, the task has a new owner, and so does the work of remembering it.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes with lines that sound like compliments: “You’re so much better at this stuff than I am,” “I’m hopeless with paperwork.” When the task does get done, it’s done so badly that nobody wants to ask again. And it only happens with boring tasks: when it comes to things they care about, the same person is highly capable.

➤ EXAMPLE

Claire asks her partner, Victor, to take care of the laundry. The first time around, Victor throws the whites in with the colors and ruins two sweaters: “I told you I’m no good at this.” At the office, the same Victor runs incredibly complicated spreadsheets without getting a single cell wrong.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t step in. Explain once, maybe in writing, then leave the task where it is, accepting that it’ll be done worse than you’d do it. Let the natural consequences arrive: the badly ironed shirt, the bill paid late. And make the agreement explicit: “From now on, the laundry is yours. If you have a question, ask me, but I’m not doing it for you.”

TECHNIQUE 407

RED FLAG

The Fake Apology

➤ WHAT IT IS

An apology that has the form but not the substance: it says “I’m sorry” without admitting anything. It serves to close the discussion and get forgiveness without paying the price. In fact, it often shifts the blame onto the person receiving it.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes in three typical forms. The conditional one: “I’m sorry if what I said upset you.” The blaming one: “Sorry, but you provoked me too.” The minimizing one: “Come on, I was kidding. I didn’t think you’d take it so hard.” All three are missing the essential part: “I was wrong, and I won’t do it again.”

➤ EXAMPLE

During Christmas dinner, Phil makes fun of his sister Anna in front of everyone for her string of temp jobs. Later, in the kitchen: “I’m sorry if you got upset. You know that’s just how I am.” Anna accepts, and the tension eases. At Easter, the scene repeats, word for word.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t accept “I’m sorry” as if it settled the matter. You can respond without raising your voice: “I don’t need to know you’re sorry about how I feel. I need you to acknowledge what you said.” A real apology has three parts: what I did, why it hurt you, what will change. If one is missing, you can say thank you and still not consider the conversation over.

TECHNIQUE 408

RED FLAG

Projection

➤ WHAT IT IS

Attributing one's own flaws, intentions, or behavior to someone else. People who lie accuse others of lying; people who cheat become obsessed with other people cheating. The concept comes from Freud, who described it as a defense mechanism: instead of facing a part of themselves they can't accept, the person sees it outside, on someone else.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Accusations that strike you as absurd, because they're nothing like you, but that describe the accuser precisely. They often come out of nowhere, without a concrete fact, and force you to spend your time defending yourself. And while you're defending yourself, nobody talks about what the other person did anymore.

➤ EXAMPLE

For a few weeks now, Pamela has been coming home late and taking calls in another room. One evening, the moment her husband, Ethan, picks up his phone, Pamela explodes: "Who are you texting? I don't even recognize you anymore. You're hiding something." Ethan spends the evening showing her his messages, one by one.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When an accusation doesn't describe you but perfectly describes the person making it, stop before you defend yourself. Don't accept the label, and don't step into the trial: answer once, calmly, and go back to the facts. "No, I'm not hiding anything. Actually, let's talk about where you were last night." People who project are looking for a defendant: that role isn't yours.

TECHNIQUE 409

RED FLAG

Baiting

◆ WHAT IT IS

Deliberately provoking someone, hitting their weak spot, to make them lose their temper. Then using their reaction as proof: “See how you are? There’s no talking to you.” It’s called baiting, as in putting bait on a hook. Onlookers remember the yelling, not the subtle dig that caused it: that’s how the person who provoked it ends up looking like the victim.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Quiet, sarcastic comments about a subject the provoker knows is painful for you, often in front of witnesses. If you react, the other person’s calm suddenly becomes perfect. Texting works the same way: ten provocations, then a screenshot of your one angry reply.

◆ EXAMPLE

At dinner at some friends’ house, Jason makes a joke about the weight of his partner, Megan, who has been struggling with her diet for months. Megan turns red and snaps back, loudly. Jason spreads his hands and smiles at the others: “See? It takes nothing.” On the drive home, the friends’ comments are all about Megan being “on edge.”

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Learn to recognize the bait before you bite: when you feel the urge to fire back, ask yourself who gains from your reaction. Answer briefly and neutrally, or don’t answer at all: “I’d rather not talk about this here.” If you feel you’re about to explode, leave the room. You don’t have to win the exchange: you just have to not give the other person the scene they’re after.

TECHNIQUE 410

RED FLAG

The Silent Treatment

➤ WHAT IT IS

Refusing to speak to someone to punish them. Unlike a break to cool down, which has a time limit and an explanation, this silence has no expiration date and is meant to make the other person feel guilty until they come begging. In 2003, Naomi Eisenberger, Matthew Lieberman, and Kipling Williams used brain imaging (fMRI) to observe that social exclusion activates brain areas that are also involved in physical pain: being ignored really does hurt.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

After a disagreement, the other person stops answering you, looking at you, saying hello. The mood at home turns icy for days. They don't say what's wrong: you have to guess. The silence ends only when you apologize, often for something you don't even know you did.

➤ EXAMPLE

John skips dinner at his mother-in-law's because he has a fever. For four days, his wife, Linda, doesn't say a word to him: plates set on the table without a greeting, doors closed quietly. On the fifth day, John apologizes "for everything." Linda is nice again, and John has learned his lesson: next time, he'll go even with a fever.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't beg: every apology without a reason teaches the other person that silence works. Say it once, calmly: "Whenever you want to talk about it, I'm here." Then go on with your day: go out, call someone who makes you feel good, do your own things. When the silence ends, set a boundary: "Problems get solved by talking. If this happens again, I won't wait for days."

TECHNIQUE 411

RED FLAG

Silent Sabotage

◆ WHAT IT IS

Secretly undermining another person's plans and successes while keeping up the outward appearance of supporting them. The sabotage is done in a way that can't be proven. The failure looks like bad luck, or the fault of the person on the receiving end. It often grows out of envy or fear that the other person will become too independent.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the timing more than the actions. A fight that breaks out the night before an exam, sweets in the house right in the middle of a diet, the alarm clock "forgotten" on the day of a job interview. Taken alone, each episode is innocent. Lined up, the episodes form a pattern.

◆ EXAMPLE

Hannah has been studying for months for the civil service exam for a job with the city. The night before, the mother she lives with brings up an old family grievance, and the argument goes on until one in the morning. Hannah shows up to the exam without having slept. When she gets home, her mother comforts her: "Poor thing, what bad luck."

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Look for the pattern: one setback is chance; three setbacks, always right before your big days, are a signal. Stop sharing deadlines and goals with people who seem to be working against you: work quietly and tell people once it's done. Protect the days that count: the night before an exam, you can even sleep somewhere else. And if a fight starts: "I need to sleep now. We'll talk tomorrow." And surround yourself with people who are rooting for you.

TECHNIQUE 412

RED FLAG

The Loyalty Test

➤ WHAT IT IS

Asking the other person to “prove” their love or loyalty with tests that cost more and more: giving up a friendship, lying, surrendering a piece of their freedom. Each test passed brings not peace but a new test, a little harder. It’s training in saying yes.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It almost always takes the form “If you really loved me...” or “If you’ve got nothing to hide...” The request touches a boundary you normally wouldn’t give up: a friendship, your privacy, your values. And saying no is presented as proof of betrayal.

➤ EXAMPLE

Nick asks his partner, Natalie, to stop seeing Debbie, her best friend: “If you care about me, you’ll do it. You know I don’t like her.” Natalie gives in. Two months later, the request is her phone password. Then it’s a lie to tell Nick’s boss, to cover for him.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the structure: a request that makes you uncomfortable and that the other person frames as a test of love. People who trust you don’t need constant proof. Answer by separating affection from the request: “How I feel about you isn’t in question; but I’m not giving up my friends.” Then hold your ground: giving in to the first test doesn’t settle the matter, it starts the series.

TECHNIQUE 413

RED FLAG

The False Need for Protection

◆ WHAT IT IS

Posing as the protector against an exaggerated or invented danger, in order to isolate the other person and make them dependent. Feeling protected is pleasant, which is why control passes for care. But the danger has often been inflated by the very person offering the protection: it's the antidote to a poison planted by the same hand.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

"It's not that I don't trust you, it's other people I don't trust," "The world is full of bad people. Here with me, you're safe." The protection always takes something away: a night out, a trip, a friendship, a job. In closed groups the logic is the same: the world outside is dangerous; only inside are you safe.

◆ EXAMPLE

Carol's son, seventeen, wants to go on the class trip to New York. Carol says no: "With everything going on, I wouldn't sleep at night." The same no comes for summer camp, for his learner's permit, for the concert in Chicago. At nineteen, the boy has never spent a night away from home, and now he's afraid to.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself whether that protection is growing your independence or your fear: real care makes you stronger; control makes you more dependent. Assess the danger together with someone outside the situation. Calmly assert your own judgment: "I understand you're worried, but I can weigh the risks for myself." And don't let anyone get between you and the people who support you.

TECHNIQUE 414

RED FLAG

Testing the Waters

➤ WHAT IT IS

Introducing inappropriate behavior in small doses, disguised as a joke, to see how the other person reacts. If no clear no comes, the manipulator reads the silence as permission and pushes one step further. There's always an escape route ready: "I was just kidding."

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

An out-of-line joke, a comment about your family made with a laugh, a touch "by accident." Each episode on its own seems small, and objecting seems like an overreaction. The signal is the direction: after each silence, the next time the line is a little further out.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the office, a coworker makes a suggestive joke to Melissa about her dress. Melissa smiles out of embarrassment and changes the subject. The next week, the comment is cruder; then comes a hand on her shoulder that stays there too long. When Melissa finally objects, the coworker laughs: "Oh, come on, you're so touchy. I was joking."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Set the boundary at the first test, while it's still easy: that's where the direction gets decided. Don't laugh to be polite, and don't pretend nothing happened. A few words are enough, no scene needed: "That joke isn't funny to me." If the joke comes back as an excuse, don't let it slide: "Maybe, but don't do it again." At work, write down dates and exact words, and talk to someone who can step in.

TECHNIQUE 415

RED FLAG

Love Bombing

◆ WHAT IT IS

Flooding someone, at the start of a relationship, with attention, compliments, gifts, and plans for the future, at an abnormal speed. The name is meant literally: affection dropped like bombs. The goal is to create in a few weeks a bond that usually takes months, and with it a dependence. When the affection is withdrawn, the person who received it will do anything to get it back.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Sweeping declarations in the very first weeks: “I’ve never felt anything like this,” “You’re the person I’ve been waiting for my whole life.” Nonstop messages, extravagant gifts, the suggestion of moving in together after a month. In closed groups it’s identical: newcomers are welcomed with overwhelming warmth, from everyone.

◆ EXAMPLE

After three dates, Kyle sends flowers to Jada at her office, takes her to Napa for the weekend, and is already talking about baby names. Jada finally feels seen. By the fourth month come the first criticisms, the coldness, the silences. Jada spends the next year trying to get back to those first weeks.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of too much, too soon: a healthy relationship grows step by step. Slow things down yourself, even if the other person speeds up: “I like you, but I’d rather take this one step at a time.” Then watch how they react. Someone sincere respects your pace; a manipulator gets impatient. Keep your friendships and your routines alive. And judge by consistency over time, not by the intensity of the beginning.

TECHNIQUE 416

RED FLAG

Devaluation and Discard

➤ WHAT IT IS

The phase that follows love bombing. The manipulator starts criticizing, humiliating, ignoring, often for the very qualities they used to adore. It can go on for a long time and end with the discard: a sudden, unexplained abandonment that leaves the other person drained and wondering what they did wrong.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The signal is the reversal: what was praised becomes a fault. “I love your laugh” becomes “Stop laughing like that. It’s embarrassing.” The criticism grows, the praise disappears. The discard often comes at the worst possible moment, and sometimes someone else is already getting the attention you used to get.

➤ EXAMPLE

At first, Ryan loved Serena’s passion for community theater and never missed a rehearsal. A year later he calls it “your little amateur hour” and sighs whenever Serena brings it up. One Sunday, Ryan vanishes: number blocked, profiles locked. Three weeks later, Serena sees a photo of him at the beach with another woman.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the cycle: adoration, criticism, abandonment, sometimes a return. There’s nothing passionate about that roller coaster: it follows a fixed script. Stop chasing the first weeks: that wasn’t the real person, it was the bait. At the first jabs, draw a line: “If there’s a problem, let’s talk about it, but not like this.” If the discard has already happened, don’t look for explanations and don’t respond when they reach out: every exchange reopens the wound. Talk to someone outside the relationship who can help you remember what it was really like.

TECHNIQUE 417

RED FLAG

Intermittent Reinforcement

◆ WHAT IT IS

Alternating kindness and coldness, rewards and punishments, unpredictably. Precisely because you don't know when it will come, the good moment becomes an obsession. It's the principle of the random reward, studied by B. F. Skinner. In 1981 and 1993, the psychologists Donald Dutton and Susan Painter found it in abusive relationships: the alternation between mistreatment and affectionate gestures, combined with an imbalance of power, creates a "traumatic bond" that is stronger than the bond in a relationship that's always calm.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Days of criticism and silence, then suddenly a dinner out, a compliment, a gift, for no clear reason. The relief is so strong it wipes out everything else: "The person I knew is back." Then the cycle starts over. It happens at work too, with a boss who belittles you for months and then, just once, praises you.

◆ EXAMPLE

Erin works at an accounting firm. For weeks, the owner ignores her or corrects her in front of everyone. Then one Friday he brings her a coffee and tells her: "Without you, this place would fall apart." Erin thinks about it for days, and stays two more years, waiting for another Friday like that one.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Put the pattern on paper: mark the good days and the bad days on a calendar. Seeing the ratio between the two in black and white breaks the illusion that things are changing. Recognize that waiting for the reward is a normal reaction of the brain, not a weakness of yours. Say it clearly: "One compliment today doesn't erase what happened all week." And ask yourself: if the good days stopped coming, would I stay? The answer tells you what's keeping you there.

TECHNIQUE 418

RED FLAG

Gaslighting

➤ WHAT IT IS

Systematically denying or distorting reality until the other person starts to doubt their own memory and judgment. The name comes from the 1944 film *Gaslight*, in which a husband dims the gas lights in the house and then convinces his wife she's imagining it. The goal is singular: to become the only one who decides what's true.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes with lines that shift the problem from the facts to your head: "That never happened," "You made that up," "You're too sensitive," "That's just your version." It doesn't arrive all at once: it starts with small details and grows slowly, one conversation at a time.

➤ EXAMPLE

Chris's boss asks him to send a quote with a ten percent discount. The next day, in front of the owner, the boss reprimands him for the discount. When Chris reminds him of the request, the boss shakes his head, calm: "I never said that. You've been mixing everything up lately." After a few months, before making any move, Chris wonders whether he's remembering right.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Anchor yourself to the facts. After every conversation in person, immediately send a three-line written recap of the points you agreed on. Tell the facts to someone outside the relationship and ask for their take: an outside view breaks the isolation. And don't argue about your memory: "That's how I remember it, and I trust what I wrote down."

TECHNIQUE 419

RED FLAG

The Drama Triangle

◆ WHAT IT IS

A three-role game described in 1968 by the American psychiatrist Stephen Karpman: the Victim, the Persecutor, the Rescuer. The manipulator drags others into these roles and switches them whenever it suits them, so the drama never ends and nobody deals with the real problem. The roles rotate: the worn-out Rescuer becomes the Persecutor; the Victim under attack goes on the offensive.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Someone complains to you about a third person and looks for an ally: “You’re the only one who understands me.” If you step in, you end up at war with someone on their behalf. Then, if the problem doesn’t get solved, the blame shifts to you: “You never really helped me either.” The signal is that people always talk about others, never to them.

◆ EXAMPLE

Sharon complains to her son, Pete, about her husband, “who doesn’t respect her.” To defend her, Pete fights with his father. The father then vents to their daughter, Lucy, who calls Pete to accuse him. Within a month the family is split into two camps, and nobody has dealt with the original issue.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t accept the role you’re being offered. If they ask you to rescue them, help them move on their own: “I hear you. What do you think you’ll do?” If you feel the urge to accuse, talk about how you feel instead of attacking. And bring everything back to the direct relationship: “This is something you should tell Dad, not me.” The triangle breaks when everyone talks to the person they need to talk to.

TECHNIQUE 420

RED FLAG

Flying Monkeys

➤ WHAT IT IS

Using other people to pressure the person you want to control, instead of doing the dirty work yourself. The name comes from the winged monkeys that obey the witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. The manipulator tells relatives and friends a version in which they themselves are the victim, and those people, often in good faith, start calling, criticizing, trying to “talk some sense” into the other person.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

After a breakup or a conflict, people close to you start reaching out with the same lines: “Maybe you should rethink this,” “They’re in such bad shape. Aren’t you overreacting?” The words sound alike because they come from the same source. The people you counted on become, without knowing it, the other person’s spokespeople.

➤ EXAMPLE

After Paula leaves her husband, she gets calls from her mother-in-law, two mutual friends, and even a cousin she hears from once a year. They all say the same thing: “He’s devastated. He’s not eating. You’re ruining his life.” Paula starts to doubt her decision, right when she needed support the most.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t try to convince the people who call: every explanation will be passed along. Be brief and kind: “Thanks for your concern, but this is between the two of us.” If they insist, end the conversation. If there’s someone in your circle you truly trust, talk to them ahead of time, with the facts. And be prepared for some people not to come back to your side: it hurts, but it’s the choice that protects you.

TECHNIQUE 421

RED FLAG

Control by Proxy

◆ WHAT IT IS

Controlling or tormenting someone through tools that look legitimate: courts, rules and regulations, government offices, even the children. The person doing it keeps their hands clean. They're just "exercising their rights." To others they look reasonable; to the person on the receiving end it's persecution with no visible culprit.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Appeals and complaints, one after another, with no real basis. Constant reports to the building's property manager. Children used as messengers or as a source of information about the other parent. The goal isn't to win: it's to force the other person to spend time, money, and energy.

◆ EXAMPLE

After a fight over a parking space, Mr. Sanders from the second floor starts writing to the property manager every week: the laundry drying on the balcony, the TV volume, the bike in the lobby. Every letter is by the book. The Millers spend every HOA meeting defending themselves, and after a year they're thinking about selling.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Put everything in writing: no phone calls, only emails and texts, so every exchange leaves a trail ("Feel free to email me; that way everything stays clear"). Keep every document, every legal filing, every communication, with dates. Put a professional filter between you and the other person: a lawyer or, in a condo, the property manager. And if there are children involved, take them out of the messenger role, with the help of a family mediator or a psychologist.

TECHNIQUE 422

RED FLAG

The Sudden Return

➤ WHAT IT IS

The attempt to suck someone back in after a breakup or a long silence, the way a vacuum cleaner does: that's why it's called hoovering, after the Hoover vacuum. It doesn't come from remorse but from the need to regain attention, control, or simply the last word.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

An "I miss you" out of nowhere after months. A flimsy excuse: "I still have your book. How can I get it back to you?" A nostalgic memory, a birthday message, or an emergency: "I'm in the hospital," "Something terrible happened." Sometimes the message comes through a mutual friend.

➤ EXAMPLE

Six months after ending things with Logan, Emma gets an email the day before her birthday: "I know I shouldn't, but not a day goes by that I don't think about us." Emma answers to be polite. Within a week they're back together, and within a month the same old fights are back.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize it for what it is: not proof of love, but an attempt to reopen a channel. The most effective defense is not to answer, not even to say no: even a refusal is attention. If you run into them and can't avoid talking, keep it short: "I have nothing to add. I'm asking you not to contact me again." Block whatever channels need blocking. If you wrote down your reasons for ending it, reread them. And if the attempts become persistent or threatening, go to the police.

TECHNIQUE 423

RED FLAG

The False Need for Closure

◆ WHAT IT IS

Asking for “one last meeting to clear the air” after a breakup, not to make peace but to regain control. The need to understand why a relationship ended is human and legitimate, and that’s exactly what gets exploited. The meeting becomes a chance to throw old grievances in your face, tug at your heartstrings, or win you back.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

“We can’t end it like this,” “We both need this to move on,” “Just one coffee, and then I’ll leave you alone.” The request sounds mature and reasonable. But once you’re at the table, the promised explanations never come: what comes instead is tears, accusations, promises.

◆ EXAMPLE

After ending a friendship that had become a burden, Jennifer agrees to “a coffee to clear the air” with Tara. For an hour, Tara lists every slight she’s suffered in ten years, cries, and at the end asks to start over. Jennifer walks out of the coffee shop feeling guilty about a decision that, that morning, had seemed crystal clear.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Remember that real closure isn’t something the other person gives you: you give it to yourself, by accepting how things went. You can turn down the meeting without justifying yourself: “No, thank you. Everything’s already clear to me.” If the other person says they need closure, that’s not your job: “I’m sorry, but I can’t help you with that.” Your only duty is to protect your decision.

TECHNIQUE 424

RED FLAG

Grooming

➤ WHAT IT IS

A slow process by which someone who wants to abuse a person, often a minor or someone vulnerable, builds trust, lowers their defenses, and isolates them from others. The word itself, grooming, sounds like care. There's no single moment of obvious violence. There's a long series of small steps, each one almost harmless, that move the boundaries a little at a time.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The typical stages repeat: choosing someone who is lonely or struggling, attention and gifts, the role of only confidant ("I'm the only one who understands you"), criticism of family and friends, then requests for secrecy. The strongest signal is the secret itself: "This stays between us."

➤ EXAMPLE

An adult contacts a thirteen-year-old boy in a video game chat. They talk about matches, then about the boy's parents, "who don't get anything." The adult gives him in-game credits and asks him not to tell anyone. The boy's father notices when his son starts deleting conversations and shutting himself in his room.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Teach young people that no decent adult asks them to keep secrets from their parents, and that they can always say no to anything that makes them uncomfortable. Give them a ready-made line: "I don't keep secrets from my parents. I'm telling them right away." Keep communication open at home: a child who isn't afraid of being judged speaks up sooner. The same goes for adults: be wary of anyone who isolates you and asks you to keep secrets. For suspicious cases online, you can report to the police and to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center, which also takes reports on its website, [ic3.gov](https://www.ic3.gov).

TECHNIQUE 425

The Gray Rock

◆ WHAT IT IS

A defensive technique, not an offensive one. When you can't cut off contact with a manipulator, for example because you share children or work in the same office, you become as boring as possible, like a gray rock by the side of the road. People who feed on emotional reactions, positive or negative, get bored with a rock and go looking for them elsewhere.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Answer briefly, factually, without emotion. No personal stories, no opinions, no defending yourself. To provocations: "Oh," "Okay," "We'll see." To practical matters: only the necessary information, in writing whenever you can. You don't have to feel indifferent: you have to show it.

◆ EXAMPLE

Michelle and her ex-husband share custody of their two kids. Every time they talk, the ex finds a way to needle her: the house, her new job, the extra pounds. Michelle sets herself a rule: texts only, logistics only. "I'll pick up the kids Friday at 4:30." She doesn't respond to the jabs. After a few weeks, the ex's messages get fewer and shorter.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Here the risk is a different one: at first, the manipulator may escalate, to get the reaction that's no longer coming. Hold firm exactly at that moment, with the same neutral response: "Noted. Otherwise, let's stick to what we agreed on." Use the gray rock only where cutting off contact is impossible: when you can, distance is still the best choice. And don't use it with the healthy people in your life, the ones you can show what you feel.

CHAPTER 18

Money and Intimacy: Recognizing Control

Money and intimacy are the two places where a couple is most exposed, and that's why they're the ones most used by people who want control. This chapter doesn't teach you anything to do: it teaches you to recognize the signs and protect yourself. If you see yourself in these pages, the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233) is free and answers day and night.

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TECHNIQUE 426

RED FLAG

Financial Control

◆ WHAT IT IS

Using money as a chain: managing all the accounts, deciding every expense, leaving the other person only what they need for the day. Without money of your own, it's hard even to think about leaving: whoever controls the wallet controls the choices. In 2007 the American sociologist Evan Stark described it as one of the forms of "coercive control," abuse made of rules and deprivation more than of blows.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The paycheck goes into an account only one of the two can access. There's a weekly "allowance" that has to be accounted for down to the last dollar. The debit card is "easier if I hold on to it." The other person's job is discouraged: "Why do you need to work? I'll take care of it."

◆ EXAMPLE

When their second daughter is born, Danielle quits her job at the pharmacy. Her husband, Claude, opens an account in his name only and gives her a hundred dollars a week for groceries, asking for the receipts. After five years, Danielle doesn't know how much Claude earns or how much the family has in savings.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Always keep a personal account that you alone control, even if you also have a joint one. Know the family's situation: income, accounts, mortgages, whose name things are in. Don't quit your job without a clear agreement on how your contribution will be recognized. Ask for access: "I want to see the family accounts too." If you're already living this situation, set aside even small amounts in a safe place: domestic violence programs also help with financial and legal matters, and you can reach one through the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233).

TECHNIQUE 427

RED FLAG

Policing Spending as Humiliation

➤ WHAT IT IS

Even when the other person has an income of their own, the controlling partner demands that they justify every purchase, criticizes it, and makes them feel guilty for every small pleasure. The goal isn't to balance the budget. It's to take away the other person's freedom to decide about their own money, like a child who has to account for their allowance.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Interrogations after every purchase: "How much did you pay for that? Did you really need it?" Sighs and pointed remarks: "Must be nice to afford these luxuries while I'm working myself to death." Over time, the person on the receiving end starts hiding receipts and removing price tags before coming home.

➤ EXAMPLE

Rebecca, who works at a bank, buys herself a pair of shoes with her own paycheck. At dinner her partner, Eric, asks how much they cost, then says nothing for the rest of the evening. The next month, Rebecca leaves her new shoes in the car and brings them into the house one at a time, when Eric isn't there.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate your finances: a joint account for household expenses, into which each person puts a share proportional to their income, and personal accounts nobody has to justify. Set a clear boundary: "This is my money, earned with my work. I'm not discussing it." And don't justify yourself at every question. A calm answer is enough, "I liked it and I could afford it." This isn't about money; it's about power.

TECHNIQUE 428

RED FLAG

“I Pay, I Decide”

◆ WHAT IT IS

The partner who earns more turns the difference in income into a difference in rights. Money becomes the measure of personal worth: whoever brings in more money decides, whoever brings in less has to go along. And the one who earns less, after hearing it often enough, starts to believe it.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

“I’m paying for the vacation, so I choose.” “With your salary we can barely cover the bills.” Caregiving, the house, the kids, the organization of family life don’t get counted, as if they had no value.

◆ EXAMPLE

Tom and Beatrice both work, but Tom earns twice as much. When it comes to choosing their son’s school, Tom ends the discussion: “I’m paying the tuition, so I decide.” Beatrice, who helps with homework every afternoon and knows each teacher personally, stops voicing her opinion.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Break the link between income and the right to speak: in a couple, important decisions are made together, regardless of who pays. Make visible the contribution that doesn’t come with a paycheck: “I take care of the kids every afternoon. That holds this family together too.” Don’t accept the trade: “Then let’s pay together and decide together.” And work on your independence. The stronger you are financially, the less the blackmail weighs.

TECHNIQUE 429

RED FLAG

The Unfair Split of Expenses

➤ WHAT IT IS

A split of expenses that looks equal but, over the years, makes one person richer and the other poorer. The key is the nature of the expenses: some build wealth, like the mortgage payment on a house in one person's name only; others disappear every month, like groceries, bills, the kids' clothes.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

"Let's split it fifty-fifty: I'll pay the mortgage, you cover the rest." On the monthly statement the numbers look equal. But the house has only one name on it, and after ten years the person who paid the day-to-day expenses has nothing of their own. It often comes out only at the moment of separation.

➤ EXAMPLE

Sabrina and Johnny have lived together for eight years. Johnny pays the mortgage on the house that's in Johnny's name only; Sabrina pays for groceries, the bills, day care. When they split up, Johnny stays in a house that's almost paid off. Sabrina leaves with two suitcases and an almost empty bank account.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Look at the expenses through the eyes of the person you'll be in ten years: who's building something, and who isn't? If you buy a house together, put it in both names, in shares proportional to what each of you puts in. If you live together without being married, put in writing who contributes to what, with the help of a lawyer. And don't pay the expenses of a house that isn't legally yours too.

TECHNIQUE 430

RED FLAG

The Debt of Gratitude

◆ WHAT IT IS

Giving a big gift or financial help, often unrequested, and then using it as a lien on the other person's behavior. Receiving a gift makes us feel obliged to give back. The manipulator exploits this natural mechanism and turns generosity into a debt that's never paid off.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Disproportionate gifts, especially at the start of a relationship. Help offered in hard times, "no problem at all." Then, at the first disagreement, the bill arrives: "So this is the thanks I get, after everything I've done for you?"

◆ EXAMPLE

When Xavier loses his job, his partner, Veronica, pays his rent for four months. Xavier is grateful. From then on, every time he wants to go out with his friends or disagrees about something, Veronica reminds him: "While you were sitting at home, I was supporting you." Xavier stops going out.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of gifts that are too big and too soon. You can turn them down gracefully: "That's a beautiful thought, but it's too much. I can't accept it." If the gift gets thrown back at you, make it clear: "I thought it was a gift. If it was a loan, tell me and I'll pay it back." Sometimes the freest path is precisely to pay it back: settle the debt and close the matter. After that, you owe nobody anything.

TECHNIQUE 431

RED FLAG

Fake Public Generosity

➤ WHAT IT IS

Appearing generous and big-hearted in public, being stingy and controlling in private. That carefully built public image serves as armor. If the person living under the control tries to tell anyone, they aren't believed: "What? Someone so generous?"

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The restaurant check paid for everyone, the donation everybody knows about, the gifts for friends. At home, though, groceries are checked receipt by receipt and every dollar is criticized. The distance between the two faces is the signal: the bigger it is, the more calculated.

➤ EXAMPLE

Around town, everyone knows Rose as the woman who organizes the church fundraiser and always buys the coffee. At home, her husband, Vince, has to ask her for gas money and justify every fill-up. When he tries to talk about it with a friend, he hears: "Rose? She's an angel."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Judge people by how they treat the people they live with, not by how they appear in public. Save bank statements and messages in a separate folder on your phone. It helps you not to doubt your own experience and, if needed, it also counts with a lawyer. When the criticism over a few dollars starts in private: "Grocery shopping isn't an interrogation." And find at least one person, outside your shared circle, to tell the truth to, someone who will believe you.

TECHNIQUE 432

RED FLAG

The Investment Test

◆ WHAT IT IS

Asking a partner to put money into a project or a joint purchase, presenting it as a test of trust: “If you believe in us, invest.” The language of love covers a financial transaction, and saying no feels like betrayal.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It often comes in the first few months, when enthusiasm is at its peak. A business to start, an idea that “will change everything,” the dream house where almost all of the down payment comes from just one of the two. And there’s always a rush: “It’s an opportunity that won’t come around again.”

◆ EXAMPLE

After six months together, Ivan suggests to Christina that they open a bar: “I’ll put in the work, you put in your savings. If you believe in me, we’ll do it.” Christina invests what she had saved over ten years. The bar is registered in Ivan’s name only. After a year it closes, and the relationship ends along with the business.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Keep your heart and your wallet separate. Treat every proposal as if it came from a stranger: ask for a written plan, numbers, the chance to show it to an accountant. Insist that whatever you put in is in your name too. Answer calmly: “I never sign on the spot. First I show the paperwork to my accountant.” And be wary of haste: a good deal is still good the following week.

TECHNIQUE 433

RED FLAG

The Romance Scam

➤ WHAT IT IS

A long-distance relationship, almost always online, with a person who doesn't exist or isn't who they say they are. For weeks or months come attention, confidences, and plans for the future; then comes an emergency, and with it the request for money. The FBI has been warning about this scam for years: it strikes money and feelings at the same time.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

A polished profile, often with a job that explains the distance: soldier on deployment, engineer on an oil rig, doctor abroad. Lots of eagerness to write, none to have a real video call. Then the difficulties: a frozen account, a customs fee to pay, a plane ticket to come visit you. And the request not to tell anyone.

➤ EXAMPLE

Julia, widowed for two years, meets an American officer on deployment on social media. The officer writes to her every day and talks about a house together on the coast. After three months, he asks for help getting a package with his savings out of customs: "I'll pay you back as soon as I get there." Julia makes the first wire transfer. Then comes a second, and a third.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

One rule: someone you know only online doesn't ask you for money. Ever, for any reason. If the request comes, end it: "I don't send money to anyone I've never met in person." And talk about it with someone you trust: exactly what you were asked not to do. Run their photos through a reverse image search: they often belong to someone else. And if you've already paid, report it right away to the police and to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center ([ic3.gov](https://www.ic3.gov)): the sooner you act, the more can be done.

TECHNIQUE 434

RED FLAG

Forced Debt

◆ WHAT IT IS

Putting the other person in debt, without their knowledge or through pressure: loans and credit cards in their name, guarantees signed “for the family,” payments left unpaid. Debt is a chain that remains even after the relationship ends: it makes it hard to rent an apartment, get a loan, start over.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Requests to sign in a hurry, “it’s just a formality.” Papers to sign without reading. ID documents and passwords that disappear and reappear. Letters from the bank or a lender that the controlling partner wants to open first.

◆ EXAMPLE

Alex convinces Ellie to sign a loan “for the house” in her name only, because Alex already has too many payments. The money goes into a new car that almost only Alex drives. When they split up, the payments stay with Ellie, and two late payments wreck her credit score.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Never sign anything you don’t understand, and don’t cosign anyone’s debts, not even your partner’s: “I don’t sign anything without reading it calmly and having someone who knows about these things look at it.” Guard your documents and passwords like your house keys. Check your credit reports from the three bureaus, Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion, every so often: you can request them for free at AnnualCreditReport.com. If you find a debt you don’t recognize, report it right away to the police and at IdentityTheft.gov.

TECHNIQUE 435

RED FLAG

Career Sabotage

➤ WHAT IT IS

Obstructing the other person's work and ambitions, because their success feels like a threat. People who work, earn money, and are appreciated have more independence, more relationships, more self-esteem: they're harder to control. So the sabotage strikes right there.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Family commitments "forgotten" exactly when you have a business trip or a decisive meeting. Constant criticism: "That job is changing you. You're not yourself anymore." Jealousy toward coworkers, pressure to turn down promotions, trips, training.

➤ EXAMPLE

On the afternoon Gabriel has to catch the train to an industry trade show in Chicago, his partner, Louis, "forgets" to pick up the kids from school and turns off his phone. Gabriel rushes to get them, misses the train, and misses the meeting with his clients. That evening Louis brushes it off: "That show wasn't going to do anything for you anyway."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself whether the unexpected ever happens when it's the other person who pays the price: when it always falls on your work opportunities, you're looking at a deliberate pattern. Protect your work information: you can keep the dates of interviews and deadlines to yourself. Set a clear boundary: "I make the decisions about my work." And build a network outside the home, coworkers and people who respect you. It's the counterweight to the devaluation that comes from inside.

TECHNIQUE 436

RED FLAG

The Threat to Ruin the Other Person

◆ WHAT IT IS

Threatening the other person, during a separation, to leave them with nothing: lawyers, endless lawsuits, hidden assets. The goal is to frighten them, so they give up on leaving or accept an unfair settlement. It works above all on people who are already worn down, earn less, and have children to protect.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

"I'll leave you out on the street," "I'll make you spend everything on lawyers." Around the same time, money often starts to move: accounts emptied, assets put in relatives' names, income reported lower than it really is.

◆ EXAMPLE

When Antonia announces that she wants a separation, her husband, Scott, answers calmly: "Go ahead. I've already talked to my lawyer. You won't see a dime." In the weeks that follow, Antonia notices that the savings have vanished from the joint account. For months she stays in the house, thinking she has no choice.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't assume the threats are real: the law provides protections for the financially weaker spouse, especially when there are children. Before announcing your decision, if you can, make copies of bank statements, tax returns, and property deeds. Don't take the bait: "The lawyers will talk about that." Then find a family law attorney. If you can't afford one, ask about free or low-cost legal aid in your area.

TECHNIQUE 437

RED FLAG

Jealousy as Proof of Love

➤ WHAT IT IS

Presenting excessive, controlling jealousy as the measure of love: “I act this way because I love you to death.” Romantic culture has taught us to read jealousy as passion, and controlling partners exploit exactly this idea to justify spying on phones, interrogations, forbidden friendships.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Scenes over a “like” under a photo, constant questions about where you are and who you’re with, requests to share your location “so I don’t worry.” Then the prohibitions: no going out with friends, no work dinners. Every prohibition comes with a declaration of love.

➤ EXAMPLE

Aurora is nineteen and has been with Kevin for six months. Kevin wants her Instagram password, asks for photos to prove where she is, and makes a scene if she talks to a classmate. Aurora tells her friends about it with a smile: “He’s jealous because he cares.”

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Keep one distinction in mind: a little jealousy is human; control is not. Don’t accept jealousy as an excuse for behavior: “I understand your jealousy, but it doesn’t give you the right to read my messages.” Your phone, your friendships, and your movements remain yours. And remember that the other person’s jealousy comes from their insecurities: you don’t fix it by giving up your life.

TECHNIQUE 438

RED FLAG

Intimacy as Reward and Punishment

◆ WHAT IT IS

Giving or withholding affection and physical intimacy, from kisses to hugs to simple closeness, as a reward for welcome behavior and a punishment for unwelcome behavior. Intimacy stops being a meeting between equals and becomes a currency. The person on the receiving end learns that affection is earned by obeying.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

After a day when everything went the way they wanted, the controlling partner is affectionate and close. After a disagreement they turn to ice: they pull away, refuse any contact, sleep on the far side of the bed for days. The unspoken message is clear: if you do what I want, you get my affection; if not, you lose it.

◆ EXAMPLE

Every time Nadia says no to one of her husband's requests, Frank stops touching her: no kiss when he gets home, no hand on hers on the couch, his back turned in bed. When Nadia gives in, the warmth comes back all at once. After a year, Nadia realizes that before giving an opinion, she asks herself how much it will cost her.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the rule underneath: affection granted only in exchange for obedience works like a leash. Say it calmly, at a neutral moment: "I notice your affection disappears every time I disagree. That's not OK." Don't beg for a hug when it's withheld: every plea confirms that the tool works. Look for warmth elsewhere too, in friendships and family, and if the pattern doesn't change, talk to a therapist about it.

TECHNIQUE 439

RED FLAG

Targeted Sexual Criticism

➤ WHAT IT IS

Constantly criticizing the other person's body, desire, or intimacy, not to improve the connection but to sow insecurity. It's an area where almost all of us are vulnerable, and manipulators know it. The insecurity that results ends up truly worsening the connection, and so the criticism seems confirmed.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Repeated comments about the body, about weight, about changes after a pregnancy or with age. Judgments about desire: "too little," "never enough." The criticism often comes at the most delicate moments, and never together with a kind, concrete request.

➤ EXAMPLE

After their son is born, Camille hears her partner, Peter, say things like "You're not the woman you used to be" and "You should get back in shape." Camille starts undressing in the dark and avoiding any moment of closeness. Peter tells her she's "gotten cold."

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Distinguish communication from abuse: someone who loves you expresses a desire in positive terms ("I'd love it if..."), not by tearing you down. Reject the tone firmly: "The way you talk about my body hurts me, and I won't accept it." Remember that people who criticize are often talking about their own insecurities. And protect your self-esteem outside that relationship: friendships, interests, people who see the whole of you.

TECHNIQUE 440

RED FLAG

The Humiliating Sexual Comparison

◆ WHAT IT IS

Comparing intimacy with the other person to intimacy with exes, friends, or unrealistic models, always to their disadvantage. It's a form of triangulation: a third party enters the scene, real or imaginary, against whom it's impossible to compete. The person on the receiving end is always one step behind, and becomes more willing to give in to make up the difference.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Lines like "It was different with my ex," "My friends say it's normal to do it more often," comparisons with movies and videos. The comparison never leads to a conversation: it's meant to shut things down, not open them up.

◆ EXAMPLE

During a dinner for two, Phil tells Marina that "there was much more chemistry with my ex," and he repeats it in the weeks that follow with small variations. Marina starts going along with things she doesn't like, so as not to feel like "the one who isn't enough."

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Set a clear, simple boundary: "Our intimacy is about the two of us. I don't want comparisons with anyone." If the comparison comes back, follow up with action: end the conversation, leave the room. Don't compete with a memory or a fiction: it's a contest that can't be won. And if there's a real desire, ask for it to be expressed in positive terms, with no one else in the middle.

TECHNIQUE 441

RED FLAG

Manufactured Rivalry

➤ WHAT IT IS

Deliberately provoking jealousy and a sense of competition: flirting with others in front of a partner, admiring other people out loud, sharing details of past relationships. The goal is to keep the other person on edge, constantly afraid of being replaced, and therefore more eager to please.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

At parties, they give another person looks and compliments, with an occasional glance to check your reaction. Comments about how attractive coworkers or friends are: “Now she knows how to take care of herself.” If you react, the accusation is ready: “So insecure. I can’t even talk to anyone anymore.”

➤ EXAMPLE

At a friend’s wedding, Vivian spends the evening laughing and dancing with one of the groomsmen, turning now and then toward her partner, Mark. In the car, Mark tries to tell her he felt pushed aside. Vivian sighs: “You’re exhausting. You’re the one with the problem.”

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t make a scene: the technique feeds on your reaction, and a scene proves it right. Set the boundary in words, calmly: “This behavior is disrespectful to me. If it continues, I’m leaving.” And then really do it, leave the party or, if the pattern repeats, the relationship. The rivalry can’t be won: someone who keeps you in the race will always find a new comparison. Someone who loves you doesn’t put you in a race: they choose you.

TECHNIQUE 442

RED FLAG

Denying the Other Person's Pleasure

♦ WHAT IT IS

Treating intimacy as if only your own needs existed, systematically ignoring the other person's. It's not one bad night, but a rule: the other person's desires don't count, and if they're expressed, they're an irritation. The person on the receiving end feels they don't count, and often ends up thinking the problem is theirs.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

There's no attention to the other person's pace and desires. Requests are ignored or rejected: "Just let me handle it." The time together ends when only one of the two is done. Talking about it, even far from the bedroom, is experienced as an attack.

♦ EXAMPLE

Jake tries several times to tell his wife, Teresa, that he'd like more attention and more tenderness in their time together. Teresa brushes it off: "Always complaining. You're too complicated." Jake stops asking. Then he stops reaching for her.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Remember that your well-being in intimacy matters as much as the other person's: it's not a favor. Talk about it at a neutral moment, clearly and concretely: "I need there to be attention for me too." Don't pretend everything is fine: pretending confirms the pattern. If, after you've said it clearly, nothing changes, ask yourself honestly what that silence is telling you. Couples therapy can help, if the other person agrees to go.

TECHNIQUE 443

RED FLAG

Coldness After Intimacy

➤ WHAT IT IS

Switching to ice, distance, or criticism right after a moment of intimacy, when the body and emotions leave the other person more open and defenseless. The person doing it reclaims distance and control: closeness is always followed by rejection, and over time the person on the receiving end comes to associate intimacy with discomfort.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

As soon as it's over, the other person picks up their phone and turns their back. Or a criticism, out of nowhere, about the body or behavior. Or a sudden exit with an excuse. Once can happen to anyone; the signal is the repetition, always at the same moment.

➤ EXAMPLE

After every moment of intimacy, Ralph gets up, gets dressed, and goes to the kitchen to check the news on his phone. When his partner, Lucy, asks him to stay, he answers without looking up: "Why make such a big deal out of it?" Lucy starts avoiding closeness, so she won't feel like that afterward.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the sequence: when that chill descends every single time, it's sending a precise message. Talk about it at a calm moment: "I've noticed you always become distant afterward, and it hurts me." Watch the response: if it's denial, minimizing, or attack, you have your confirmation. Take care of yourself in that moment, instead of waiting for a warmth that doesn't come. And ask yourself whether this is the relationship you want.

TECHNIQUE 444

RED FLAG

Appearance Dictated by the Other Person

◆ WHAT IT IS

Dictating how the other person dresses, presents themselves, and behaves in public. Sometimes more provocatively than they'd like, like a trophy to show off; sometimes more modestly, in clothes that cover them up, so nobody looks. The two forms seem opposite, but they're the same thing: treating a person as property.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Constant comments about clothes before going out: "You're not going out like that." Or the opposite: pressure to wear more revealing clothes or act seductively in public in ways that cause discomfort. Makeup, hair, the way you laugh with others all become topics of argument.

◆ EXAMPLE

Before every dinner with Rachel's coworkers, her husband, Michael, checks what she's wearing. The skirt is too short, the lipstick too bright, the blouse too open. Rachel, who used to love colors, now always goes out in gray. She tells her friends she likes it that way.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Reaffirm your right simply: "How I dress is my decision." Don't look for compromises on your identity: every concession becomes the basis for the next demand. Recognize the mechanism, which is possession, not attention. And talk about it with someone you trust. These dynamics are private and tend to be kept to yourself, but said out loud, they're seen for what they are.

TECHNIQUE 445

RED FLAG

Sex to Erase the Fight

➤ WHAT IT IS

Using intimacy to close a fight or an episode of verbal abuse without ever addressing it. The shift from tension to closeness brings intense relief, which gets mistaken for passion. The problem gets swept under the rug, and the cycle of fight, relief, fight repeats itself, binding the two more and more tightly. It's what psychologists call a trauma bond.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

After yelling, insults, or humiliation, instead of an apology comes physical closeness. The next day nobody mentions it: everything seems fine. But the reason for the fight is never discussed, and the next time the episode is a little harsher.

➤ EXAMPLE

During a fight, Ernest calls his wife, Olivia, a failure in front of the children. That same night he reaches for her as if nothing had happened, and Olivia feels loved again. The next morning the word "failure" is never mentioned again. Two weeks later it comes back, the same.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the cycle: if every fight ends the same way without anyone talking about it, that's not reconciliation; it's a way of not dealing with anything. Put things back in the right order: first responsibility and a real apology, then, if you want it, closeness. "First I want us to talk about what happened." And remember that the seesaw between pain and relief creates dependence: getting out of it alone is hard, and a therapist experienced in relationship abuse can help.

TECHNIQUE 446

RED FLAG

Subtle Sexual Coercion

◆ WHAT IT IS

Getting unwanted sex without physical force, through psychological pressure that wears the other person down: insistence, guilt, self-pity, sulking. The person who gives in hasn't changed their mind: they've given in out of exhaustion or fear of the consequences. A yes extracted this way isn't consent, and the law protects sexual freedom inside marriage and cohabitation too.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

A no that isn't accepted, but "discussed." Sighs and martyr lines: "You never want me anyway," "Fine, I'll suffer in silence." Insistence that goes on and on, until giving in seems like the fastest way to make the pressure stop.

◆ EXAMPLE

Every time Luke tells his partner, Deborah, that he isn't in the mood, Deborah responds with a long, offended silence, then with lines like "You're just not attracted to me anymore. Admit it." The tension lasts until Luke gives in, out of fatigue and to feel less guilty. Over time, Luke stops saying no: it doesn't help anyway.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Remember that no is a complete sentence: you don't have to explain it, because every explanation becomes a foothold for bargaining. Repeat it calmly as many times as needed. If the pressure turns physical, get up and go to another room. Say it clearly: "When I say no, it means no. Making me feel guilty doesn't change the answer." If it happens often, it isn't a couple's problem to fix. It's abuse, and you can ask for help from the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233) or a local domestic violence program.

TECHNIQUE 447

RED FLAG

Sex as Marital Duty

➤ WHAT IT IS

Demanding sex by appealing to marriage, as if it were an obligation written into the contract. It's an ancient idea, which treated one spouse's body as being at the other's disposal. Today the law rejects it: in the United States, marital rape is a crime in every state. Marriage doesn't erase the right to say no.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

"We're married. It's your duty," "Our grandmothers didn't make such a fuss." It often comes with blackmail: "If you won't, it means you don't love me," "Then don't complain if I look elsewhere." The other person's guilt and traditional values become the lever.

➤ EXAMPLE

Agnes, raised in a very religious family, keeps hearing from her husband, Joseph, that "a wife has to." When she talks about it with her cousin, who's a lawyer, the answer leaves her speechless: "Agnes, marriage doesn't obligate you to anything. What you're describing is a crime." It's the first time Agnes wonders whether what she's living with is normal.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Hold on to one idea: marriage is a union, not servitude, and your body is still yours. "Being married doesn't give you rights over me whenever you want." Expose the blackmail: love and respect aren't proven by giving in. If this dynamic is part of your life, talk to a lawyer or a domestic violence program, even just to learn your rights: the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233) is free and confidential.

TECHNIQUE 448

RED FLAG

Intimate Image Blackmail

◆ WHAT IT IS

Using intimate photos or videos, exchanged in a moment of trust or taken secretly, as a weapon for blackmail: “If you leave me, I’ll send them to everyone.” It’s a form of control that plays on shame and fear of how others will see you. In the United States, nearly every state has made it a crime to share sexually explicit images of someone without their consent.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Insistent requests for photos “just for us,” then the hint: “Imagine if your parents saw these.” During a crisis or a breakup, the threat becomes explicit, and it’s used to get something: getting back together, dropping a request, keeping quiet.

◆ EXAMPLE

When Naomi decides to end a two-year relationship, her ex, Daniel, writes to her: “Remember, I still have our photos. Your boss would be curious.” Out of fear, Naomi answers his messages for weeks and agrees to see him again. Only when she talks to a friend does she learn that the threat itself is already a crime.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t give in to the blackmail: every concession invites another. Keep the evidence, without deleting anything: messages, numbers, dates. Report it to the police and to the FBI’s Internet Crime Complaint Center (ic3.gov), even before the images are shared. If you’re afraid they’ll be posted, StopNCII.org offers a free tool to help keep intimate images from being shared on major platforms. And remember: the shame belongs to the blackmailer, not to you.

TECHNIQUE 449

RED FLAG

Contraception Sabotage

➤ WHAT IT IS

Secretly tampering with the other person's contraception to cause a pregnancy they didn't choose. It's a form of what researchers call reproductive coercion: control over whether and when to have children. It takes away the most personal decision there is, and it's often the first step toward binding the other person forever.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Pills that disappear or get swapped, damaged protection, or the condom secretly removed during sex (known as stealthing), constant pressure to "let fate decide." It often comes with lines like "A baby would bring us together," or a furious reaction when the other person brings up contraception.

➤ EXAMPLE

Erica discovers that her partner, Sam, has replaced some of her birth control pills with other tablets, "because we wanted a baby sooner or later anyway." Faced with her anger, Sam says it was an act of love. For a few days, Erica even feels guilty about her own reaction.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Set a hard boundary: "My contraception and my body are not up for negotiation." Keep contraception under your own control: talk to your doctor or a family planning clinic, where they can suggest methods that depend only on you. Keep your medications somewhere only you know. Recognize the act for what it is: not an act of love, but serious abuse. If you discover sabotage, get help right away, from a clinic, the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233), or a lawyer, and plan for your safety.

TECHNIQUE 450

RED FLAG

Children as a Chain

♦ WHAT IT IS

Using pregnancy or children to bind the other person and keep them in the relationship. A child creates a bond no separation erases, and manipulators use it as a chain: first pushing for a child when the relationship is shaky, then using the children as hostages every time the other person thinks about leaving.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

Pressure for a baby right at moments of crisis: “A baby will fix everything.” Then, once the children are born, the blackmail: “If you leave, you’ll never see them again,” “I’ll tell the judge you’re unstable.” The children become messengers, witnesses, bargaining chips.

♦ EXAMPLE

Every time Monica brings up separation, her husband, Albert, answers with the same sentence: “Go ahead. But the kids stay with me, and you’ll be the mother who abandoned them.” For three years Monica stays. Finally a lawyer explains to her that the threat has no basis: custody is decided based on the best interests of the children, not on one parent’s threats.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t let the threats paralyze you: decisions about children are made by a judge, based on their best interests, not on who shouts the loudest. Write down every threat, with dates and exact words. Consult a lawyer experienced in family law and domestic violence before announcing any decision. And keep the children out of the conflict: protecting them also means never turning them into messengers.

CHAPTER 19

The Masks: Fakes in Relationships and at Work

The most dangerous masks aren't frightening: they look like enthusiasm, generosity, pain, remorse. In this chapter you'll find 25 fakes you meet in couples, in families, and at the office, from the lightest to the heaviest, with the signs for recognizing them and the way out.

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TECHNIQUE 451

RED FLAG

Fake Enthusiasm

◆ WHAT IT IS

Showing exaggerated enthusiasm you don't really feel, to get something: to win over the boss, to sell a mediocre product, or to make someone look ridiculous by praising them too much. It works because enthusiasm is contagious: when someone is very enthusiastic, we assume there's a good reason, and our judgment shifts without our noticing.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It has three faces. Flattery, which applauds every one of the boss's ideas as brilliant. The sales pitch, which describes a tired compact car as "a gem." And the most poisonous, sarcasm in disguise: praise so exaggerated that everyone understands the opposite. The common signal is disproportion: lots of enthusiasm, very few concrete details.

◆ EXAMPLE

In a meeting, Dara presents the new shift schedule. A coworker exclaims: "Incredible! Presentation of the century, let's give her a hand!" A few people snicker. Nobody said anything offensive, but now Dara's work looks ridiculous, and the person who spoke can always answer: "But it was a compliment!"

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Keep your own yardstick: ask yourself what you'd think of the idea or the product without all that enthusiasm around it. When the praise aimed at you is excessive, say thank you and keep your feet on the ground: flatterers usually want something. Faced with sarcasm, the best move is a naive question: "Thanks. Which part did you find most useful?" The person faking it has no answer ready.

TECHNIQUE 452

RED FLAG

False Modesty

➤ WHAT IT IS

Bragging while pretending to complain or to be humble: “Ugh, they’ve asked me to speak at the conference again,” “I don’t know why, but people always think I’m younger than I am.” It’s called a humblebrag, a boast disguised as humility. In 2018 Ovul Sezer and her colleagues studied this behavior. People who brag in disguise are liked less, and judged less sincere, than people who brag openly.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

A sentence with two layers: on the surface a complaint or a bit of self-deprecation, underneath an achievement, a compliment received, an air of importance. The goal is to collect admiration without paying the price of vanity, and often to put others in the position of having to console or compliment. In couples and among friends, it becomes a way of always holding center stage.

➤ EXAMPLE

In the class parents’ group chat, one mom writes: “So stressful, the teacher wants my son in the math competition again. It ruins all our weekends.” Ten messages of congratulations arrive. The dad who had asked a question about homework gets no answer.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Respond to the surface layer, kindly: to the complaint, a practical solution (“If it’s too much, you can say no”). The mask is left without the prize it was after. And if you have an achievement to share, share it straight: according to the same research, honest bragging is less off-putting than the disguised kind.

TECHNIQUE 453

RED FLAG

Fake Altruism

◆ WHAT IT IS

Doing something that mostly benefits yourself and presenting it as a gesture for the good of others. It's an image mask: it lets you pursue your own interests while appearing generous. It works because it rests the action on values nobody wants to challenge: family, the team, the environment, safety. Opposing it seems cynical, or uncaring about the common good.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up in phrases that talk a lot about you and little about the speaker: "I'm doing it for you," "It's for your peace of mind," "It's an opportunity for the whole group." It often comes with decisions that increase the control or the advantage of the person making them. In a couple it sounds like this: "I'm leaving you because I love you too much to make you suffer." The signal is the insistence on one's own good heart. People who really help usually don't need to keep saying so.

◆ EXAMPLE

The owner installs software that records every click on the office computers and presents it like this: "It's to help showcase your work." After a month, the software is used mostly to challenge coffee breaks.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask the oldest question: "Who benefits?" Separate the action from the justification: you can agree with the stated goal and not with the chosen means. Ask for concrete, verifiable effects: "Showcase it how? What changes for us, exactly?" Also look at the costs shifted onto others, which the altruistic story leaves in the shadows. And be a little more wary when generosity is announced out loud.

TECHNIQUE 454

RED FLAG

The Fake Request for Advice

➤ WHAT IT IS

Asking someone's opinion on a decision that's already been made, to make them feel involved and turn them into an ally. People who said "yes, it sounds like a good idea" then feel obliged to support it: they took part, so they're partly responsible. The involvement is real only in appearance: the choice was closed before the question was even asked.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The question arrives when everything is already set: the supplier is chosen, the contract is written, the house is booked. The alternatives are never really discussed; objections are heard with a smile and dropped. Often the question is built to get a yes: "You agree it would be an improvement, right?"

➤ EXAMPLE

Roger tells Sonia: "I've been offered a job in Seattle. I'd never do anything without you. What do you think?" They talk about it for three evenings. Then Sonia discovers that his resignation had already been signed the week before. Those three evenings served only to turn an individual choice into a "couple's" choice.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Look at the timing: does the request come while the decision is open, or when everything is already decided? Ask questions that test it: "What alternatives did you consider?" "What would make you change your mind?" If the answers are vague, the debate was a performance. Then say so calmly: "If it's already decided, tell me. I'd rather know than pretend to choose."

TECHNIQUE 455

RED FLAG

Support in Words Only

◆ WHAT IT IS

Promising support to a person or a project and then, in practice, doing nothing, or quietly putting on the brakes. It's sabotage that's hard to call out, because the words are impeccable: "You have my full support." The betrayal lies in the missing actions, which always come with a ready excuse: "It didn't seem like the right time," "I didn't think it was necessary."

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Great enthusiasm in private, silence in public. Generic promises, never specific commitments. Absences right when a hand was needed. Sometimes small obstacles disguised as care: the friend who supports your diet and suggests pizza every night. The signal is the constant gap between what's said and what's done.

◆ EXAMPLE

You propose a new way of handling orders. Your coworker Christian tells you: "Fantastic idea. I'm with you a hundred percent." In the meeting, when the boss asks who agrees, Christian looks at his phone. Afterward, in the elevator: "I didn't want to put you too far out there, you know how it is."

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Judge the commitments kept in public, not the encouragement in private. Turn generic support into a specific, verifiable task: "Thanks. So tomorrow in the meeting, will you present the point about costs?" If the gap keeps happening, name it without accusing: "You told me you agreed, then in the meeting you didn't say anything. What happened?" And if the answer is always an excuse, take note: you can't count on that support.

TECHNIQUE 456

RED FLAG

Conditional Support

➤ WHAT IT IS

Offering help, money, or approval, but tied to conditions that serve to control: “I’ll help you, but only if you do it my way.” The support looks like generosity; in reality it’s a tool for deciding in your place. It exploits a moment of need: refusing the conditions means losing the help, and coming across as ungrateful.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The conditions often arrive after the offer, when you’ve already counted on that help. They concern choices that are yours to make: where to live, whom to work with, how to dress, whom to see. And they’re presented as concern: “It’s for your own good,” “I’m saying it because I love you.”

➤ EXAMPLE

Your father offers to help with the down payment on your house. A week later he adds: “But you’ll buy in our neighborhood, and we’ll keep a copy of the keys.” Refusing seems like an insult; accepting means having your parents in your home whenever they like.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Name the conditions calmly: “I really appreciate it. I see the help comes with some conditions. Can we talk about them openly?” Separate the help from the conditions and try to negotiate. Meanwhile, look for a plan B: a different mortgage, other help, more time. Having an alternative gives you the strength to say: “On these terms, I’d rather manage on my own.” And prepare for the guilt that will come. It’s part of the price, not a sign you’re doing something wrong.

TECHNIQUE 457

RED FLAG

Intrusive Help

◆ WHAT IT IS

Doing things for the other person without being asked, correcting every move and taking the work out of their hands under the mask of generosity, until they feel incapable and indebted. In 1996 Daniel Gilbert and David Silvera, in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, called it “overhelping”: unrequested intervention that makes the person receiving it seem less competent in the eyes of others and of themselves. In 2002 Arie Nadler showed how help that solves everything in the other person’s place often serves to keep them in a position of dependence.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The tone is caring, sometimes impatient, with an indulgent sigh: “Here, give it to me, it’ll go faster if I do it,” “Leave it, it’s complicated for you, I’ll take care of it.” Every attempt to do it yourself is interrupted or redone right afterward. Protesting is hard, because the intruder can always answer: “I was just trying to help.”

◆ EXAMPLE

In the family woodworking shop in North Carolina, every time the apprentice, Sam, sets up a planer, the senior partner, Earl, walks over smiling, nudges him aside with an elbow, and finishes the piece: “I’m saving you the trouble.” After six months, Sam no longer dares to touch a machine on his own.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Thank them for the intention, but take the object or the task right back into your hands, without giving up your place. Set a clear boundary before the other person starts: “Thanks, but if you do it, I won’t learn. Let me get to the end on my own, and if I get stuck, I’ll ask.”

TECHNIQUE 458

RED FLAG

The Never-Ending Project

➤ WHAT IT IS

Faced with a request for serious change, never saying no, but presenting yourself as someone who's "working on it": improving for a few days and then going back to exactly how things were, to freeze the other person's decisions. Unlike *The Promised Future*, this doesn't sell a distant tomorrow: it stages an effort already underway. It works because the person asking for change doesn't want to be the one who gives up right while the other is "trying."

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Every time the other person has had enough, the signs of work in progress appear: a book bought and left on the nightstand, two weeks of flawless attentiveness, lines like "I'm on a journey, you can't expect everything at once," "Can't you see I'm making an effort?" Anyone who complains during those days comes across as ungenerous for not recognizing the effort. As soon as the alarm subsides, the work stops.

➤ EXAMPLE

For two years, Cosmo has been asking his partner, Ted, to stop leaving shifts uncovered at their bakery in Providence. After every fight, Ted shows up on time for four mornings and repeats: "I'm changing my routine one step at a time." The following Monday he disappears again.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Stop measuring the beginnings and measure only how long it lasts, over months, not days. Say it without anger: "I see the effort this week, but I need to know whether it lasts. Let's talk again when it's kept up for three months straight."

TECHNIQUE 459

RED FLAG

“My Hands Are Tied”

◆ WHAT IT IS

Justifying an uncomfortable choice by saying you had no choice: “Rules are rules,” “It’s not up to me,” “My hands are tied.” People who say this present themselves as mere executors, and so they take no responsibility for what they do. The anger shifts toward something abstract, the system, management, the procedure, which is impossible to fight with.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

A regretful, almost sympathetic tone: “I know, it seems ridiculous to me too.” But no checking, no exception sought, no name of whoever decided. In families it becomes “I’d love to come to your party, but my mother expects me for dinner”: an external obligation covering a lack of desire.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the DMV, the clerk rejects your application because one box on the form was filled in with blue ink instead of black: “That’s the procedure. There’s nothing I can do.” You ask to speak to the supervisor. The supervisor looks at the form and accepts it in ten seconds.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Bring the decision back to the person: “Rules aside, do you see a way to solve this?” Ask what the leeway is: “Every procedure has exceptions. Could you check for me?” And if their hands really are tied, ask who can untie them: “Then who decides? Can I speak with them?” Remember that applying a rule rigidly, instead of with common sense, is also a choice.

TECHNIQUE 460

RED FLAG

The Boss Who Isn't There

➤ WHAT IT IS

In a negotiation, presenting yourself as a mere intermediary with no power, who always has to “check with” a higher, absent authority: the boss, headquarters, the partner, the committee. It’s used to refuse without taking responsibility, and to ask for extra concessions when the deal seemed closed. It’s hard to get angry at someone who presents themselves as an ally against the “bad guy” you never see.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The deal is done, the person steps “out for a moment,” and comes back with a regretful face: “My manager won’t approve it. Can we go up a little?” Or, at every request: “I have to check with headquarters. They’re very strict.” The decision-maker always stays invisible, and at the table the only side that can give ground is you.

➤ EXAMPLE

You’ve agreed on a price with the exhibit builder for your trade show booth, and you’ve shaken hands. The next day the sales rep calls: “The owner says that with the price of the light panels, we can’t make it work. We need another eight hundred dollars.” After a week of drawings and measurements, starting over from scratch seems impossible, and that’s exactly what they’re counting on.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Clarify decision-making power at the start: “Can you close the deal today, or does someone else have to approve it?” If approval is needed, ask to speak with the person who decides, or bring someone to consult yourself: “Then I need to check with my partner too.” If the deal is reopened after the handshake, calmly stand up: “Then yesterday’s agreement no longer stands. I’ll look at other offers.” Often, at that point, the owner changes his mind.

TECHNIQUE 461

RED FLAG

The Weak Spot on Display

♦ WHAT IT IS

Deliberately showing a small or fake weakness to draw the other person's attention away from the point that really matters. Like the magician who makes a showy gesture with one hand while the other sets up the illusion. The opponent attacks the target on offer, feels victorious, and lowers their guard exactly where they shouldn't.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

In a negotiation, the other side puts up a long, fierce fight over an unimportant detail (the date, the color, an accessory), which in the end is "conceded" with a pained air. The person who won that point feels indebted, or simply has no energy left, and gives ground on the real point: the price, the penalties, the length of the term.

♦ EXAMPLE

You're renewing your lease. The landlord argues for an hour about the no-pets rule, then gives in with a sigh: "Fine, the cat can stay." In the relief of victory, you sign the rent increase and the longer term without discussion. Everything was riding on those two lines.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Before the negotiation, write down your ranking: what really matters to you, what matters little. During it, ask yourself why the other person is fighting so hard over a detail. When you win a point, don't give anything away in return: "Good, thank you. Now let's talk about the rent." And be wary of weaknesses that are too obvious: sometimes they're a door left open on purpose.

TECHNIQUE 462

RED FLAG

The Small Confession

➤ WHAT IT IS

Confessing to a minor fault, sometimes invented or inflated, to hide a much more serious one. The small admission acts as a lightning rod. It draws attention and criticism to a secondary point and, on top of that, makes the person seem honest. Someone who confesses to something seems sincere to us, and we stop looking for anything else.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It arrives just as suspicions get close to the real problem, in a tone of pained sincerity: “You’re right, there’s something I didn’t tell you.” Then comes the admission of something embarrassing but harmless. Or a character flaw is confessed in place of a fact: “My fault is that I trust people too much” instead of “I took that money.”

➤ EXAMPLE

Brenda notices that the numbers at the coffee shop don’t add up. Her partner, Frank, admits right away, looking guilty: “Sorry, I took two hundred dollars from the register for the dentist. I’ll put it back on Monday.” Brenda appreciates his honesty and leaves it there. Too bad the register is short two thousand dollars, not two hundred.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When someone under pressure quickly admits a small fault, don’t stop there: that’s exactly the moment to look more closely. Thank them and go back to the facts: “Thanks for telling me. Now let’s go through all of this month’s transactions together.” And if you’re offered a vague flaw in place of a fact, bring the question back to specifics: where, when, how much.

TECHNIQUE 463

RED FLAG

Malicious Timing

◆ WHAT IT IS

Deliberately choosing the worst moment for the other person to make a request, deliver bad news, or launch a criticism: when they're in a hurry, tired, on edge, or about to face an important test. Our energy is limited, and at those moments we think less clearly and defend our boundaries less well. People who wear this mask wait right there.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The important request arrives while the other person already has their coat on and keys in hand. The harsh criticism arrives the night before the exam, the interview, the competition. The fight always breaks out on the birthday, or the morning of the trip. Once is an accident. Every time is a design.

◆ EXAMPLE

On the day of the presentation to your most important client, five minutes before you go in, your coworker Vera tells you: "Oh, yesterday the boss was saying your last slides were weak. But don't think about it, OK?" You walk into the room with that sentence in your head.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When an important request arrives at the wrong moment, put it off: "This is important, but not now. Let's talk about it calmly tomorrow morning." Before the tests that matter, protect your space: no emails, no discussions, phone off. Don't make decisions in the heat of the moment. And if someone always picks the worst moment, stop thinking it's an accident: it's a way of treating you.

TECHNIQUE 464

RED FLAG

The Secret Shared on Purpose

➤ WHAT IT IS

Confiding a personal “secret” or a piece of confidential information not out of real intimacy, but to create a fake bond of trust and exclusivity. The person receiving the confidence feels special, and reciprocity kicks in: they feel the urge to give back something of their own. That’s exactly the material the manipulator is looking for.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Big confidences too soon: the painful story on the second date, the secret about the boss on the third day of work. Lines like “I’m only telling you because I trust you.” Often the secret is about other people, and it’s gossip disguised as trust. Then, right on cue, comes the question: “What about you?”

➤ EXAMPLE

After a week, your new coworker, Ian, takes you aside in the cafeteria: “I’ll tell you something, just you: the manager is about to be transferred. How do you get along with her?” You open up and share a few gripes. A month later, your gripes have reached the manager, word for word.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Real trust is built slowly, with consistent actions: be wary of premature confidences. Remember that someone who badmouths others to you probably badmouths you to others. You have no obligation to reciprocate: you can listen, say thank you, and share nothing of your own: “Thanks for telling me. It stays between us.” And watch what happens to the things you’ve said: that’s where you see whether it was trust or ammunition gathering.

TECHNIQUE 465

RED FLAG

The Fake Devil's Advocate

◆ WHAT IT IS

Demolishing a person's ideas, plans, and enthusiasm while hiding behind the role of "devil's advocate": "I'm saying it for your own good," "I'm just being realistic." The stated goal is to help you see the problems; the real one is to drain confidence and motivation. It works because it disguises itself as reasonableness: anyone who protests looks unable to take criticism.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Objections in rapid fire, all presented as help, none accompanied by a solution. They come mostly when the idea is newborn and fragile. They hit the person more than the project: "But you don't have any experience," "With your personality?" And they come back with every new project, not just the weak ones.

◆ EXAMPLE

You tell your cousin you want to open a small bakery. Your cousin starts in: "The market is saturated, taxes will eat you alive, and what if you can't find customers? Besides, you've never run anything." Twenty minutes later you don't want to talk about it with anyone. Not one of the objections contained a piece of advice.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Tell the two advocates apart: the real one criticizes the idea to make it stronger and proposes solutions; the fake one criticizes to tear it down. You can say thanks and put it off: "Thanks. I'll think about the problems later. Right now I'm gathering ideas." In a group, assign the role officially and with a time limit: "Ten minutes for objections, then we move on to solutions." And choose carefully whom you tell about newborn projects.

TECHNIQUE 466

RED FLAG

Fake Forgiveness

➤ WHAT IT IS

Theatrically forgiving someone for a tiny mistake, one that doesn't exist, or even one committed by the forgiver. The goal isn't to make peace: it's to climb onto the judge's bench and put the other person in the defendant's seat. Refusing forgiveness is socially difficult, because it smacks of arrogance: so the role of the guilty party sticks.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

A small incident becomes a drama, closed with a solemn line: "OK, I forgive you." Often in front of others, because an audience is needed to witness such magnanimity. At work it takes its most dangerous form: the boss's mistake gets pinned on someone else, who is then publicly "forgiven" in a meeting.

➤ EXAMPLE

In a meeting, the boss says: "I know Chester made a mistake on the quote, but we all make mistakes, and I'm choosing to move forward." Chester knows that the last change to the quote was made by the boss, the night before. But now, in front of everyone, the forgiven culprit is Chester.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Reject the premise, calmly: "Thanks, but there's nothing to forgive: it was a small mix-up." If the mistake isn't yours, clarify right away who did what: "Just to be clear, the numbers in the file are the ones you entered on Tuesday evening." In the face of theatrical forgiveness for trivial things, a neutral "OK" and a change of subject take away the stage. People who play this way are looking for power, not peace: don't feel indebted.

TECHNIQUE 467

RED FLAG

Fake Bluntness

◆ WHAT IT IS

Saying mean things, put-downs, and unrequested judgments while hiding behind the mask of sincerity. People who wear this mask turn rudeness into a moral virtue. The gratuitous attack is presented as the courage to tell the truth, and whoever takes offense comes across as fragile, or as a hypocrite who only wants to hear lies. In the psychology of aggressive communication, studied by authors such as George Simon, it's a way of striking while keeping a superior image.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

The blow is almost always preceded or followed by a self-declaration of honesty: "I'm a direct person, I always say what I think," "I'm telling you straight because I can't fake it." Curiously, this irrepressible sincerity never produces a compliment or an admission of one's own faults: it delivers only jabs at other people's looks, choices, or work, almost always in front of witnesses.

◆ EXAMPLE

During a fitting at a tailor shop in Brooklyn, Beth's coworker Rachel looks at the coat Beth has sewn and says out loud: "I don't mince words: that collar came out crooked, and it would make anyone look old." When Beth's face falls, Rachel raises her hands: "Would you rather I lied?"

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't argue about the judgment and don't defend your sensitivity: take apart the confusion between sincerity and unrequested attack. Answer calmly, looking the other person in the eye: "Being blunt doesn't require being rude. If I need an opinion on my work, I'll ask for it."

TECHNIQUE 468

RED FLAG

Playing the Victim

• WHAT IT IS

Always presenting yourself as the victim of bad luck, of other people, of the system, to get attention, favors, money, and to never answer for your own actions. It's passive control: it doesn't impose itself by force, but through pity. Criticizing someone who seems to be suffering makes us feel cruel, and people who wear this mask know it very well.

• HOW TO SPOT IT

The cause of the problems is always outside: the hostile boss, the jealous coworkers, bad luck. Every criticism is met with a sad story that shifts the conversation: "Don't you understand how much I'm suffering?" The requests for help never end, and no help really changes the situation. The pain, real or exaggerated, becomes a shield against any discussion of the present.

• EXAMPLE

Every time you remind your brother about the loan from two years ago, the answer is a list of misfortunes: the unstable job, his back, the rent. You feel guilty for asking. Meanwhile, on social media, photos of his weekend at the spa appear.

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Hold empathy and responsibility together: "I'm really sorry about what you're going through, but the loan still has to be paid back." Separate the past from the present: a hard life doesn't justify the way they treat you today. Shift the conversation to solutions: "What do you plan to do, concretely, to change things?" People who only want attention usually don't like this question. And learn to say no without feeling like a bad person.

TECHNIQUE 469

RED FLAG

Pain as a Shield

◆ WHAT IT IS

Responding to a legitimate criticism not on its merits, but by loudly complaining of being offended, attacked, persecuted. It's sometimes called crybullying. The alleged emotional harm becomes the new topic, and the person who made the criticism finds themselves cast as the bully. Nobody talks about the original issue anymore.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Faced with a fact or a correction, the reaction is out of proportion: "This is an attack," "You're all ganging up on me," "The atmosphere here is toxic." No response on the content, lots of words about one's own state of mind. It often happens in public, or with an audience summoned on purpose, because someone needs to see the "victim."

◆ EXAMPLE

At the festival volunteers' meeting, you point out, with the quotes attached, that the tent rental chosen by the coordinator costs twice as much as the others. The answer comes within a minute: "I'm shocked by this tone. I do all of this for free and I'm treated like a thief." Messages of solidarity pour in. The quotes sit there, unanswered.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't apologize for the content, if you expressed it civilly. Separate the idea from the person: "I'm sorry if you felt it as an attack. It wasn't. The question remains: why does this quote cost so much more?" Always bring the discussion back to the facts, calmly and in writing. Honest criticism isn't violence, and you don't need anyone's permission to make it.

TECHNIQUE 470

RED FLAG

Cruelty Disguised as a Joke

• WHAT IT IS

Saying something offensive in the tone of a joke, so you can take it back the moment the other person reacts. “Brave choice, that color!” with a smirk. If you’re offended, the blame becomes yours: “Oh, come on, I was kidding. Don’t you have a sense of humor?” The joke acts as a mask: the blow lands, but the person delivering it stays clean. Psychologists call it passive aggression: the hostility is there, but it hides behind a form that can’t be challenged without looking like you’re upset over nothing.

• HOW TO SPOT IT

Jokes always about the same things: weight, work, family, intelligence. Impressions, nicknames, “affectionate” teasing. Often in front of others who laugh, so protesting seems over the top. And always the same exit line: “It was a joke,” “You’re too sensitive.”

• EXAMPLE

At dinner with coworkers, Rhonda talks about her new project. Fabian, her manager, smiles: “Nice! Is the idea actually yours this time?” Everyone laughs. The next day Rhonda tells him that line hurt her, and he spreads his arms: “It was a joke. You’re so uptight.”

• HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t laugh out of politeness: laughing confirms that the blow landed. Respond to the content, not the tone, calmly: “That doesn’t sound like a joke to me. What exactly did you mean?” When you hear “It was a joke,” don’t argue about humor: “Jokes make both people laugh. This one didn’t.” If it happens all the time, keep count: one joke is an accident, ten are a method.

TECHNIQUE 471

RED FLAG

Deny, Attack, Play the Victim

♦ WHAT IT IS

It's the most complete form of turning the tables: the person who did wrong doesn't just shift the blame, but presents themselves as the real victim. In 1997 the psychologist Jennifer Freyd, at the University of Oregon, named this sequence DARVO: deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender. It's typical of people who have to answer for abusive behavior.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes in three steps, often in the same conversation. First the denial: "Nothing happened." Then the attack: "You're the one who always overreacts, you're the one who provokes me." Finally the reversal: "Look how you make me feel. You treat me like a monster." In the end, the person who was wronged finds themselves consoling, and sometimes apologizing.

♦ EXAMPLE

After an evening of harsh insults, Darren tells Jada that things can't go on like this. The answer: "Insults? I just told you the truth. You're the one who drives me crazy. Go ahead and cry, so I come off as the bad guy." Half an hour later, Darren is the one apologizing, and he's no longer sure what for.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Recognize the sequence: just naming it helps you not get lost. Keep the fact at the center: "The point isn't who provoked whom. The point is how you talked to me." Don't accept blame that isn't yours. Write down what happens and tell someone outside the relationship or a professional. This pattern is a warning sign of psychological abuse, and an outside view keeps you from getting sucked in.

TECHNIQUE 472

RED FLAG

Theatrical Remorse

➤ WHAT IT IS

After hurting someone, staging an exaggerated show of remorse: desperate crying, “I’m a monster,” “I don’t deserve you,” grand promises. The goal isn’t to make amends; it’s to disarm the other person’s anger and turn it into compassion. Real remorse is quiet and focuses on the harm done. Theatrical remorse is loud and focuses on its own suffering.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The scene is always bigger than the wrong. Attention shifts from the person who was hurt to the person who did the hurting, who “feels terrible.” Sometimes veiled threats of self-harm appear, which frighten and freeze the other person. And after a few days, or a few weeks, everything goes back to how it was, until the next scene.

➤ EXAMPLE

Lucy finds out that Max has lost money on online betting again. Before she can say a word, he bursts into tears, drops to his knees, and says his life means nothing without her. Lucy spends the evening comforting him. They never talk about the emptied account.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Measure remorse by what changes in the following weeks, not by the volume of the tears. Don’t start consoling: “I see you’re hurting, but that doesn’t change what happened. Let’s talk about that.” Ask for a concrete plan: “What exactly will you do so it doesn’t happen again?” Remember the earlier scenes: if the script repeats, the past is the best prediction. And if threats of self-harm appear, don’t handle it alone: call 911 or the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988.

TECHNIQUE 473

RED FLAG

The Fake Hero

◆ WHAT IT IS

Secretly creating a problem in order to solve it in front of everyone, and come off as the one who saves the day. People who wear this mask are arsonist and firefighter at once: they collect gratitude and admiration for a fire they started themselves. It works because, in the relief of a crisis resolved, nobody thinks to ask where it started.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

Crises that repeat, with the same person always ready at the right moment. The rescue is showy: announced all-nighters, frantic phone calls, “good thing I was here.” Afterward, an insistent need for recognition. In couples it becomes a cycle: first the emotional storm, provoked, then the comforting hug from the same person who provoked it.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a small professional office, the server crashes for the third time in two months, always on the eve of a deadline. Each time the in-house technician stays until midnight and saves everything, to everyone’s thanks. On the fourth crash, the owner calls in an outside consultant: the crashes all started from a login with the technician’s credentials.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Be wary of heroes who are always in the right place. Look at the patterns: do the crises repeat? Is the rescuer always the same person? Investigate the origin of the problem, not just the solution: who had access, who stood to gain? Ask openly: “Thanks for fixing it. Now let’s figure out together why it happens every month.” And watch out for the hunger for applause after the rescue. People who really fix things usually care most that it doesn’t happen again.

TECHNIQUE 474

RED FLAG

Feigned Naivety

➤ WHAT IT IS

Doing someone wrong and then presenting yourself as someone who didn't know, didn't understand, didn't imagine. The American psychologist George Simon, in his 1996 book *In Sheep's Clothing*, lists it among the tactics of covert aggressors: feigning innocence or confusion so as not to answer for what you've done. It's a convenient mask, because getting angry with someone who "didn't know" seems excessive.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Lines like "Oh, I didn't think it bothered you," "Was it really that important?" "I didn't realize it was that particular day." The signal is the repetition: the same oversight comes back even after it's been clearly explained, and it always goes in the direction that suits the person committing it. On things they care about, the same person remembers every detail.

➤ EXAMPLE

You've asked your business partner several times not to schedule appointments on Friday afternoons, when you take your mother to dialysis. For the third time you find a client on the calendar at three o'clock. "Sorry, it completely slipped my mind." The Thursday pickup basketball game, on the other hand, has never slipped anyone's mind.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't argue about what the other person knew: argue about what's happening. "Maybe it slipped your mind, but this is the third time, and Friday afternoon stays free." Block the time directly on the shared calendar, so naivety has no more room. And when a coincidence always benefits the same side, stop calling it an oversight.

TECHNIQUE 475

RED FLAG

Triangulation

◆ WHAT IT IS

Instead of talking with you directly, the manipulator brings in a third person: as a messenger, as a point of comparison, as a supposed ally. That way they create jealousy, rivalry, and confusion, and stay at the top of the triangle while the other two eye each other with suspicion. Attention shifts from the manipulator's behavior to the third person, who becomes "the problem."

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It happens in couples and families, with lines like "Agnes thinks you're overreacting too," "This never happened with the person before you," "I talked to your sister about it, and she agrees with me." Criticism never comes to your face, but always through someone else. The result is the same: two people competing for the approval of a third.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the office, the department head tells Nick: "I'm worried about Tina. Could you talk to her?" Then she tells Tina that Nick "has some doubts about her work." Within a month the two coworkers aren't speaking, and the department head has never had to confront anyone.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask for direct communication: "If you have a problem with me, talk to me about it. What Agnes thinks has nothing to do with it." Remember that the third person is usually a pawn, not an enemy: if you can, clear things up with them directly: "I was told you have doubts about my work. I'd rather we talk about it between us." When needed, propose that all three of you talk together: people who triangulate fear an open conversation. And if the triangle is the usual way of being together, the only winning move is to step out of it.

CHAPTER 20

Traps of Debate and Rhetoric

A debate isn't always won with reason: it's often won with moves. Here you'll find the rhetorical traps you run into in meetings, in group chats, in family arguments, and on TV. The last techniques are the most advanced moves, and the very last one is the countermove for arguing well even when the other person plays dirty.

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TECHNIQUE 476

RED FLAG

“Look Who’s Talking”

◆ WHAT IT IS

Rejecting a criticism by throwing the same fault back at the person making it. In Latin it’s called *tu quoque*, “you too.” The criticism isn’t refuted: it gets shifted onto the speaker’s inconsistency. It works because hypocrisy irritates us more than almost anything else, and when we see it, we stop listening to the argument.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the lines that turn the finger around: “You’re telling me that?” “Look who’s talking,” “Oh yeah? What about you, last year?” All it takes is finding a stain in the other person’s past, even a small one, for the discussion to change targets. It often ends in a chain of accusations, further and further from the starting point.

◆ EXAMPLE

The neighbor on the second floor points out to Max that his dog barks every night. Max answers: “You’re talking about noise? With the washing machine you run at eleven at night?” The neighbor apologizes for the washing machine and goes back home. The dog keeps barking.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If the criticism you receive is true, accept it and keep it separate: “You’re right about the washing machine. I’ll move it to the morning. But the dog is still a problem: how do we solve it?” And if you’re the one criticizing, remember that you don’t need to be perfect to be right. A doctor who smokes is wrong to smoke, but right when she says smoking is bad for you.

TECHNIQUE 477

RED FLAG

The False Dilemma

➤ WHAT IT IS

Presenting a complicated situation as if it had only two exits, usually one good and one terrible. Listeners choose the good one without noticing that there were many more alternatives. It's the classic "you're either with us or against us." It works because two options are easier to think about than ten.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

Next to the proposal someone wants to push through, a disastrous alternative appears: "Either we cut staff costs, or we close at the end of the year." Everything in between disappears. In sales it's used in a soft version: "Would you prefer it in white or gray?" a question that takes the purchase for granted.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the condo board meeting, the property manager says: "Either we approve a complete facade renovation today, or a year from now chunks of plaster will fall on someone's head." The facade project passes. Nobody asks whether it would have been enough to fix the cornice, the only part that was really damaged.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you hear an "either... or..." stop and ask: "Are these really the only two?" Then add at least a third path yourself; just one is enough to break the pattern: "We could have the cornice made safe and decide about the facade with a second quote." When the options become three, the choice is back in your hands.

TECHNIQUE 478

RED FLAG

The Appeal to Emotion

◆ WHAT IT IS

Getting a claim accepted by stirring up a strong emotion instead of providing evidence: fear, pity, pride, anger. When an emotion rises, fast, instinctive thinking takes charge, and slow, critical thinking steps aside. The stronger the feeling, the truer the conclusion seems.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it because the speech talks to the gut and not to the question. Instead of explaining why something is right, it shows something that frightens, moves, or outrages: the house burglarized at night, the child in tears, “a real American would never do that.” The emotion does the work, and the reasoning never arrives.

◆ EXAMPLE

A salesman for a tutoring program meets with Mr. and Mrs. Collins after their son’s bad report card. Before talking about prices, he spends ten minutes on the risk of the boy being held back: “Do you really want him to repeat the year and fall behind his classmates?” Then he pulls out the annual contract with monthly installments. The Collinses sign without asking how many hours of lessons are included, or what a private tutor would cost.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Name the emotion you’re feeling: “This is guilt.” Then ask yourself whether the proposal would hold up without that emotional pressure. Before giving an answer, compare other options and check the concrete numbers: the program, the actual hours, the costs of three different alternatives. “I never decide at the first meeting. Leave me the brochure and we’ll talk it over at home.” Important decisions are made at room temperature.

TECHNIQUE 479

RED FLAG

The Appeal to Popularity

➤ WHAT IT IS

Claiming that an idea is true, or right, because lots of people believe it. In Latin it's called *argumentum ad populum*. Popularity becomes the proof. It plays on two strong instincts: following others when we don't know what to do, and the fear of being left out of the group. In closed groups it also becomes a way to silence dissenters: "You think you know more than all of us?"

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

In the commercial version it's a number: "America's best-seller," "Thousands of customers have already chosen it." In the group version it's a question that isolates: "We all agree except you: doesn't that make you wonder?" In both cases nobody explains why the idea is good: it's enough to count the people backing it.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a training course for real estate agents, Elise asks whether the method really works or whether there's any data. The trainer smiles: "Hundreds of agencies across the country use it. You think they're all wrong?" The room laughs, and Elise doesn't ask another question all afternoon.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Separate the number from the proof: "I know it's widespread. But how do we know it works?" Remember that the majority has been wrong many times: for centuries, doctors treated patients by bloodletting. And if you find yourself in the minority in a group, you don't have to prove you're smarter than everyone. You only need to ask for the evidence.

TECHNIQUE 480

RED FLAG

The Wrong Authority

✦ WHAT IT IS

Backing a claim with the opinion of someone who is famous, or an expert, but not in that subject. We trust experts to save ourselves effort, and it's usually a good shortcut. The catch lies in confusing fame with expertise, or in believing that someone good in one field is good in all of them.

✦ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the big name put in place of evidence: “Even a Nobel Prize winner says so,” “That football player recommended it,” “There’s a doctor online who explains it.” Nobody checks whether that person actually works on that subject, or whether the other experts in the field agree.

✦ EXAMPLE

In the pickup soccer group chat, Fabian shares a video of a famous engineer explaining how a no-carb diet extends your life. “He’s one of the most brilliant minds in the country,” he writes. Three friends start the diet the following Monday. Nobody notices that the engineer has never worked on nutrition.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask three questions. Is this person an expert in this specific subject? Is what they say the view of most experts, or of a single contrarian? And, beyond the name, what evidence do they bring? “He may be brilliant in his field, but what evidence is there on this?” On health, money, and the law, the opinion that counts is that of the people who deal with it professionally.

TECHNIQUE 481

RED FLAG

Anecdote Versus Data

➤ WHAT IT IS

Using a single personal story, charged with emotion, to refute data gathered from thousands of cases. The brain remembers stories much better than numbers: a story has a face, a name, a scene; a statistic is abstract. That's why a single case, well told, weighs more than any study.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the formula "I know a guy who..." Faced with general data, out comes the exception experienced up close: the grandfather who smoked until he was ninety, a friend's cousin who died in a plane crash, the neighbor who got rich on crypto. The story is true, but it's used as if it were the rule.

➤ EXAMPLE

Anna explains to her brother that riding a scooter without a helmet is much riskier. Her brother replies: "My friend Chris fell without a helmet and didn't get hurt at all. Johnny, on the other hand, was wearing one and broke his collarbone." End of discussion, and the helmet stays in the garage.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Acknowledge the story without letting it become the rule: "Luckily Chris was fine. But one case doesn't tell you what happens to most people who fall." Remember that you can prove almost anything with a story: for every grandfather who smoked and was perfectly healthy, there's someone who got sick from smoking at fifty. Ask what the rule is, not what the exception is.

TECHNIQUE 482

RED FLAG

Whataboutism

◆ WHAT IT IS

Answering a problem by saying there are more serious ones: “With all the trouble this country is in, you’re worried about potholes?” The issue isn’t refuted: it’s downgraded. Besides whataboutism, it’s also called the fallacy of relative privation. It works because it sounds like a call for a sense of proportion, and anyone who insists comes across as someone who gets lost in trivia. But if it always held, no problem could ever be tackled: there’s always a bigger one.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

“That’s not the real problem,” “There are more important things,” “Worry about... instead.” It arrives when a concrete request is inconvenient: the fault to be fixed, the meeting that runs over, the bill to be paid. And often even the bigger problem, the one mentioned to close the discussion, never gets dealt with.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the Monday meeting, Sandy asks to replace the office printer, which jams every day. The manager sighs: “With the software migration and the year-end deadlines, we’re talking about the printer?” They move on to the next item. A year later the software is still the same, and the printer still jams.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Acknowledge the big problem without letting yourself be moved: “Agreed, the software matters too. But the printer is cheap and can be replaced in two days: let’s decide today.” A more serious issue doesn’t make the smaller one any less real. And ask who will handle the “far more important” problem, and by when.

TECHNIQUE 483

RED FLAG

“Always” and “Never”

✦ WHAT IT IS

Turning a single mistake into a character flaw, with absolute words: “always,” “never,” “everything,” “nothing.” A specific fact becomes a label on the person. It’s a distortion you hear often in fights, and it wears down the person on the receiving end: little by little they stop seeing one specific mistake and start believing it’s part of who they are.

✦ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up as an explosion after something small: a forgotten bill becomes “You can never be trusted,” a delay becomes “You only ever think about yourself.” The more it’s repeated, the more the label sticks. The person using it doesn’t want to fix the mistake: they want to define the person.

✦ EXAMPLE

Tom forgets to stop at the pharmacy for his daughter’s ear drops. His wife, in front of her parents: “Typical. You never remember anything that has to do with this family.” Tom, who took the little girl to the pediatrician twice that week, hangs his head and apologizes for everything.

✦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Bring the label back to the fact: “I forgot the drops, and that’s a mistake. It’s not true that I never remember anything: on Tuesday and Thursday, I was the one at the pediatrician’s.” Ask for specific examples in place of “always.” And inside yourself, hold on to the distinction between a single mistake today and your worth as a person.

TECHNIQUE 484

RED FLAG

The Exception That Proves the Rule

◆ WHAT IT IS

Using a case that contradicts a rule as if it confirmed it. The saying comes from a principle of Roman law that meant something else: if a sign prohibits parking on Sundays, that means you can park on the other days. In everyday use, it has become a way of rescuing a rule that the facts have already disproved.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

It comes out as soon as someone offers a counterexample. Instead of saying “then I was wrong,” people say “exactly, that’s the exception.” The phrase sounds like folk wisdom, closes the discussion with a smile, and turns evidence against into evidence in favor. The more exceptions arrive, the more the rule seems “proven.”

◆ EXAMPLE

At the diner, Gene insists that young people today don’t want to work. The waitress points to the young man who works shifts with her, studies at night, and has never missed a day. Gene shrugs: “The exception that proves the rule.” And the next round of coffee goes on with the rule intact.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Remember how logic works: an exception doesn’t confirm a rule, it challenges it. A statement like “all young people are lazy” falls at the first counterexample. Answer calmly: “If there are exceptions, then it’s not all of them. So how many is it?” Getting the other person to move from “all” to “some” is already a win.

TECHNIQUE 485

RED FLAG

No True Scotsman

➤ WHAT IT IS

Saving a generalization by changing the definition as soon as a counterexample arrives. The name comes from an example by the British philosopher Antony Flew: “No Scotsman puts sugar on his porridge.” “My uncle is Scottish, and he puts sugar on his.” “Then he’s no true Scotsman.” The rule becomes impossible to disprove, because anyone who breaks it gets thrown out of the category.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the adjective that pops up at the last moment: “true,” “real,” “serious.” “No real professional works with that software,” “Someone who truly loves you would never say no to you.” Every piece of contrary evidence gets thrown out of the group, and the claim stays standing.

➤ EXAMPLE

The tech at the computer store tells Serena that no serious graphic designer works on a budget laptop. Serena points out that her studio does work for two well-known brands on perfectly ordinary laptops. “Then they’re not serious designers,” the tech replies, and offers her the two-thousand-dollar model.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask for the definition before, not after: “What exactly does ‘serious’ mean? How do we measure it?” If the definition changes every time you bring an example, point it out: “First it was ‘no designer,’ now it’s ‘no serious designer.’ The rule is shrinking so it won’t lose.” A claim that no fact can disprove says nothing.

TECHNIQUE 486

RED FLAG

The Single Cause

◆ WHAT IT IS

Giving a complicated event a single cause, ignoring all the others. Reality is a web of causes, but a simple explanation is reassuring. It gives the impression of having understood, and it often supplies a culprit to vent on. That's why whoever offers a single cause almost always finds an audience that applauds.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by phrases with “only,” “it's all the fault of,” “there's just one problem.” A convenient cause gets picked (a coworker, the government, a whole group of people) and presented as the only one. Sometimes it serves to find a scapegoat, other times to sell a miracle solution: if there's one cause, one remedy is enough.

◆ EXAMPLE

Over a year, Patricia's clothing boutique has lost customers. The consultant who sold her a course says it's all because of social media: “If you're not on TikTok, you don't exist.” Patricia puts everything into it. Nobody looks at the other factors: the mall that opened a mile away, the parking that's now paid, the store's hours.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you hear an explanation with a single cause, ask: “And what else?” Try listing at least three possible factors before accepting one. And be wary of anyone who has a single cause and a remedy to sell you at the same time: usually the explanation was chosen to fit the remedy.

TECHNIQUE 487

RED FLAG

The Whole and Its Parts

➤ WHAT IT IS

Two mirror-image mistakes. The first, the fallacy of composition: believing that what's true of the parts is true of the whole. The second, the fallacy of division: believing that what's true of the whole is true of every single part. Transferring a quality from the group to the individual, or the other way around, spares us the effort of examining them one by one.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The composition version sounds like this: "Every ingredient is top quality, so the dish is excellent," "Every player is a champion, so the team wins." The division version goes the other way: "The company is an industry leader, so this branch must be excellent too," "The neighborhood is wealthy, so nobody here needs help."

➤ EXAMPLE

The salesman lists the parts of the road bike for Valerie: carbon frame, high-end Japanese shifters, ultralight wheels. "With these components, it's the best bike on the road." Valerie buys it. But the frame is the wrong size for her height, the fit was set up badly, and the excellent parts, put together, make an uncomfortable bike that's hard to handle.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask yourself whether the quality really passes from the parts to the whole: "Great parts, agreed. But who assembles them? Who stands behind the whole thing?" Conversely, when you're given a big name, ask about the individual: "The company is big, but how does this branch, this product, this person actually work?" A whole has qualities of its own, which aren't the sum of the parts.

TECHNIQUE 488

RED FLAG

The Appeal to Novelty

♦ WHAT IT IS

Claiming something is better just because it's new. It's the mirror image of The Appeal to Tradition, which judges everything that's always been done as better. The new is associated with progress and improvement, and the fear of falling behind does the rest. It's one of the levers advertising uses most.

♦ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by words like “revolutionary,” “next-generation,” “the future is now.” Novelty is presented as an advantage in itself, and the old as something to be ashamed of. Nobody explains how, concretely, the new thing works better.

♦ EXAMPLE

The new sales director arrives and, in his first week, announces that the management software used for ten years has to be replaced with “a next-generation platform.” Six months later the office is doing the same things as before, with more steps and two more subscriptions. Nobody had ever complained about the old software.

♦ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask the comparison questions: “How exactly is it better? What can we do now that we couldn't do before?” Also calculate the cost of the change: money, time to learn it, the mistakes of the first few months. If the advantage doesn't outweigh the cost, the new thing is merely new.

TECHNIQUE 489

RED FLAG

Equivocation

➤ WHAT IT IS

Using a word that has two meanings and switching from one to the other in the middle of the argument, without saying so. The reasoning seems to hold, but it stands only because the same word changed meaning along the way. It's hard to spot, because the brain doesn't notice the switch when the word stays the same.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

First you get a sentence accepted with the most harmless meaning of the word, then you use the same word in the meaning you need. "You also have faith that medicine will make progress, so you can't criticize my faith": the first "faith" is confidence; the second is a belief without evidence.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the travel agency, Sonia asks whether the package to Cancún is all-inclusive. "Of course, all-inclusive." At the hotel she discovers that drinks with meals cost extra. When she gets back, she complains. "All-inclusive, ma'am: flight, hotel, and transfers. Drinks are extra." It was the same word, with two different meanings.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When a key word comes back several times in an argument, stop and ask for a definition: "What exactly do you mean by 'all-inclusive'?" Try replacing the word with its meaning in both sentences: if the argument no longer stands up, you've found the equivocation. For contracts and estimates, get the list in writing, not the label.

TECHNIQUE 490

RED FLAG

The Catch-All Label

◆ WHAT IT IS

Using a vague, all-encompassing label to dismiss an entire argument without discussing it. Everything ends up inside the label, sensible things and absurd things alike, so it can all be thrown away in one go. It's a convenient shortcut, and it also signals which side you're on: people who use the same label feel like they're on the same team.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by words that act as insults without defining anything: “woke,” “politically correct,” “fluff,” “snake oil.” Just stick one on the other person's proposal and you never have to evaluate it. The vaguer the label, the more powerful it is, because it can't be disproved.

◆ EXAMPLE

In a meeting, Matt proposes one work-from-home day a month for people with young children. An executive shuts it down immediately: “More of the usual corporate feel-good stuff.” Nobody discusses the costs, the benefits, who would be eligible. The label did the work of an entire discussion.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Ask for a definition: “What exactly do you mean by feel-good stuff?” The answer is almost always vague. Then bring the conversation back to the concrete proposal: “Let's drop the labels. One day a month, for these people: does it cost us or pay off?” And if different things are in the bin, separate them. Each one has to be judged on its own.

TECHNIQUE 491

RED FLAG

Only What Gets Measured Counts

➤ WHAT IT IS

In a debate, treating as real only what can be turned into an easy-to-count number, and dismissing everything else as nonexistent. In 1971 and 1972 the sociologist Daniel Yankelovich, in the study *Corporate Priorities*, called it the “McNamara fallacy,” after the American Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who in Vietnam measured the progress of the war by body counts, ignoring the support of the population and the morale of the troops. Yankelovich summed it up in four steps: measure what’s easy, disregard what isn’t, declare it unimportant, and finally say it doesn’t exist.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it when the speaker rejects any argument that doesn’t fit in a spreadsheet: “Show me the metric, otherwise it’s just talk,” “The numbers say response times are down, so the service is fine.” Customer trust, a department’s exhaustion, or the quality of a piece of work vanish because they don’t have a column in the table.

➤ EXAMPLE

At a private clinic in Phoenix, the medical director shows Olivia that appointments last eight minutes on average: “Excellent productivity.” Olivia points out that patients leave confused and switch doctors, but the director cuts her off: “Confusion isn’t a data point.”

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t dispute the number: show that it measures only one piece of reality. Bring concrete consequences that the table leaves out: “The number of minutes is accurate, but it only counts speed. If we look at how many patients never come back, the picture changes.”

TECHNIQUE 492

RED FLAG

The Insinuating Question

◆ WHAT IT IS

Launching a suspicion in the form of a question, so as not to have to take responsibility for an accusation. The person asking can always say “I was just asking.” But the doubt, once it’s in the listener’s head, stays there. And the person on the receiving end is trapped: if they stay silent, they seem to be hiding something; if they deny it forcefully, they seem defensive.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by questions that carry a rumor or a suspicion inside them: “There’s a rumor going around that... care to comment?” “Is everything OK? You haven’t seemed like yourself lately.” The tone is often kind, almost caring, which makes it even harder to react.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the co-op’s general meeting, a board member asks the treasurer, Albert: “Were there any unusual transactions in the account this summer? I’m only asking for the sake of transparency.” There were no unusual transactions. But from that day on, when Albert presents the books, someone checks them twice.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don’t respond to the rumor: ask where it comes from. “What transactions are you talking about, exactly? Who told you about them?” Then send the burden back to the person who asked: “If there’s an accusation, let’s make it properly, with the documents in hand.” In front of everyone, the request for precision shifts the embarrassment onto the person who insinuated.

TECHNIQUE 493

RED FLAG

The Question That Asks for a Yes

➤ WHAT IT IS

Paying yourself a compliment in the form of a question, so that the other person has to say yes so as not to seem ungrateful or hostile: “I’ve always treated you fairly, haven’t I?” That yes seems harmless, but it creates a precedent: after saying it, it becomes harder to contradict yourself.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The question combines two things: a fact that’s true, or nearly true, and a convenient conclusion. “With all the extra work I’ve done, don’t you think I deserve something?” Saying no would mean opening a conflict, and most people choose the quieter path: they nod. From then on, that yes is used as a commitment.

➤ EXAMPLE

Her brother-in-law asks Danielle: “Whenever you needed me, I was always there, right?” Danielle says yes, because it’s true. Her brother-in-law goes on: “Then you won’t have a problem cosigning my mortgage.” The first yes has already set up the second.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Split the question in two and answer only the true part: “Yes, you’ve helped me out, and I’m grateful. But cosigning the mortgage is something else, and I’ll evaluate it on its own.” Acknowledge the past without letting it become an IOU you have to pay off. Gratitude and obligation aren’t the same thing.

TECHNIQUE 494

Paralipsis

◆ WHAT IT IS

Saying something while pretending not to want to say it: “I won’t mention the fact that...”, “Let’s set aside that...”, “Heaven forbid I suggest that...” Classical rhetoric calls it paralipsis, and Cicero was already using it in his speeches. It works because the speaker brings the argument into play and, at the same moment, presents themselves as a decent person who declines to use it.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

It’s a genuine figure of speech, with a fair use: recalling a strong point without weighing down the speech. “I won’t bother reminding you about the three-year warranty. You already know about it.” In the unfair version it serves to insinuate. You name an opponent’s inconvenient fact, declare that you don’t want to use it, and leave it to do its work in the audience’s heads.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the election for the new president of the sports club, one candidate says: “I don’t want to talk about how the money from the summer party was handled. This isn’t the time. Let’s talk about the future.” Nobody had ever raised doubts about the party. From that evening on, everybody is wondering about it.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

When you hear “I don’t want to say that...,” ask yourself: “What did they just say, really?” Then put the topic back on the table in the open: “You mentioned the party money. If there’s a problem, let’s say so and look at the books; if there isn’t, let’s really drop it.” A paralipsis brought into the light loses almost all its effect.

TECHNIQUE 495

RED FLAG

The Reversed Burden of Proof

➤ WHAT IT IS

Making a claim without evidence and then challenging the other person to prove it false. The philosopher Bertrand Russell explained it in 1952 with his teapot: if someone claimed that a teapot was orbiting the Sun between Earth and Mars, too small for any telescope to see, nobody could disprove it. But that wouldn't be a good reason to believe it.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the challenge "Prove to me it isn't true." The person making the claim brings nothing; the listener ends up searching for contrary evidence, which often doesn't exist, because proving that something isn't there is almost impossible. If the search fails, the person who made the claim declares victory.

➤ EXAMPLE

At the office, a coworker claims the new manager got her job through connections. Grace asks what that's based on. The answer: "And how do you know it isn't true? Prove it." Grace can't prove it, and the rumor goes around the whole floor.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't accept the challenge: if you start looking for contrary evidence, you're playing by the other person's rules. Put the burden back where it belongs: "You said it, so it's up to you to bring the evidence." You can use the rule made famous by the journalist Christopher Hitchens. What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.

TECHNIQUE 496

RED FLAG

The Perfect Solution

◆ WHAT IT IS

Rejecting a good solution because it isn't perfect. It's also called the Nirvana fallacy. A real proposal, with its flaws, is compared with an ideal solution that doesn't exist, and since the real proposal loses the comparison, the decision is to do nothing. The person using it seems demanding and conscientious; in reality, they're defending the problem that already exists.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by phrases like "It won't solve everything anyway," "It's not a permanent solution," "Until there's a real solution, there's no point starting." A flaw is found for every proposal, and the flaw becomes the reason to stay put. It works because a flaw can always be found in any real solution.

◆ EXAMPLE

At the school board meeting, a mom proposes a walking school bus: parents take turns walking the kids to school, to cut down on traffic in front of the entrance. The board president objects: "It doesn't solve the problem. Lots of families live far away." The walking school bus never starts. And all the traffic stays, including from the families who live five minutes away.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Compare the proposal with the real alternative, not with the ideal: "It doesn't solve everything, that's true. But compared with today, when we're doing nothing, does it make things better or worse?" Remember the old saying: perfect is the enemy of good. A step in the right direction is worth more than a perfect solution that never arrives.

TECHNIQUE 497

RED FLAG

The False Moral Dilemma

➤ WHAT IT IS

A rigged choice in which every path makes you look like a bad person, except the one that suits the person proposing it. You're no longer choosing between two actions, but between being a good person and being a selfish one. It plays on a very powerful need: to feel like, and look like, a good person.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

It shows up as an "either... or..." loaded with guilt: "Either you lend me the money, and prove you love me, or you keep it, and prove you only care about yourself." One of the two paths is labeled love, loyalty, generosity; the other, selfishness. The middle paths disappear, and your needs with them.

➤ EXAMPLE

In November, Gabriel's mother tells him: "Either you spend Christmas here with me, since I'm all alone, or you go to the mountains with your girlfriend and leave your mother crying." Gabriel cancels the week he'd booked months before. His girlfriend goes to the mountains, with her friends.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Name the trap: "You're giving me two choices, and both of them make me feel guilty. That's not an honest choice." Reject the label: saying no to a request doesn't make anyone selfish. Then build the third path, one that holds affection and needs together: "I love you, and that's exactly why I'll come to you on the 27th and we'll spend two whole days together."

TECHNIQUE 498

RED FLAG

The Avalanche of Arguments

◆ WHAT IT IS

Burying an opponent under a barrage of claims, half-truths, and questions, one after another, without leaving time to answer any of them. It's known as the Gish gallop, after Duane Gish, an American creationist famous for this style in public debates. It works because of an asymmetry the Italian software developer Alberto Brandolini made famous in 2013: saying something false takes a second; debunking it takes minutes.

◆ HOW TO SPOT IT

You recognize it by the speed and the quantity: ten points in a minute, figures rattled off without sources, constant changes of topic. The person answering manages to take apart one or two; all the others stay standing, and the audience counts them as points scored. Online it takes the form of a wall of text, full of links.

◆ EXAMPLE

At a city council meeting open to the public, Lawrence asks why the bike lane by his house has been stalled for a year. The councilman answers with a flood: state funding, lawsuits, the previous contractor, water main work, bad weather, the other bike lanes already completed, the previous administration. Lawrence doesn't know where to start, and his speaking time runs out.

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Don't try to answer everything: that's exactly the trap. Pick the most important point, or the weakest, and work on that alone: "You've said a lot of things. I'll stop on one: when does construction restart, and on what date?" If needed, name the technique: "That's ten arguments in one minute. Let's take them one at a time." Asking to slow down is always legitimate.

TECHNIQUE 499

RED FLAG

The Motte and Bailey

➤ WHAT IT IS

Alternating between two similar claims: an ambitious one that's hard to defend, and a modest one nobody disputes. Medieval castles had a bailey, a courtyard that was comfortable to live in but exposed, and a motte, a tower on a hill that was uncomfortable but impregnable. The philosopher Nicholas Shackel proposed the name in 2005. You live in the bailey; when the attack comes, you retreat to the tower.

➤ HOW TO SPOT IT

The ambitious claim is asserted as long as nobody objects. As soon as someone asks for evidence, the speaker falls back on the obvious one: "But all I said was..." The critic seems to be disputing something obvious, and looks nitpicky. Once the danger has passed, the speaker goes back to the strong claim, as if it had been proven.

➤ EXAMPLE

The owner of a beauty salon promises that her treatment "eliminates cellulite in a month." After a month, Monica sees no difference and complains. "Look, I've always said that taking care of your body is good for you." The next day, the sign in the window still says: eliminates cellulite in a month.

➤ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Hold the two claims apart and show the jump: "Agreed, taking care of your body is good for you. But the sign says something else: eliminates cellulite in a month. That's the sentence I'm asking you to back up." When you hear the strong promise, ask for it to be written into the contract or the recap message, so it can't be taken back. A promise has to be defended in the form in which it was sold.

TECHNIQUE 500

Strengthen the Other Side's Argument

◆ WHAT IT IS

It's the opposite of The Straw Man: before answering, you restate the other person's position in its best version, stronger than they put it. It's often called *steelmanning*. The philosopher Daniel Dennett made it famous as the first of "Rapoport's rules," named after the psychologist Anatol Rapoport, for criticizing honestly. People who feel understood lower their defenses, and your answer carries much more weight.

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Listen all the way through, then summarize the other person's position in your own words, adding the best reasons they have: "If I understand correctly, you're saying that... and on this point you're right." Ask for confirmation: "Is that it?" Answer only when the other person says "yes, that's exactly it." First list what you agree on, then where you don't.

◆ EXAMPLE

In a family argument over selling the beach house, instead of attacking his brother, Steve says: "Let me see if I've got it: for you, that house is the last memory of our parents, and selling it now, with prices low, would mean losing twice. Is that it?" His brother nods, surprised. From there the discussion changes: how do we keep the memory, and how much does it cost us to keep it?

◆ HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

If someone uses it with you, it's usually a good sign: you're dealing with an honest counterpart. But check that the summary is really faithful, and if it isn't, correct it right away: "Almost. I didn't say never, I said now." An accepted summary becomes the foundation of the whole discussion, so it has to be yours.

RECOMMENDED READING

The studies and experiments are cited in each technique with their authors and year. Here you'll find the books: the ones cited in the techniques and four classics to start with.

TO GET STARTED

Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, 1984
Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 2011
Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge*, 2008
Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes*, 1981

PERSUASION AND NEGOTIATION

Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, 1936
William Ury, *Getting Past No*, 1991
Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference*, 2016
Rob Fitzpatrick, *The Mom Test*, 2013

STORIES AND COMMUNICATION

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949
Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick*, 2007
Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor*, 2001
Donald Miller, *Building a StoryBrand*, 2017
James W. Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns*, 2011
Thomas Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training*, 1970

THE MIND, DECISIONS, AND BODY LANGUAGE

Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity*, 2013
Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan*, 2007
Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*, 1995
Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, 1966
Paul Ekman, *Telling Lies*, 1985

GROUPS, RELATIONSHIPS, AND MANIPULATION

Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 1972

George K. Simon, *In Sheep's Clothing*, 1996

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Geraldine M. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties*, 1973

Patrick S. Byrne and Barrie E. L. Long, *Doctors Talking to Patients*, 1976

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EVERY DAY, SOMEONE TRIES TO DECIDE **FOR YOU.**

At work, at home, in stores, in a negotiation or an argument: the levers that move our decisions are always the same. This manual gathers them all. **500 techniques of persuasion and manipulation**, one per page, explained through the studies that discovered them and through everyday examples.

- **One technique, one page.** What it is, how to use it or how to spot it, a real example, and how to defend yourself, with the exact words to say.
- **Use it or spot it.** Unfair techniques carry a RED FLAG, so you can tell honest persuasion from deception at a glance.
- **First Aid.** 14 tough situations, from the contract you are about to sign to the argument that keeps going in circles, with the techniques to read right away.
- **Alphabetical index** of all 500 techniques, plus recommended reading to go deeper.

For anyone who wants to stop being pushed around, command respect, and truly understand how people work.