MY WAY.
OR NO WAY.

When everything has to go my way



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INTRODUCTION

I'm not stubborn. I just know what I want.

Thursday, 9:40 p.m. The kitchen. The dishwasher is open and Tom is loading it. Emma is sitting at the table with a cup of tea, pretending to read. She isn't reading. She's watching Tom slide a mug into the bottom rack.

“You're putting mugs on the bottom?”

“There's room.”

“But then they don't get clean inside.”

“They do. It sprays from below.”

“Exactly. It sprays the bottom of the mug, not the inside.”

Tom takes the mug out, holds it for a moment and puts it back in exactly the same place. In relationship diplomacy, this gesture is roughly equivalent to planting a flag on a captured hill.

“Fine. You do it, since you know better.”

“I'm not saying I know better. I'm just saying mugs go on top.”

“Same thing.”

“It isn't. And why do you take everything I say as an attack?”

“And why are you always standing behind me with a comment whenever I do anything?”

Six minutes later, nobody is talking about mugs anymore. They're talking about who forgot to take the bins out last week, whose mother has what to say about what, and why “you always” and “you never”. At 10:05 Emma reloads the dishwasher. At 10:06 Tom announces he's going to bed. At 10:07 they're both lying in bed, and both of them feel they were right.

In the morning the dishes are clean. All of them. Even the mugs.

Small thing, big fight

If this scene seems exaggerated, try to remember your own last argument about something completely trivial. Which way to drive to Grandma's. Whether tomatoes go in the fridge. Who parks better. How to name files on the shared drive. Which colour marks finished tasks in a spreadsheet.

At work it looks only slightly more dignified. The meeting is supposed to last twenty minutes. Forty minutes later, the team still can't agree whether the client presentation should open with results or with a story. Both ideas are sensible. Both would work. But it stopped being about the presentation long ago. Now it's about whose idea it will be.

You can recognise that moment because the question changes. At first it's: *How do we do this*? Then it quietly turns into: *Who's right here*? And finally: *Who's going to back down*?

From then on it's not about the dishwasher, the route or the presentation. It's about power, recognition and whether the other person takes you seriously. Those are big things. They just hide behind small ones.

And then there's the other one

Maybe you didn't recognise yourself in Emma or Tom. Maybe you're more the person who wouldn't say anything. Mug on the bottom? Fine, leave it. And yet half an hour later you'd quietly reload the dishwasher when nobody was in the kitchen. If someone asked where you wanted to go for dinner, you'd say, “I don't mind.” And then you'd spend the whole evening in a restaurant you can't stand, without a word.

That's also what this book is about. Perhaps surprisingly, it matters just as much as the first thing.

The need to have everything your way and the inability to want anything your way are not two completely different worlds. Often they're

two sides of the same coin. Both are about how we cope when the other person wants something different from us. One person reacts by fighting. The other by escaping. And plenty of people do both: in charge at work, silent at home. Deciding everything with friends, constantly justifying themselves to their parents. Nodding along to the boss, then snapping at their partner about how they loaded the dishwasher.

So the main question of this book is:

> *Why do we sometimes need to decide everything, and at other times disappear even from ourselves?*

What this book is not

It's not a book about how to "kill the ego". Without an ego you'd have no opinions, you couldn't stand up for anything, and you probably wouldn't bother reading books about communication.

Nor is it a guide to pleasing everyone. There are already plenty of people in the world who can please everyone except themselves.

And it's definitely not a book that will tell you stubbornness is a personality disorder and every compromise is a virtue. Sometimes being stubborn is the best thing you can do. And some compromises are just a polite name for giving up something that matters to you.

What this book is

It's about five differences that easily blur together in everyday life:

- **Confidence and ego.** Standing your ground is not the same as needing to win.
- **Compromise and capitulation.** Giving way doesn't mean betraying yourself.

- **Respect and obedience.** Respecting someone's opinion doesn't mean agreeing with it.
- **Control and security.** The need to keep everything under control sometimes has more to do with worry than with strength.
- **Boundaries and stubbornness.** Saying no is fine. It's just that not every no is a healthy boundary.

Once you can recognise these differences at the moment they matter, you don't have to choose between “always win” and “always give in”. You have the whole range of options in between.

How to read this book

The chapters build on each other, but each can also be read on its own. The first half is mostly about *why* we react the way we do. The second half is mostly about *what to do about it*. Chapter 11 is purely practical: twenty-six situations and phrases you can start using right away. At the end you'll find a worksheet for going through your own reactions calmly.

These features recur throughout the text:

? SOUND FAMILIAR?

Short questions to think about. They're not tests and nobody will grade them. They're just for you.

! THE EGO JUST SPOKE

Moments when an ordinary situation turns into a duel. Mostly they're funny. Except that we usually recognise ourselves in them.

TRY IT DIFFERENTLY

Concrete phrases and responses to use instead of the automatic ones.

WHEN YOU GIVE IN TOO MUCH

Situations for those who struggle less with others and more with themselves.

SMALL EXPERIMENT

Small everyday tasks. Not for life. Just for one week, one day or one conversation.

A few notes before we start:

Ego has no gender. The need for the last word and the inability to say no affect women and men alike. That's why the examples in this book alternate between women and men, and between partners, families, friends, workplaces and businesses.

Psychology is not fortune-telling. Where I rely on research, I'll say so. Where something is a possible explanation or just an illustration, I'll say that too. Human behaviour usually has several causes at once, and nobody, not even the author of a book, can tell what's going on in your head from one argument about a dishwasher.

This book is not a substitute for professional help. If you are experiencing humiliation, intimidation or control in your relationship, family or workplace, or you don't feel safe, that is not a communication or

compromise problem. In that case you deserve support from a professional, not advice on how to give in more gracefully.

And now back to the kitchen. The mugs are clean. But something did go wrong that evening. Let's find out what.



1

CHAPTER 1

I'm right. And that's the end of it.

Saturday morning, the drive to the cottage. The satnav suggests the motorway: 58 minutes. Jane knows the route through the villages: 61 minutes, “but at least you don't get stuck”. Martin is driving and takes the motorway. Jane is sure there'll be a queue. There isn't.

“See?” says Martin at the exit.

“We got lucky,” says Jane.

They arrived at the cottage at the same time they'd have arrived through the villages, in the same car, with the same bag. And yet both took away a small wound from the journey. Martin because Jane wouldn't admit he was right. Jane because Martin needed her to admit it.

Exactly the same scene plays out in offices. Lucy wants to send client proposals as PDF attachments. Owen wants to share them as a link to a shared document. Both work, both have small pros and cons. And yet the debate lasts three weeks, survives two meetings and one remark along the lines of “well, as long as *you* know what clients want”.

When two people argue about a method where both methods work, it's not about the method. It's about something else. This chapter is about what.

Why disagreement sometimes feels like an attack

If opinions were just information, disagreement wouldn't hurt. We'd simply note that someone sees things differently and move on. But for most of us, opinions aren't just information. They're pieces of who we are, or who we want to be. Someone who sees themselves as practical treats their “practical” method as proof of their practicality. Someone who prides themselves on knowing things feels any challenge to their knowledge as a challenge to their self-image.

Psychologists describe a phenomenon called **naïve realism**. Most of us tend to believe we see the world as it really is. And if someone sees it differently, only three explanations come to mind: they don't have enough information, they aren't thinking, or they have some hidden agenda. The possibility that they simply have a different and equally legitimate view occurs to us last. This bias is well documented in research and it applies to all of us, not just to "stubborn people".

Studies in which people listened to arguments against their strongly held beliefs while having their brains scanned suggest that areas linked to self-perception and threat responses become active. This should be read with caution: those studies looked at particular kinds of beliefs under laboratory conditions, not at a row over a dishwasher. But it roughly fits what we experience: when something is tied to our identity, disagreement doesn't feel like a different opinion. It feels like an attack.

And we respond to attacks with defence. Not because we're bad or stupid. Because at that moment we're not defending an opinion. We're defending ourselves.

Three drawers: fact, opinion, preference

A large share of pointless arguments could be ended with one question: *Which drawer does this belong in?*

A **fact** is something that can be checked. How many minutes the satnav says the trip takes. Whether the client's contract asks for a PDF. Whether the dishwasher sprays from below. You can only argue about facts until someone checks.

An **opinion** is an interpretation. "The village route is more reliable." "Clients prefer a link because it doesn't clog their inbox." An opinion can be smart, grounded in experience and highly likely. But it's still an opinion, not a fact. It's worth stating, defending and comparing with other opinions.

A **preference** is simply what you like better. You enjoy driving on the motorway. You hate attachments piling up in your inbox. Mugs on top just feel "right" to you. Preferences are legitimate. But they're not arguments. And they can't be won.

The trouble starts when we pass off a preference as a fact. A typical giveaway is the word **"properly"**. *This is how you load it properly. This is the proper way to do it.* In most arguments at home and at work, "properly" means "the way I do it".

! THE EGO JUST SPOKE

A meeting. The team spends thirty minutes debating whether the numbers in a report should be aligned left or right. At the end, someone announces triumphantly: "I happen to know accountants align them right." There isn't a single accountant in the room. The report is read by two managers who only look at the bottom line.

When it's no longer about the thing

Every argument has two levels. On the first, the issue itself is being discussed: the route, the format, the mugs. On the second, the relationship is: who respects whom, who trusts whom, whose word counts.

As long as people are talking on the first level, they can reach an agreement. Once the debate moves to the second, the issue itself stops mattering. You can tell because:

- people start discussing *how* something was said rather than *what* was said,
- old cases come up ("like that time on holiday"),
- the words "always" and "never" appear,
- the dispute wouldn't go away even if the facts were checked.

The last point is the most reliable test. Imagine Jane and Martin could look into the future and find out that both routes take exactly the same time. Would that end the argument? Probably not. Martin would want recognition that his choice wasn't worse. Jane would want recognition that her worry wasn't silly. Neither of them wanted to get to the cottage anymore. Both of them wanted to be seen by the other.

How to tell you're after victory, not a solution

Being right feels good and there's nothing wrong with that. The problem comes when being right matters more than whatever the conversation was supposed to be about. Here are some signs that it's happening:

- While the other person is talking, you already have your counter-argument ready.
- If they said “you're right” too quickly, you'd be slightly disappointed.
- It's not enough that it gets done your way. You need them to *admit* you were right.
- After the conversation you replay in your head what else you should have said.
- You care less about the result than about who suggested it.

? SOUND FAMILIAR?

- When did you last keep arguing even though it was clear the outcome didn't matter?
- How do you feel when someone does something differently from you, and it works?
- Can you say “you're right” without adding “but”?
- Which things do you call “proper” that are really your preferences?

Careful, this isn't a reason to stay silent

You might now be tempted to conclude that it's best never to argue about anything. That's not the point. There are situations where being right really does matter. When a colleague is about to send a client a budget with a mistake in it. When your partner is about to sign a contract they haven't read. When it's about health, money or safety. In those moments it's not ego that's standing firm. It's responsibility.

The difference isn't *whether* you stand your ground. It's *why*. Whether you care about the outcome, or about being the one who was right.

> … WHEN YOU GIVE IN TOO MUCH
>
> There's also the opposite case. You know the client wants a PDF because they told you so explicitly last week. But in the meeting you say nothing, because Owen sounds so confident and you don't want to "make trouble". Two weeks later the client sends an annoyed email. Owen wonders why nobody said anything. And you know you knew.
>
> Staying silent when you have important information isn't modesty. Stating a fact doesn't mean winning an argument. It means giving the team a chance to make a good decision.

What to do: three questions before your next argument

Next time you feel your speech speeding up and a perfect counter-argument assembling itself in your head, try asking yourself three questions for a few seconds:

1. **Which drawer is this in?** Fact, opinion or preference? Check facts. State opinions as opinions ("I think…"). State preferences as prefer-

ences (“I'd rather…”).

2. **What would actually happen if it went their way?** Really, practically. Not “it would be wrong”, but what specifically would go wrong. If the answer is “nothing, really”, you've got a chance to save yourself a lot of energy.
3. **Am I after the thing, or after them admitting I'm right?** If it's recognition you want, it's better to ask for it directly than to fight for it in a roundabout way.

TRY IT DIFFERENTLY

Instead of: “That's nonsense, that's not how it's done.”
Try: “I'd do it differently. Can you show me why you do it that way?”

Instead of: “See? I was right.”
Try: Nothing. Really. If you were right, they know.

Instead of: “This is the proper way to do it.”
Try: “I prefer it this way. Would you mind?”

Instead of: “You always have to have it your way.”
Try: “I feel like we're arguing more about who's right than about the thing itself. What matters to you about this?”

The price of the last word

Martin and Jane made it to the cottage. The argument at the motorway exit lasted two sentences. But each of them took away a small piece of evidence that the other doesn't take them seriously. Evidence like that adds up. Not over one weekend, but over years.

Every argument has room for only one last word. Whoever gets it walks away feeling victorious. But they rarely count what they paid for it. Perhaps a little of the other person's willingness to suggest something

next time. Perhaps the desire to discuss anything with them at all. Perhaps the chance to find out why Jane hates the motorway so much. Maybe she once had an accident there. Maybe all it would have taken was to ask.

We'll meet the price of the last word again in this book. It's one of the most expensive things we buy in everyday life, and we almost never look at the receipt.

SMALL EXPERIMENT

Two methods that work. This week, find one thing at home and one at work that others do differently from you, and that still works. Let them do it their way. Don't comment, don't correct, don't secretly redo it.

At the end of the week, write down:

- What happened to the result?
- What happened to you? Was it hard, or were you just afraid it would be?
- Did the other person notice?

In a nutshell

- When two people argue about a method where both methods work, it's usually no longer about the method but about recognition.
- Disagreement hurts more when the opinion is tied to who we are.
- It helps to separate fact, opinion and preference. The word “properly” often gives away a preference in disguise.
- Standing your ground is fine when it's about the outcome. If it's mainly about winning, it's worth pausing.