



## Episode 913: What You Can Learn from a Hostage Negotiator

Guest: Christopher Voss

**WOODS:** I just told everybody about your book. As I say, I can't remember who it was who recommended it, but I'm really glad I read it. I want to get into something really specific. Normally I start out with generalities. Let's start with something specific. I actually know somebody who was involved in the Harvard Negotiation Project. Awfully nice fellow, friend of Roger Fisher. And I didn't know anything about it other than it sounded like a good idea. They wrote a book called *Getting to Yes*. Surely we all want "yes" at the end. But then recently, I have a guy I follow closely, Ben Settle, who's been obsessing about Jim Camp. He says you've got to read Jim Camp, because Jim Camp turns this whole thing on its head and says, To the contrary, you want to get them to say no, because once you get them to say no, then the honest negotiating can begin. And so when I saw that you had some – eh, obviously skepticism about the Harvard Negotiation Project, I thought, I wonder if I'm going to get me some Jim Camp. And doggone it, I did. So can you talk about those two different approaches?

**VOSS:** Yeah, all right, so the Harvard guys are great, but it's a very intellectual approach. I mean, this stuff is intellectually sound. You can't question it intellectually, which is what Harvard guys do. It's what academics do. But we are irrational – human beings are emotional. We're passionate, and reasonableness is kind of like beauty: it's in the eye of the beholder. I mean, we make up our minds based on what we care about, and if you are willing to accept that crazy idea, then by definition, our decisions are emotional. So the Harvard guys – and I taught at Harvard, actually. I was on the teaching staff at Harvard Law School's negotiation course. It's intellectually sound stuff. And it's good if you want to sit down and have a great academic discussion of, Let's discuss our positions and our interests [laughing].

But so Jim came along – Jim was a friend of mine, and I still collaborate with his company. And he sparked a lot of our ideas. And he said, really, instead of focusing on trying to get people to say yes all the time – which, lawyers call that cornering and it's a way to trap people. The problem with cornering or trapping people is the first opportunity they get to get out of the corner, they do, and it causes deals to go bad. So Jim said, number one, let's tell people up front it's okay to say no. And they're more likely to agree if we stop trying to push them into a corner. And I remember when I first found Jim's book, I said, hey, that's what we do as hostage negotiators. We found out – and Jim wrote in his book – people will die over preserving their right to say no. It's an autonomy issue. I thought, yeah, we found that out a long time ago. So when I stumbled over Jim's book, that was the first time I realized that

this hostage negotiation stuff applied directly to everything else. So then if Jim turned it on its head, then we took it sideways and headed off on a 45-degree angle.

**WOODS:** Well, it disarms people, because no one's expecting you to go that route. I don't remember where the example comes from, but it might be from some movie, where a defense attorney gets up and speaks to the jury and says, Look, my client is basically dead to rights. You've got the murder weapon. His fingerprints are all over it. You've got the motive. So we might as well just say, "Forget it, the guy's guilty," and all go home. And he's got them all so ready to go against his client that the judge jumps in and says, Well, wait a minute, sir; isn't he entitled to a fair trial? So once they realize that wait, okay, we can say no to this guy's client, then they're actually now disarmed and willing to listen. And it's bizarre. And the same thing works in sales, by the way, when you're not so high-pressure. Or even in relationships. When you say, You know, I'm not really sure you're totally into this, so you know, I think maybe we have something. I'm not so sure, but if you want to pursue it sometime – and for some reason, that is what it takes instead of just constantly trying to get a yes.

**VOSS:** Yeah, absolutely. And you see it over and over again. It's very disarming and it's incredibly compelling. I see evidence of it in different places now and again. Ronald Reagan when he debated Jimmy Carter way back when for the presidential election in 1980, at the end of that last debate, he stood up and said – you know, "the great communicator." He said, Ask yourself if you're better off than you were four years ago. And he asked several questions in a row, and all the answers to those questions were no. And he got elected. So yeah, when you give people a chance to say no to something, it makes a huge difference.

**WOODS:** I was really interested in the example in your book about the fundraiser, the Republican fundraiser who would call up and say, "Aren't you mad as hell?" and, "Isn't this a big problem?" "Isn't Obama a bum?", sort of thing. "So, do you want to donate to the Republicans?" And the answer was always no.

**VOSS:** Right, right, right.

**WOODS:** Yeah. And then what'd they do to make – Now, of course, the geniuses in fundraising wouldn't go along with the strategy in the long run because they always stick to whatever was in fashion 20 years ago, but they apparently got a 23% improvement by doing what?

**VOSS:** Yeah, by flipping from yes to no. It was a standard sales call, like all sales calls. Get somebody to say yes three times in a row, then ask for the sale or ask for the money. And of course the first question was, "Do you want to see the Republicans back in the White House in November?" And what my student did was he turned around – and of course, if you proceed, that answer's yes. And instead, he changed it to, "Have you given up on seeing Republicans retaking the White House in November?" And the answer's no. And instead of going for three yeses, they took it to three nos. And the "no" script got a 23% higher rate of return. I mean, it's a way to instantly make yourself 23% better.

**WOODS:** All right, as you know, I'm just obsessed with this point because it just blew me away. It's so counterintuitive. How would you use this principle in an FBI negotiation?

**VOSS:** Well, all right, so if I've got a guy barricaded in a house because he's upset with his wife because his wife – you know, his estranged wife – and I've always loved that term, "estranged" [laughing]. It just cracks me up. But his estranged wife won't let him see the kids, and he's going to kill himself over it. You know, you'd ask that guy, Do you want your wife to win? Do you want your kids to grow up without a father? Do you want your kids to remember this happening? For them to have this be their last memory of you? Different things where the answer's no.

And flip it over to business. Instead of calling somebody on the phone – like the worst thing you can say if you call somebody on the phone is, Have you got a few minutes to talk?

**WOODS:** [laughing] Oh yeah.

**VOSS:** Everybody –

**WOODS:** Then you'll get a no. Then you'll definitely get a no that you don't want.

**VOSS:** Actually, what you really get when you do that is what happens every time you try to get somebody to say yes. They stop and they think through where's this going, what's going on. They become anxious. They become worried about what yes is going to let them in for. And the problem with becoming anxious and concerned is if they're always listening for the trap, then they stop listening to you. They're only half there. It's like having somebody whispering in their ear the whole time, and they really can't pay attention to you. And people, when you try to get somebody to say yes to something, people lose their ability to listen to you. They're no longer hearing what you have to say.

So instead of, "Have you got a few minutes to talk?" everybody that works for me and myself and all of my clients, we say, "Is now a bad time?"

**WOODS:** Oh, that's a good one, yeah.

**VOSS:** Yeah, and you get one of two answers with that. Typically they'll hesitate for a second, and in that hesitation, they're gathering themselves. They feel good. They feel protected. They feel like they don't have to worry about what they're letting themselves in for. And they'll say, "No, no, no, it's never a bad time. Go ahead, what have you got?" Or they'll say, "Yeah, it is, but I can talk with you tomorrow at 2 o'clock." Which then means you just got the appointment, which is what you were after to begin with.

**WOODS:** I'm thinking about what it must be like to be, let's say, a hostage negotiator, and to have it – I just listened to you talk and it's all so natural, to be able to do that without it seeming like you're playing mental tricks on the person. But you're just talking. You're just talking it through with another human being. How long did it take

to get to the point where it was so natural that you didn't feel like, Okay, now I'm using this tactic and that tactic; you just know it and it flows and the person couldn't tell you were even doing anything?

**VOSS:** Yeah, you know, that's a great question. It doesn't take long. The hard part is the upfront part. I mean, to really learn a couple of your communication skills, it feels awkward. Like, you can do it in three days easily if you focus on it, but the great barrier to learning, there's always awkwardness, and people are so addicted to getting yeses and they're so the hostage of no. I mean, people are horrified. Everybody thinks no is horrible. So those initial moments where you make that switch is ridiculously awkward, and that's the real barrier. But if you sit down and work at it, you're there in three, four days max. Very short period of time. But our initial impression is when we first start something new and it's crazy awkward at the beginning, we think that painfulness of that first experience is going to last. Like, I can't do this for four days. This really stinks.

What happens is neuroscience shows us it's like plowing a new road. When you try a new skill, there's actually a new neural pathway built in your brain. That's why it feels so awkward. It's your brain kind of going like, Ahhh [laughing]! But just like plowing a road, every subsequent trip down that new neural pathway is quicker and faster and comes to you that much more quickly, and that's why it comes to you really quickly once you get past the difficult awkwardness.

**WOODS:** Do you think hostage negotiators have gotten better over the years? Not just as individuals, but the whole approach has actually gotten better and gotten better results?

**VOSS:** You know, it really varies by location, because the other problem is these communication skills are perishable, and if you haven't learned that lesson hard, just been slapped in the face with the nature of having that happen to you, you don't realize how perishable they are. Now, I kind of got lucky because I learned in a way that it didn't cost me — I learned how perishable it was in a way that didn't cost me. I first started out volunteering on a suicide hotline. And from that training, just like hostage negotiation training, when you come out of the training you're sharp. I mean, you rock it. You can't wait for somebody to take somebody hostage because you want to save lives [laughing].

And so on the hotline, they put us up for annual reviews every year, for good reason, because they're worried it's a perishable skill. They're also worried that you don't know that. You know, you get good, you think it's like riding a bike. And it's not. So I'm up for my annual review. And fortunately, I've got a guy on the phone who's just basically kind of distraught. He's not suicidal. He's just trying to work through some issues. And I do the call — and actually, at the end of the call, the guy says, "Wow, that was great. You were really good. That was a great job. Thank you so much." And I'm like, I'm walking out of there — because I know the supervisor was listening in the other room, and I'm sort of rubbing my fingernails on my shirt like, Ha ha ha, that was really awesome. I was so good, the guy even said I was good. And I go in for the review, and the guy, this great guy, Jim, he says, Boy, that was horrible.

**WOODS:** Yeah, "That was the worst call ever." I couldn't believe that. I was as surprised as you were.

**VOSS:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so then when he explained why to me, I was like, it just smacked me in the face as to how perishable this stuff is. So you know, even for me now, I've got to use it in everyday conversations or it goes away.

**WOODS:** Now, the idea behind your book, *Never Split the Difference*, is not that everybody who reads it is going to go out and be a hostage negotiator. The idea is that you can take some of the approaches to negotiation that you use professionally and use them in your own work life or personal life. So give me examples of how some of these principles transfer over into the lives of anybody who might be listening today.

**VOSS:** Yeah, I mean, people are going to love talking to you. You'd be amazed at how much more people will enjoy conversations on all levels. There's a Silicon Valley executive, woman, that all of a sudden one day, she said to her fiancé, she said like, What's going on with you today? I'm really enjoying these conversations. This is really different, and I can't figure out why. And he said, Eh, I've been reading this book, *Never Split the Difference*, and I took some of the training and they told me that I had to practice it every day. And she went out and bought all these books for the boyfriends and husbands of her girlfriends [laughing].

**WOODS:** Nice.

**VOSS:** So it makes all your conversations, makes people want to collaborate with you in a way that they're happy about it instead of feeling forced into it. When you're talking with your significant other about what kind of Christmas tree you want to get or you're talking to a business partner or you're talking to the guy who's cutting your grass or you're talking to your kid, people have a tendency to really collaborate with you sooner so that you don't waste as much time.

**WOODS:** You know, there's so much here, and I of course want people to just read it. There's no way we can cover it all, and you should just read it. And I'm actually wondering which area that I should home in on. Let's go to an area that I think would be of most interest to people, because we can all imagine situations with a boss, let's say, or with a client, where you really want to drive a hard bargain. And you actually have Chapter 9: How to Get Your Price, and the chapter's called "Bargain Hard." What can you – again, from your training, what can you tell us that would transfer over to those situations?

**VOSS:** Well, the first thing is the most universal approach that raises your batting average the highest across the board is to be deferential and respectful with everybody. Most people think negotiation is a power game, and the secret to getting the upper hand in any negotiation is giving the other side the illusion of control. So if you slowed down just a little bit and asked a lot more "what" and "how" questions – for lack of me going into greater depth, we call these calibrated questions. But the real bread and butter of great negotiations is "what" and "how" questions. How do you want me to proceed? What's the obstacle here? What happens if we fail? What happens if you do nothing? Because in any given negotiation, the adversary is the status quo.

And what do I mean by that? The adversary is the situation. You're trying to get people to change, and you're trying to get them to take a different course of action.

And in order to get them to do that, you have to get them to think about what happens if they don't. So you start off by saying, What happens if we do nothing? What happens if we fail? And that focuses in people's brains, if they don't make a move, this is what it's going to cost me. And there's actually Nobel prize-winning behavioral economics theory called prospect theory, which tells us that people are more likely to take a risk to avoid a loss as opposed to risk for gain, which is the opposite of what most people think in sales. Let me pitch the game; let me pitch the game; let me pitch the game. While that works, the batting average there is low. What happens if we fail, what happens if we do nothing increases your ability to make the deal. And that's just a tiny – that's just the tip of the iceberg.

**WOODS:** Yeah. And of course I've seen a lot of marketers try to adapt that when they have a product that's either going to go up in price after a certain time, or there are only so many of them, or it's going to be pulled off the market, and they're trying to instill in people this sense of loss and this sense of missing out. And it turns out that for some reason, the sense of loss or even frankly fear about what the future might hold if they don't take action seems to draw people in more than, "Here's what you'll get." It's, "Here's what could happen to you if you don't do anything," seems to grab people.

**VOSS:** It's a stronger driver of human behavior. It's not the only behavior, but if you're lazy like me, you're looking for the stronger drivers, because I want to put in less effort. I want to make it move quicker. So I'm just making tactical choices based on what we've sort of felt was true for a long time, and now we've got the brain science that backs it up.

**WOODS:** Now, I don't know how common hostage situations are. I don't see that many of them on TV, but you know, what does that mean necessarily? So I don't even know how often a hostage negotiator's services are called into service, so can you say something about that?

**VOSS:** Yeah, well, first of all, you don't see it that much because the media rule is if it bleeds, it leads. So if hostage negotiators talk people out, nobody gets shot, the media, they're like, That's boring; I can't do anything with that. So in general terms, that's why you don't see it much in the media. A real hostage situation, like where hostages have been taken in order to get something, that's a little rare. Hostage negotiators as a group are out on a regular basis mostly on domestic problems, guy's waving a gun around trying to get his wife back or his girlfriend back. That's pretty routine stuff, and so different hostage negotiation teams will have, especially local law enforcement, will have a lot more experience in that. Now, whether or not a negotiator's got a lot of experience is another question on top of that. And if the negotiator is into it, he gets out there, he trains – he or she. They can be pretty experienced.

**WOODS:** Is there an average duration that a hostage confrontation will last? It seems to go on – they seem to be many hours at a time. Is that normal?

**VOSS:** Yeah, dependent upon – there's kind of three types – dependent upon the type that you're in to begin with and the talent of the negotiators, it's going to probably last at least two to three hours. A bank robbery, for example – which is a really rare thing, actually. That's one of those unicorn situations. And you see it in the movies all the time; doesn't really happen in real life that much where you negotiate somebody out. I did that in Brooklyn early in my career. But those will go anywhere from 9 to 12 hours, typically, and the one that I did in Brooklyn was a 12-hour siege.

**WOODS:** Well, I know this might be difficult, but did you ever have a situation that went bad?

**VOSS:** I had some kidnappings – I worked a lot of kidnappings internationally. And if you work enough kidnappings, unfortunately, eventually something's going to go bad. And I worked a lot, and there's one I talk about in the book that actually, we did everything we knew to possibly do. It was a kidnapping in the Philippines, and a couple of the hostages, Americans, ended up dead in the last – it went on for months, and the final outcome was the hostages were killed by friendly fire in a botched rescue attempt. But what came out of that was we got better. We went back and we looked at what we were doing – and that's actually how I ended up at Harvard, because I knew that we did everything that we knew how to do, and I said we've got to go outside; we've got to learn from other people. And I went up to Harvard, and I said, Let's collaborate, and they said, Yeah, cool, let's collaborate. So we used those to learn more, to get better, to analyze the situation, to figure out what we did wrong or what we needed to learn.

**WOODS:** What are you trying to accomplish when you're speaking with, let's say, the hostage taker? Obviously what you want is the safe return of the hostages, but in the shorter run, what kind of a relationship are you trying to establish with him? Given that he knows you're the adversary, what can you hope to achieve?

**VOSS:** Yeah, you know, first of all, that they think that we're honest and have integrity. You make a great point. A police officer calling in the bad guy, you can't say, Hey, man, did you play baseball growing up? We could be great buddies [laughing]. It's such a stupid idea. But the guy on the inside, if he picks up the phone, first he just wants to know if who he's talking to is going to – if his actions are going to back up his words. Or is he going to lie to me? And as soon as you're not a liar – and then you're listening. Then you can understand – the fine line is understanding without agreement. And a lot of people, that idea just blows them away. Like they think the words "I understand" are tantamount to agreement. And it's not. And so if I can have credibility and if I can understand without agreeing, in reality, I can develop a rapport with any person on the planet, from the most despicable terrorist to the guy next door who voted for a different presidential candidate than I did.

**WOODS:** What if we took a minute or two and I just acted like a hostage taker and you talked to me just to see how this would work? Can we try that?

**VOSS:** How am I supposed to do that?

**WOODS:** [laughing] Is that not doable?

**VOSS:** See? I already started. That was a negotiation tactic.

**WOODS:** [laughing] That's awesome [laughing]. That is excellent [laughing]. All right [laughing]. All right. But look, I could imagine myself – well, okay, I cannot imagine myself holding hostages.

**VOSS:** [laughing] Wait a minute, have you gone through this in your head a few times already? You've been practicing – you've got in-laws you're trying to get back at? Where are we going?

**WOODS:** I'm trying to think in terms of how could I make this a guy who is not necessarily Mr. Rationality, but at least has a motive that you could understand.

**VOSS:** Yeah, that's cool.

**WOODS:** All right, so look, I've taken a couple hostages and what I've told you so far is that my life is hopeless and I don't really know what to do and maybe a bunch of money would help me, but that's the only thing I can think that could get me out of all the bad – all the debt and all the terrible situations I'm in.

**VOSS:** And I'd say, Man, it sounds like life has really cornered you.

**WOODS:** Yeah, darn right it has. He probably wouldn't say "darn."

**VOSS:** Yeah, you know, it seems like you've done everything that you possibly could have done in life, and life has just really kicked you in the gut.

**WOODS:** And then let's say I get to a point where I say, Look, I mean – ugh, maybe there's some way out of it, and I know that I've done something now that's going to screw me up more than everything else I ever did in my life. So if I walk out of here, my life is ruined. So why shouldn't I just stay here and take everybody down?

**VOSS:** Well, it seems to me like you're looking for a way out of this.

**WOODS:** Oh, that's good. I think I've trapped myself at this point. There is no good way out. And I'm just so full of rage at the world that maybe I'll just go out in a blaze of glory.

**VOSS:** Yeah, it sounds to me like you're holding the outside world accountable for this stuff that has happened to you.

**WOODS:** Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I've played by the rules by the most part, up until I kidnapped these people and held them hostage. And what's it given me in return?

**VOSS:** So are you telling me this is the first time you've seen these people?

**WOODS:** Oh, I hadn't thought that far ahead. Let's say yes. Yes, it is.

**VOSS:** Yeah, so it sounds to me like you're trying to hold people that you just met today accountable for all the horrible things that everybody else has done for you.

**WOODS:** All right, okay, so now I see where you're going. So now walk me through how you approached this and what you were doing there. And how you're getting towards a successful resolution. Because each time I felt slightly manipulated, but not in a bad way. Because I'm trying to be aware of where it is you're trying to lead me, but I don't think – if I were a real hostage taker, I wouldn't be thinking it that way.

**VOSS:** Well, there's a difference between – am I trying to lead you some place, or am I just trying to reveal things to you that are true about what you've said? And I'm trying to completely understand what the problem here is and where the gaps are in the problem. And the first step in listening is really, people want to listen for the ah-ha moments. Like, I got you. I got it. I've found the mistake in your logic and I want to point at you and I want to go, Ah-ha! Now, if you can take yourself out of the ah-ha moments and just kind of be willing to genuinely understand and be curious, you've immediately taken the ability to listen you already had developed and you put yourself from going from an attacking listener or an attacking negotiator to like a collaborator, or even, dare I say, empathic [laughing]. People want to be understood. People are trying to sort stuff out in their heads. And it's kind of a mess when it's in our heads. And so I become a great sounding board for you so that you can actually hear what you're saying. And you get a lot of clarity out of that.

**WOODS:** I really want people to read the book. It's called *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating As If Your Life Depended On It*. I'm telling you, this is not – Normally I hate books like this, because I'm sure you know why: it's a lot of fluff with no practical application. It's a lot of maxims. It's like I'm reading Ben Franklin's *Almanac* or something.

**VOSS:** [laughing]

**WOODS:** It's just not useful for me. But you, not only do you have interesting ideas, but you have many, many real-life examples of how they actually work. So supposing somebody is interested in your book, of course they should read it. I'm linking to it at TomWoods.com – let's see, today would be 913. TomWoods.com/913 will be the show notes page. But there's another way they can reach you and get more information from you, and what's that?

**VOSS:** Yeah, we put out a once-a-week complimentary newsletter on how to get better at negotiations, and the type of articles you can read in five minutes. And it's applicable, it's usable, it's actionable. You pick up the phone and you can use what we talk about. And you subscribe to that – it's called *The Edge*. And if you send a text to 22828, and your text should say "THATSRIGHT," with no space, no apostrophe, no punctuation, as if it was all one word. Just THATSRIGHT, no space, no apostrophe. And you'll get a message back that'll sign you up for the newsletter. It'll tell you where the best price on the book is. It'll tell you also about upcoming training. It'll link you in to other products that we have. Some stuff we charge for; other stuff is free. I've got a friend of mine that used to say, "If it's free, I'll take three." And we can help you get better.

**WOODS:** Well, that sounds great. All right, so 22828 is the place to text. You're going to text THATSRIGHT, all one word, no punctuation. Sounds great. I'm going to do it in just a minute myself. And I appreciate your time, Chris. It really is great stuff. And I know people say, But Woods, you tell us to read a lot of books. I know, but that's because I don't have people who write crummy books on the show in the first place, because that would be a waste of my time. But I really mean this. There are books that, frankly, I have to skim because I do this five days a week and it's not possible to read every single book cover to cover. But this one, from the moment that this book opened and you – I'm not going to spoil it for people, but the way you open the book is absolutely brilliant.

**VOSS:** Thank you.

**WOODS:** I put that down. I actually said, "That is brilliant." I was totally drawn in, and I thought, All right, if that's the way he's going to hook me, I'm going to be reading this thing all the way through to the other cover. And I've gotten a lot out of it, and now I'm going to try it out on my friends and see if they find that they're more compelled to have conversations with me now. And we'll see if I get more of what I want in life, and I'll send you a report on how it's going [laughing].

**VOSS:** Awesome.

**WOODS:** Thanks so much, Chris.

**VOSS:** Thanks for your time, man.