RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Reading People

Jo-Ellan Dimitrius and Mark Mazzarella

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Can you imagine how much better your life choices would be if you knew how to read people, predict their behaviour, and understand how they're reading you? *Reading People* will open your eyes to a wealth of clues that reveal the truth about those around you. Once you've learned to read people, your world will never be the same.

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Reading People

How to Understand People and Predict Their Behavior—Anytime, Anyplace

Jo-Ellan Dimitrius, Ph.D., and Mark Mazzarella

Vermilion
LONDON

To my father, Harlan Huebner, whose love of people was contagious; to my mother, Joan Huebner, who continues to inspire me with her passion for people; to my wonderful children, Nikki, Francis, and Stirling, who bring me love and joy every day of my life; and to Mark, whose intellect, humor, compassion, patience, and devotion made this book possible.

– JO-ELLAN DIMITRIUS

To my mom, Carol, who is with me in spirit always; to my children, Eve, Laurel, Joel, Michael, and Cody, who give me strength—and lots of practice reading people; and to Jo-Ellan, who has taught me to see people, and the world, through different eyes.

– MARK MAZZARELLA

Introduction: A Passion for People

When I was a child, I'd peer down from my perch at the top of the stairs above my parents' living room during their frequent dinner parties. I'd watch as my mother scurried around, carefully ensuring that no glass was empty. I remember the chubby, bald man whose booming laughter resonated throughout the house, and his rail-thin wife, who shook her head and rolled her eyes as he launched into an only slightly modified version of a story he'd told dozens of times before. I would laugh to myself as my father's friend John reached out casually for another hors d'oeuvre to add to the scores he'd already inhaled, while my dad playfully poked him in the stomach, and said, chuckling, "Make sure you save some room for dinner, little boy." I loved those Saturday evenings, when the house filled with the laughter and conversation of a dozen people—all so different, and yet so alike. Even when I was a child my passion was people.

Twenty-five years later, armed with nothing more than my lifetime of experiences, paper, and a pen, I sat nervously in court watching several dozen prospective jurors file into the courtroom for the first time. From among them, I would have to select the twelve who would decide whether my client would live or die. Every other decision I'd ever made about people suddenly seemed insignificant. Should I have trusted the salesman who sold me my first used car? Was I right to confide in my best friend that I had a crush on her big brother? Had I chosen a good baby-sitter for my young daughter? I had been reading people for over thirty years, but this time a man's life was at stake.

For fifteen years since then, I have made my living reading people. I have sized up more than ten thousand prospective jurors, and evaluated thousands of witnesses, lawyers, and even judges. I sat for weeks next to “the Night Stalker,” Richard Ramirez, peering every day into the coldest eyes I have ever seen. I shared Peggy Buckey’s anguish at her unwarranted prosecution for child molestation in the McMartin Preschool case. I watched in horror as rioting spread through Los Angeles after the defense verdict in the Rodney King Simi Valley trial. In the Reginald Denny case, I tried to comprehend why four young men would mercilessly beat a complete stranger, and struggled to select jurors who would understand those motives and respond leniently. I strained to comprehend the internal torment that led John DuPont to shoot and kill Olympic wrestler David Schultz. And I endured the world’s scrutiny, and often its harsh criticism, because I helped select the jury that acquitted O. J. Simpson.

It has been a wild, sometimes exhilarating ride, but not as glamorous as some might think. I have worked agonizingly long hours, and while I have been applauded by some for my involvement in unpopular cases, I have also been criticized by others for the very same involvement. My efforts to explain my deep commitment to the American system of justice and the principle that no one should be denied his liberty, let alone his life, by anything less than a truly impartial jury, have often fallen on deaf ears. My life has been threatened. I was even blamed by some for the L.A. riots in 1992 because I helped pick the jury that acquitted the four police officers charged with beating Rodney King.

Through it all, I have watched and listened. I have done my best to apply my education, my powers of observation, my common sense, and my intuition to understanding those who have passed through the courtrooms where I have worked. Mostly, I have learned. And if there’s one thing I

have learned, sometimes the hard way, it is how to read people.

From the day I was chosen by “the Dream Team” to become the jury consultant in O. J. Simpson’s criminal trial, I have been approached from seemingly every angle to write a book. Not a book about what I do best—reading people—but about the dirt on the Los Angeles District Attorney’s Office, or how the O. J. Simpson case compared with my other high-profile cases, or (and this was far and away the most popular topic) the inside scoop on the Dream Team. But writing an exposé never interested me. It was not until a very wise friend, the writer Spencer Johnson, suggested, “Write about something you know best, something that will make a difference in people’s lives,” that we were inspired to write *Reading People*.

No matter whom you interact with, no matter where or when you interact with them, the quality of your life will depend to a large extent on the quality of your decisions about people. Salesmen will sell more, and customers will make better purchasing decisions. Employers will make better hiring choices; prospective employees will improve their chances of landing the best jobs. You will choose your friends, lovers, and partners better, and understand your family members more. As a friend you will be more sensitive and as a competitor you will be more alert.

Some of those who read people for a living, as I do, rely almost exclusively on scientific research, surveys, studies, polls, and statistical analysis. Others claim to have a God-given talent. My own experience has taught me that reading people is neither a science nor an innate gift. It is a matter of knowing what to look and listen for, having the curiosity and patience to gather the necessary information, and understanding how to recognize the patterns in a person’s appearance, body language, voice, and conduct.

During college and graduate school, I spent almost a decade studying psychology, sociology, physiology, and

criminology, along with a smattering of statistics, communications, and linguistics. As valuable as my formal education has been, it is not what made *The American Lawyer* dub me “the Seer” a few years back. Rather, it is my near-obsessive curiosity about people—how they look, sound, and act—that has made me an effective people reader. The empathy I feel for others drives me to understand them better.

My most important skill is my ability to see the pattern of someone’s personality and beliefs emerge from among often conflicting traits and characteristics. It is a skill I learned from the time I was a little girl, sitting at the top of those stairs during my parents’ dinner parties, and refined through a lifetime of experiences and over four hundred trials. Best of all, it’s a skill that can be learned and applied with equal success by anyone—anytime, anyplace.

Why am I so sure?

Because over the past fifteen years I have tested this method on more than ten thousand “research subjects.” After predicting the behavior of thousands of jurors, witnesses, lawyers, and judges, I have been able to see whether my predictions came true. After the cases were decided, I spoke with the participants to explore what they thought and why. I did not always peg them correctly, especially in the earlier years. But by testing my perceptions over and over, I have verified which clues are generally reliable and which are not. I have also learned it is important not to focus on any single trait or characteristic: taken alone, almost any trait may be misleading. And I have found that the approach outlined in this book will help anyone understand people and better predict their behavior in the courtroom, the boardroom, and the bedroom.

People are people, wherever they are. The man on the witness stand trying to persuade the jury of the righteousness of his cause is no different from the salesman hawking his goods at the flea market. The prejudices shown

by a prospective juror are the same as those that may surface in a job interview. A juror or witness will try to avoid answering a sensitive question in court in much the same way as he does at home or at work.

Each courtroom is a microcosm of life, filled with anger, nervousness, prejudice, fear, greed, deceit, and every other conceivable human emotion and trait. There, and everywhere else, every person reveals his emotions and beliefs in many ways.

In the first chapter, “Reading Readiness,” we will explain how you can prepare yourself to read people more effectively. Chapter 2, “Discovering Patterns,” will show you how to make sense of a person’s often contradictory characteristics. In the succeeding chapters, you will discover how people reveal their beliefs and character through their personal appearance, body language, environment, voice, communication techniques, and actions. You’ll also learn how to enhance your intuition and use it to your advantage. The final chapters will show you how to make a good impression on those who are reading you, and how to make wise and reliable snap decisions.

Throughout this book you’ll be seeing what can be learned from how a person looks, talks, and acts. But the goal is not just to provide you with a “glossary” of people’s characteristics and behaviors. Instead, *Reading People* aims to teach you how to evaluate people’s complex characteristics and how to see the overall pattern those characteristics form—the pattern that truly can reveal and predict behavior. This method has been the secret to my success at reading people. Once you’ve mastered these skills, they will serve you just as well, at work and at play, today and for the rest of your life.

CHAPTER 1

Reading Readiness: Preparing for the Challenge of Reading People

> "I can't believe I didn't see the signs. They were right there in front of me! How could I have been so blind?"

WE'VE ALL SAID something very much like this, probably more times than we care to admit. After we've misjudged our boss's intentions, a friend's loyalty, or a baby-sitter's common sense, we carefully replay the past—and usually see the mistakes we made with 20/20 hindsight. Why, then, after living and reliving our mistakes, don't we learn more from them? If reading people were like driving a car or hitting a tennis ball, we'd be able to recognize our weak points and improve our performance with every try. That rarely happens with relationships. Instead, we interact with our friends, colleagues, and spouses in the same old ways, doggedly hoping for the best.

In theory, thanks to the people-reading skills I acquired over the years, it should have been easy for me to make better decisions in my personal life—whom to let into it and what to expect from them once I did. Yet for many years I failed to apply my courtroom abilities to my off-duty life. Perhaps I had to reach a saturation point of pain and disappointment in some of my personal relationships before I was willing to analyze my mistakes and put my professional experience to work for me.

When I finally resolved to bring that focus and clarity to my personal life, it made sense to start by comparing the courthouse with the world outside. I was determined to figure out what I was doing in the courtroom that enabled me to read people in that setting with such consistent accuracy. I thought I should be able to distill that information into a set of people-reading basics that would work anywhere.

When I told my colleagues about the great difference between my people-reading successes on and off the job, I found I wasn't alone. Many of the best attorneys I knew confessed that, while they enjoyed great success reading people in court, the rest of the time they didn't do much better than anyone else. Why?

The conclusions I eventually reached led me to the keys of "reading readiness"—the foundation of understanding people and predicting their behavior. The first thing I discovered was that *attitude is critical*. In a courtroom, I was ready to focus fully on the people I encountered, to listen to them closely, to observe the way they looked and acted, and to carefully think about what I was hearing and seeing. I had a very different attitude in my private life; I rarely did any of those things. The fact is, you have to be *ready* to read people, or all the clues in the world won't do you any good.

In this chapter, you'll learn how to bring a courtroom state of mind—clear-eyed, observant, careful, and objective—into the emotional, subjective drama that is everyday life. Master the following skills, and you'll be ready to read people.

1. Spend more time with people. That's the best way to learn to understand them.
2. Stop, look, and listen. There's no substitute for patience and attentiveness.

3. Learn to reveal something of yourself. To get others to open up, you must first open up to them.
4. Know what you're looking for. Unless you know what you want in another person, there's a good chance you'll be disappointed.
5. Train yourself to be objective. Objectivity is essential to reading people, but it's the hardest of these seven skills for most of us to master.
6. Start from scratch, without biases and prejudices.
7. Make a decision, then act on it.

DISCOVERING THE LOST ART OF READING PEOPLE

Unless you've been stranded on a desert island for the past fifty years, you've noticed that the world has changed. Understanding people has always been one of life's biggest challenges, but the social changes and technological explosion of recent decades have made it even more difficult. Today, many of us don't enjoy close bonds or daily contact even with the most important people in our lives. We're out of touch and out of practice.

Unless you practice the skills you'll learn in this book, you won't retain them. But that's difficult today, because we live in a global society. We're in contact with people across town, across the country, or even on the other side of the world. But our contact usually isn't personal. The same technological advances that allow us such extraordinary access to others have exacted a toll—they have made face-to-face conversation relatively rare. Why meet with a client in person if you can phone him? Why have an actual conversation with Mom if you can leave a message on her answering machine? Why phone a friend if you can send an e-mail or a fax? As long as the message gets through, what's the difference? Most of us have even phoned someone, *hoping* to leave a message, only to be *disappointed* when she's actually there to answer the call.

Some of us even bow out altogether, relying on our assistants, kids, spouses, or friends to do our communicating for us. Or we settle into cyberspace, meeting, doing business, sometimes even becoming engaged—all on the basis of the sterile, electronically generated word, without the benefit of seeing someone or even talking to him.

All forms of communication are not equal. If I want to ask a favor of my colleague Alan, I have several choices. I can walk down the hall and speak with him in person; in that case, I'll be able to gauge his response accurately. Maybe he'll gladly say yes. Then again, maybe he'll say yes while wincing. Or perhaps he'll say no, but will clearly show his reservations. There's an almost infinite number of reactions I might see if I'm there in the room with him. Now, if I phone Alan instead, I'll be able to sense some of his feelings from his voice—but I may miss the more subtle undertones and I won't get any visual cues. If we e-mail each other, effectively squelching almost all human contact, I'll get just the facts. And what if I simply send someone else to ask?

Making matters worse, most of us purposely avoid meaningful conversation with all but our closest friends and family. When we do get together, we may be more comfortable saying what is expected or "politically correct" than what we really believe. Self-revelation comes hard to most people; those who confess their innermost secrets on afternoon talk shows are the exception, not the rule.

The reasons we don't like to expose ourselves could fill a book, but undoubtedly the edgy, distrustful tenor of urban life is among them. From childhood on, those of us who live in or near big cities are urged to be wary of strangers; the concept is reinforced nightly on the local news. We urbanites often return from a visit to a small town marveling at how we were treated. Instead of the averted gazes we've grown accustomed to, we're met with a friendly "Hello, how are you?" from people who really seem to mean it! That

level of spontaneous, trusting communication is hard to come by in the cities where most Americans live.

Most of us did not grow up in a community where our high school classmates became our dentists, our barbers, and our children's schoolteachers. Sure, we have friends and families, but the majority of people we see each day are strangers and therefore suspect. Because we fear them, we often avoid contact, and as a result we don't use our social skills as often as we could. Our people-reading muscles have atrophied for lack of exercise.

Making Contact

If you want to become a better people-reader you must make a conscious effort to engage other people. Even the most entrenched Internet junkie can learn the true meaning of "chat" if the desire is there, but you have to get off the couch and make it happen. Work those atrophied muscles, even if it makes you feel inconvenienced, awkward, or vulnerable.

To practice and develop your people skills, start by becoming aware of how and when you make personal contact. For the next week, each time you have the opportunity to communicate with someone, enhance the quality of that communication by moving up at least one rung on the contact ladder:

1. Face-to-face meeting
2. Telephone call
3. Letter/fax/e-mail/answering machine
4. Delegation

Instead of asking someone else to set up an appointment for you, contact the person yourself by letter, fax, or e-mail. Instead of e-mailing your cross-country friend, call, even if the conversation has to be brief. Instead of phoning your

neighbor to discuss the school fund-raiser, knock on her door and talk to her in person. Step by step, you'll become more comfortable with the increased contact.

Try to improve the quality of your communication, too, by making a conscious effort to reveal something of yourself. It doesn't have to be an intimate secret—in fact, many people will be turned off if you inappropriately reveal confidences. But you can share a like or dislike, a favorite restaurant, book, or movie. And ask something about the other person—where she bought a piece of jewelry, or whether he saw the ball game last night. Warm them up, and the conversation will start rolling.

After a few weeks, you'll become more adept at these social skills. Test yourself on the person checking your groceries, the receptionist in your doctor's office, the mail carrier, the next customer who walks into the shop. Connecting doesn't have to mean a ten-minute discussion. It can mean simply looking someone in the eye, smiling, and commenting on the weather. These brief sparks of contact aren't superficial, they're sociable, and they are where trust and communication—and people reading—begin.

Learn to See the Sheep

The more time you spend reading people, the easier it gets. Just as the anxiety and awkwardness of your first time behind the wheel of a car disappeared after a few months of everyday driving, people-reading skills that may seem unattainable today will become automatic with a little practice.

With willpower and persistence, we can sharpen any of our senses. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than an experience a client of mine had several years ago. He'd been hired by the Big Horn Institute, a facility dedicated to preserving an endangered species of bighorn sheep that live in the mountains just southwest of Palm Springs, California.

Development of neighboring land was disturbing the sheep and interrupting their breeding activity; the institute wanted to do something about it.

When my client visited the institute, the director took him outside, pointed to the massive, rocky hills that rose up behind the offices, and said softly, “There are a lot of them out today.” My client squinted up at the brown hills, trying to hide his amazement—not at the beauty of the bighorn sheep, but at his inability to see even one of them. Obviously accustomed to this reaction, the director tactfully called his attention to a sheep just below a triangular rock, and another on the crest of a hill to the left, and then another—until he’d pointed out almost a dozen.

The director’s eyesight was no better than my client’s. But he had learned to see the sheep. He knew how their shape broke the subtle patterns of the hills. He could detect the slight difference between their color and that of the rock. He had learned where the sheep were most likely to gather at a particular time of day. He had experience. He had contact. He had practice. What was virtually automatic to him was foreign to my client—until he, too, learned to see the sheep.

STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN

In the courtroom, I constantly watch jurors, witnesses, lawyers, spectators, and even the judge, looking for any clues about how they’re responding to the case and the people presenting it. I listen carefully to the words that are spoken, and to how they are spoken. I pay attention to the way people breathe, sigh, tap their feet or fingers, or even shift their weight in a chair. As the jurors walk by I notice any unusual smells—heavily applied perfume, body odor, the scent of medication. When I shake someone’s hand I take note of the feel of his handshake. I use *all* of my senses, *all* of the time.

Patience, Patience

Observing people properly takes time. Most people simply don't take enough time to gather information and reflect upon it. Instead, they frequently make critical decisions about people in a hurry, as if life were a game show in which quick answers scored more points. It's usually the other way around in life: quick answers are often wrong—and lose points.

Quick answers aren't necessary most of the time, anyway. You'll find that you often have more time to make up your mind about people than you think you do. Abraham Lincoln was once asked how long a man's legs should be; he responded, "Long enough to reach the ground." Likewise, the question "How much time does it take to read people?" can be answered: "As much time as you have." There is seldom a premium on the speed with which we read people; most deadlines for decision making are self-imposed. *If you take all the time you really have available, you'll usually have as much as you need*. If you're offered a job, the offer probably won't vanish if you ask for a few days to think about it. You seldom need to make a decision about a doctor, lawyer, accountant, day-care provider, mechanic, or purchase on the spur of the moment. So don't! Ask yourself what information would help you make the best choice, and then take the time to gather it. If you're still not sure, sleep on it.

In almost every jurisdiction in the country, the judge cautions jurors at the beginning of the trial that they must not decide the case until all the evidence has been presented. This concept has been ingrained in the law for hundreds of years, and for good reason. Just as you can't solve a riddle without all the clues, you can't make wise decisions about people if you act prematurely. To be successful, you must be patient.

Pay Attention, or Pay the Consequences

Every interview with the neighbor of a heinous criminal seems to start with “He seemed like such a nice guy.” Further questioning usually reveals that the neighbor never really noticed the man and then the admission “He kept to himself.” In fact, there were probably many clues that Mr. X was not such a nice guy after all. It’s just that no one ever paid much attention.

Decisions are no better than the information on which they’re based. Incorrect or incomplete information can lead to an incorrect conclusion—garbage in, garbage out. So before you can effectively read people, you need to gather reliable information about them. You can do this by using your eyes, your ears, and at times even your senses of touch and smell. When people fail to be attentive and focused, the consequences can be regrettable. One of the more notable moments in the O. J. Simpson criminal trial illustrates this point nicely.

Late in the trial, Laura Hart McKinny was called to the witness stand by the defense to testify about her audiotaped interviews of Mark Fuhrman, who used “the ‘N’ word” with alarming frequency. She was cross-examined by an obviously agitated Christopher Darden, and their exchange became more and more confrontational. Finally, Ms. McKinny asked, “Why are we having this adversarial conversation?” To me this was clearly a shot across the bow. Ms. McKinny was sending a message to Mr. Darden. Her tone and manner were saying, “Back off. I’m just telling you what I know. If you keep hounding me, you’ll be sorry!” But Mr. Darden continued to bore in, either not understanding what Ms. McKinny was trying to communicate or choosing to ignore it.

Ms. McKinny was always truthful, but her early testimony had been calm and almost understated. As Mr. Darden

attacked, Ms. McKinny—now apparently angry and frustrated—defended herself by providing more detail, using more descriptive and negative words, and adopting a more critical tone of voice. Her testimony quickly grew even more damaging to Detective Fuhrman—and to the prosecution.

It's not hard to recall occasions when we've been inattentive to important clues. We may hire a day-care provider without spotting the faulty latch on her backyard fence, noticing how she ignored the children under her care as she spoke to us, or paying attention to her poor grammar. Yet each of these factors could have a critical impact on our child's well-being and development. We may not notice the flushed face and ever-so-slightly slurred speech of an employee who returns from a long lunch, but these may be clues he's been drinking—maybe drinking too much. This type of critical information is usually available to you—if you just take your time and pay attention.

COMMUNICATION IS A TWO-WAY STREET

During jury selection, prospective jurors sit before the assembled clients and attorneys, where they are subjected to an onslaught of personal questions—which they swear to answer truthfully. They aren't allowed to ask anyone on the legal team any questions, and we have no obligation to reveal anything about ourselves. In short, the procedure is specifically designed to let one set of people, the lawyers, read another set, the jurors.

Outside the courtroom, few people will sit politely and answer a barrage of questions without wanting to ask you a few of their own. If you're reading them, they want some opportunity to read you. If you want candid responses to your questions, you usually have to give something in return. Unlike jurors, the people you engage in everyday conversation aren't required to open up to you, and they haven't sworn to be forthcoming or honest. To coax

unguarded and honest responses out of them, you need to encourage them to trust you.

The best way to establish this trust is to reveal something of yourself. Let people read you to some extent, and they will feel more comfortable. As their comfort level increases, they will open up to you. It's simple—*if you want a clear view of another person, you must offer a glimpse of yourself*.

Good trial lawyers use self-disclosure effectively to develop rapport with jurors during the jury selection process and throughout the trial. They know that even though openness isn't required of them, they can take the jury selection process to a much more meaningful level if they disclose something of themselves during the questioning. If this consistently works in an intimidating setting like the courtroom, imagine how effective it can be at a casual lunch.

KNOW WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

Laurence J. Peter observed in *The Peter Principle*: "If you don't know where you're going, you will probably end up somewhere else." It's a good rule in general, but doubly important when it comes to reading people.

Long before prospective jurors enter the courtroom, the legal team and I prepare a "juror profile" that lists the personal attributes of jurors who will view our case most favorably. Sometimes we conduct mock trials or surveys of community attitudes to help us gauge the type of person who is most likely to be open-minded toward our client. I grade all candidates on their empathy, analytic ability, leadership, gregariousness, and life experiences, and on my gut reaction to them. Then I consider what other characteristics might be important in that particular case. If it's a death penalty trial, I also evaluate personal responsibility, punitiveness, and authoritarianism. In a

contract dispute, I may be more concerned with prospective jurors' attention to detail or experience with legal agreements. In short, I know exactly what I'm looking for in the jurors for that particular case. If I didn't, how could I choose the right ones?

Outside the courtroom, we aren't usually so methodical. In part this is because it seems a little cold-blooded to create a list of desirable attributes. When it comes to romance, we like to think the fates will throw us together with the perfect mate. We rarely take the time to consciously evaluate even a casual friend's characteristics. By the time the bad news sinks in—"Hmmm. She doesn't keep her word"; "He's always late"; "She still hasn't taken her sick cat to the vet"—we've often become emotionally committed and find it hard to change the relationship. We devote even less forethought to people who appear less frequently in our lives—doctors, contractors, plumbers, and the like. Instead, we rely on a friend's recommendation—or, worse, an advertisement.

If we're not aware of our own needs and haven't decided what we want in a friend, a boss, or a paid professional, it's hardly fair to blame that person for disappointing us later. I recently watched a talk show in which a young man was complaining that his girlfriend of two years dressed like a streetwalker and blatantly flirted with strangers. When asked, he admitted that she had dressed and acted exactly the same way when they first met. He loved it back then, when he was focused on the immediate prospect of a few fun nights on the town; but once he decided he wanted a committed relationship, his girlfriend's wild side was unacceptable. He had failed to evaluate her in light of his long-term needs.

Before you decide whether a person meets your needs, create a mental list—or, better, a written one—of everything that is truly essential for a successful relationship of the type you're contemplating. And then don't hesitate to

regularly compare your real-life candidate with the ideal one.

Whether you're looking for a husband, a business partner, or a gardener, reflect on the experience and qualities you'd like this person to have. If you're a divorced woman with two young children, it might make sense to date men who also have kids: they'll understand the demands of a family. If you're looking for a business partner, ask yourself exactly what skills your enterprise will need that you don't possess—and look for someone who has them. If you need a gardener, decide whether you want a master of topiary art or someone to reliably mow the lawn and rake leaves once a week.

Whatever you do, approach the task with absolute honesty. You won't be doing anyone a favor by pretending to have different needs and priorities than you really have. Once you know what to look for, you'll be much more likely to know whether you've found it.

OBJECTIVITY: THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT

During jury selection, I have only one goal: to assemble a group of people who will listen with an open mind to my client's side of the story. It's easy for me to be completely objective about this, since I have no vested interest in any particular juror serving or being excused from the jury. They aren't friends, family, or even acquaintances. Odds are I'll never see them again.

When I first tried to apply my people-reading methods to my personal life, I quickly found that the objectivity I took for granted in the courtroom was my greatest weakness. In real life, I cared very much what others thought of me. I agonized over how I'd feel if I said, "Yes," "No," "You're not right," or "You're not good enough." In order to translate my courthouse skills to the outside world, I'd have to transfer

my objectivity as well. *You can't read people accurately unless you view them objectively*.

Unfortunately, as a general rule, the more important a decision is in your life, the more difficult it is to stay objective. It's easy to be objective about whether a casual acquaintance might be a good blind date for your brother. If she's a co-worker, there's more at stake; if she's your boss, there's even more; if she's your best friend, all bets are off.

We all have a tendency to make decisions based on what will be painful or pleasant for us at the moment. All too often, we pick the easiest, least confrontational solution because our emotions blind us to the big picture or the long-term reality. If a woman's boyfriend constantly flirts with other women, she'll probably notice it. But if she's in love and doesn't want to admit to herself that her boyfriend has wandering eyes—and that the rest of him is probably not far behind—she may choose to think his behavior is innocent. Odds are, if he were somebody else's boyfriend, she wouldn't be so charitable. A businessman who is having trouble with a new employee may prefer to write off her mistakes to new-job jitters, rather than admit he needs to replace her. And the daughter of an elderly woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease may explain away her mother's bizarre behavior rather than face the painful truth.

Whenever the truth is threatening, we tend to reach for the blinders. Just a few years ago, a friend confided to me that her teenage daughter must be lovesick, although as far as she knew the girl hadn't been seeing anyone in particular.

"How can you tell she's in love?" I wanted to know.

"Well, her grades have really started to slip. She seems to have lost her interest in everything, sleeps late all the time, stays out till all hours without calling. She just seems to be very distracted."

To me this behavior screamed "drugs," not "young love." My heart went out to my friend as I gently suggested this

possibility, which she briefly considered, then rejected. It took her another six months to confront her daughter, who by that time was prepared to acknowledge her drug problem and accept help.

It is human nature to close our eyes—and minds—to things that are uncomfortable or disturbing. Leon Festinger coined the term “cognitive dissonance” in 1957 to describe the phenomenon. One symptom of cognitive dissonance is a person’s refusal to accept the obvious, as my friend did with her daughter. This is a form of delusional thinking. The word “delusional” usually brings to mind someone who has completely lost sight of reality and who babbles meaninglessly or lies without any perception of the truth. But most delusional activity takes place in the minds of ordinary people like you and me as we make day-to-day decisions that may have tremendous impact on our lives. The truth is hard to see, especially when we don’t want to see it.

Most lapses in objectivity are due to some degree of cognitive dissonance or delusional thinking. Even though it’s difficult, we can overcome our tendency to ignore facts we don’t like. First, we have to understand what it is that upsets us so much that we’re willing to ignore or distort reality instead of acting on it. I’ve found that four states of mind most often lead to the loss of objectivity:

1. Emotional commitment
2. Neediness
3. Fear
4. Defensiveness

If you avoid making decisions while under the influence of these four mind-sets, you are far more likely to stay objective.

Emotional Commitment: The Tie That Blinds

We all feel love, friendship, contempt, and even hatred for some people in our lives. These feelings all tend to compromise our objectivity. We don't want to think ill of those we love, and we don't want to see anything good in those we hate. To further complicate matters, most of us dislike change. For our own security and convenience, we have an emotional commitment—to ourselves—to keeping things just as they are. The same emotional undercurrent that pulls us toward the status quo also warps our objectivity when we're deciding whether to change it.

Once you're emotionally committed to a particular outcome, it can be very hard to maintain your objectivity. The stronger the emotional commitment, the greater the tendency to behave irrationally. This is why counselors usually advise against sexual intimacy until mutual respect, trust, and friendship have been well established. Once the powerful and pleasurable ingredient of sex has been added to a relationship, we tend to overlook even basic flaws until the passion subsides. By then we may be well down the road toward emotional disaster.

You can't always avoid making decisions when you're emotionally vulnerable, but if you're aware of the pitfalls, you can sidestep many of them. To begin with, try to avoid situations in which you may feel pressured to arrive at a particular answer. In those circumstances, you'll lose your objectivity. The result may be that you'll make a bad decision in the first place, then be reluctant to acknowledge your mistake even when it should become obvious later on. If you interview the daughter of a friend for a job, you may overlook her fundamental deficiencies, because you're not going to want to tell your friend his daughter doesn't measure up. If you hire your neighbor as your accountant, or your golfing buddy as your lawyer, you'll tend to overlook what would otherwise be unacceptable performance because of your friendship. Whenever your worlds collide, you bring the emotional commitments of one to the other. If

you mix business with pleasure, the result might turn out fine, but more likely your desire to keep everyone happy and avoid confrontation will lead you to misread people.

Another common way we create emotional commitment is recognized in a typical jury instruction: on beginning their deliberations, jurors are told not to announce their feelings about the case until after they've discussed it together. Once people publicly commit themselves to a particular viewpoint, they are reluctant to change it. Pride, stubbornness, or fear of admitting we made a mistake gets in the way. If your goal is to be objective when evaluating other people, don't hamstring yourself by announcing your feelings about someone to your friends, family, or co-workers before you've had time to gather pertinent information and carefully think it over.

If you do find yourself evaluating someone to whom you have an emotional commitment, at least be aware that your objectivity is probably impaired. Be conscious of your emotions, and thoughtfully employ the people-reading techniques discussed in the chapters that follow. Take a little extra time and effort before you form any lasting conclusions. Consider whether a trusted and respected friend who is more objective may be able to add perspective. Play devil's advocate by asking yourself how you would view the person if you weren't so close to the situation. Even if you can't eliminate the influence of your emotional commitment, you can minimize it by using one or more of these techniques.

Don't Shop When You're Hungry

Negotiators have a saying: "The person who wants the deal the most gets the worst deal." This rule applies to relationships, too: the person with the greatest need is most likely to fill it with Mr. or Ms. Wrong. Only after he's felt the

sting of his mistake will he recognize his decision for what it was—a compromise.

We first learn to compromise as children, when we fall victim to the lure of immediate gratification. We'll take the bicycle with a scratch on the fender rather than wait for an undamaged replacement to arrive, because we are afraid that Dad may change his mind if we don't act quickly. As teenagers, we may accept the first offer of a date to the senior prom because we worry that no one else will ask. As adults, we continue to make bad decisions about people out of neediness. The most familiar example of this is the inevitably disastrous "rebound relationship." But neediness also drives the employer who's desperate to fill a position and hires the first passable applicant, only to find himself flipping through résumés again two months later; or the parent who settles for substandard child care rather than miss another day of work.

My mother used to say, "Don't shop when you're hungry." Good advice. When you're hungry, everything looks tempting, and you end up bringing home items you don't really need, plus some that may even be bad for you. The key is to slow down long enough to write a shopping list and maybe even have a healthy snack while you write it. Just don't let your unchecked cravings rule the day, whether you're shopping for dinner or a wife.

One crisis that has erupted throughout the country as a result of the increase in two-wage-earner households is the day-care scramble. Good day care is hard to find and often hard to keep. When the child-care provider leaves without giving her employers much notice, they're thrown into a frenzy looking for a replacement. It's hard to imagine a more stressful situation: you need a very special person to care for your child, and until you find that person, you can't go to work, which jeopardizes your livelihood. Choosing a long-term child-care provider under these circumstances is a