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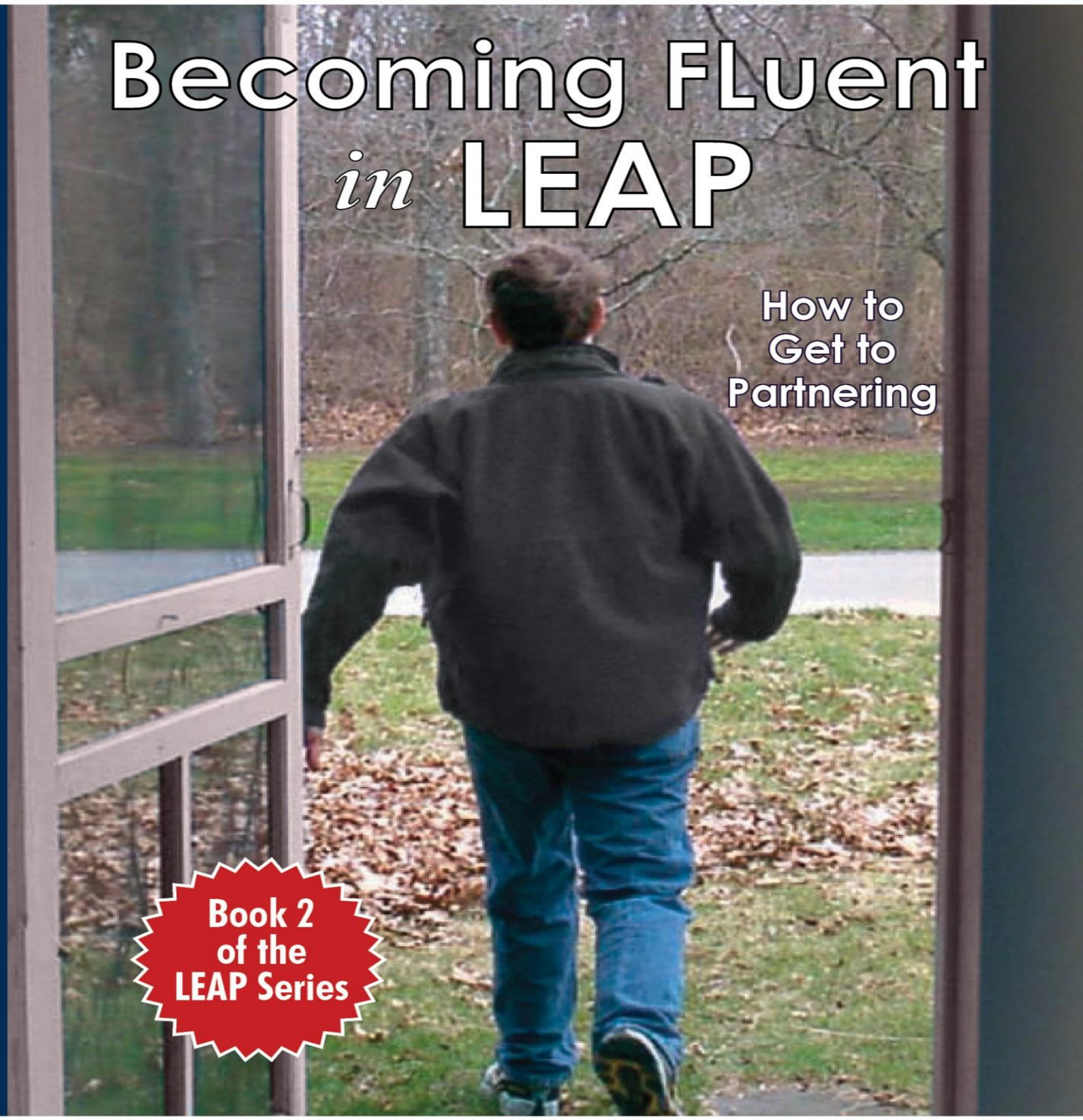
Becoming Fluent *in* LEAP



How to Get to Partnering

Book 2 of the LEAP Series

Xavier Amador, Ph.D.

Becoming Fluent in LEAP

How to Get to Partnering

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How to Get to Partnering

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For my children, Tatiana, Aniceto and Robinson Amador
so they remember that dad is always right…

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Author's Note

With only one exception—involving a transcript from a television documentary I participated in—I have used aliases to protect the privacy of the people I am writing about and the doctor/client relationship. To that end, I have also changed certain biographical facts to further obscure the identity of the persons that appear in this book. Unless stated otherwise (as in the case of recordings and transcripts), when I write about a conversation I personally had, I am relying entirely on my memory and acknowledge that some factual errors are inevitable as no one's memory is perfect.

Introduction

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN because countless readers of I am Not Sick, I Don't Need Help! have told me that LEAP has worked for them to repair relationships, but they still stumble and don't know how to get to the "Partner" phase. They want to know how to use LEAP to influence behavior change such as acceptance of treatment. They forget to reflectively listen, or how to delay giving contrary hurtful opinion, or how to give their opinion using the LEAP method. They are not fluent in LEAP and, as a result, have trouble getting to partnering.

In the stories you will read in this book you will see how many were able to get to the partnering stage. The stories range from using LEAP with your child to using it in business relationships. You may ask: Why the wide range?

The reason is because becoming fluent in LEAP, just like learning any foreign language, requires immersion. You can't just read a single book or attend one of my seminars and expect to become fluent. By seeing how many people have used LEAP in many different situations, you will begin to internalize the language of this approach.

Helping someone who vehemently disagrees with you to see things your way enough to take your suggestions, to accept change and help, is usually a marathon, not a sprint. And just like training for a marathon, you need to cross-train. Marathon runners don't just run. They bicycle, swim, hike and build their muscles and stamina by training across a range of activities. That's what you need to do to. By seeing how LEAP is successfully used across a range of situations, you will be cross training and as a result, be able to complete the marathon and get what you need.

If you find yourself in a disagreement that's going nowhere and hurting your relationship, you are heading for an impasse. Whether the issues are big or small, we all get into these situations every day. We know we're right and the other person is being a jerk.

The problem is that the "jerk" also knows he's right and you're the one who's crazy. The specifics and scope of the situation may change, but the underlying dynamics do not. And what have you done up until now to make the person you were arguing with see things your way? Yelled? Sulked? Rolled your eyes?

Has it worked? Have you gotten what you wanted? More importantly—have you gotten what you needed? Have you focused myopically on getting your opponent to say, "You're right, I admit it," which is what you want during the heat of battle, or have you instead directed your energy and focus on getting what you need—for the person to do the thing you want him to do while preserving the relationship. I'd venture to guess that nine times out of ten you haven't, and the times you have won were usually at the expense of the relationship.

Until you start to do something different, the outcomes are going to remain the same.

Remember the reason you're reading this book. To become fluent in LEAP and get to partnering, you must cross-train. Consequently, reading how others, in different situations succeeded using LEAP will help you to become fluent in the language of LEAP. That's why I included many kinds of impasses in this book. What's at risk may be as important as whether or not your kid drops out of college, whether or not you negotiate a deal, whether or not your aging parent goes into a nursing home, or whether you and your partners sell your business. Or it may be one of the countless everyday impasses you reach while trying to negotiate smaller matters, such as whether or not you really did promise to (fill in the blank) or

whether your health insurer is going to approve the claim you know you're covered for.

One thing all these disagreements have in common—the one you may not even have considered—is that you have to create a positive relationship with that other person if you're ever going to get what you need. You have to turn him from an adversary with whom you're arguing into a partner who is working with you. It doesn't matter if that other person is a co-worker, a bank manager, or your spouse. It may be for five minutes or five days or it may be for the rest of your life, but right then, at that moment, you need that other person to work with you instead of against you. And to accomplish that you have to show some genuine interest in his perspective and his needs.

In my LEAP seminars, I always ask, "Why would anyone want to listen to you if he felt you had not first listened to him? Quid pro quo." This important psychological principle—which is the cornerstone of my method for breaking an impasse—is far from new. More than 2,000 years ago, the Roman poet Publilius Syrus said, "We are interested in others when they are interested in us."

Psychologists who are expert in conflict resolution and marriage and family therapy have written about this fundamental principle for decades. Dale Carnegie, author of the 70-year-old best seller How to Win Friends and Influence People writes, "Philosophers have been speculating on the rules of human relations for thousands of years, and out of all that speculation, there has evolved only one important precept. It is not new. It is as old as history. Zoroaster taught it to his followers in Persia twenty-five hundred years ago. Confucius preached it in China twenty-four centuries ago. Jesus taught it among the stony hills of Judea nineteen centuries ago." Jesus summed it up in one thought—probably the most important

rule in the world: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

More recently the authors of Getting to Yes, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Good to Great, How to Argue and Win Every Time and other insightful observers of human relations have all emphasized this same fundamental principal of persuasion.

But despite the ancient lineage and popular dissemination of this simple and logical truth, it is too often overlooked when we are lured into an “I’m right, you’re wrong” situation and end up thrashing around like a fish caught on the end of a line, certain that if we try just hard enough (speak more loudly or repeat our position once again), we will win. And sometimes we do succeed in bending the other person to our will—but not without doing some damage.

One of my most vivid memories of the frustration—and futility—that come with trying to argue with someone when I knew I was right and he was wrong took place more than twenty years ago. It is also an embarrassing reminder of how I used to reflexively turn a deaf ear, all the while demanding that I be heard.

My brother had just come home after his first psychiatric hospitalization for a serious mental illness. Medication had brought him back to reality, but within a day of his homecoming, I found that he’d tossed his bottle of pills in the garbage. Naturally, I asked him why he’d thrown it out. The conversation went something like this:

“I’m okay now,” he explained. “I don’t need those pills anymore.”

Since this was exactly the opposite of what he’d been told in the hospital, I made a point of reminding him. “But the doctor told you that you’re probably going to have to be on this medicine for the rest of your life. You can’t just stop taking it.”

“He didn’t say that.”

“Yes, he did. I was at the family meeting, remember?”

“No, he said I had to take it while I was in the hospital.”

“Then why did he give you that bottle of pills to take home with you?”

“That was just in case I got sick again. I’m fine now.”

“That’s ridiculous! That’s not what he said.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Why are you being so stubborn? You know I’m right.”

“It’s none of your business.”

When you got sick it became my business. And besides, I’m worried about you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Just leave me alone.”

And with that he walked away. Unfortunately, I was right, and within two months he relapsed and returned to the hospital.

As anyone can see (even though I didn’t at the time), my “I’m right, you’re wrong” approach to resolving that disagreement wasn’t going anywhere. All it did was spark an argument, make us both angry, and cause us to dig our heels in deeper. My brother wasn’t listening to me. And why should he have, since I wasn’t listening to him? I was too busy insisting on the correctness of my point of view. Even worse, however, the “I’m right, you’re wrong” approach threatened to destroy any trust we might have had in one another and with it our relationship, and that was the last thing I wanted to happen.

After that first argument—and predictable impasse—I did not suddenly remember the wise advice I quoted above, rejoice at the insight, and stop badgering my brother with my point of view.

Instead, I took the bait repeatedly until our relationship looked like a battered and bloodied fish slapping the ground in its death throes. It seemed like every time we tried to talk about this issue it ended the same way and worse. He became suspicious of my motives, and I became more certain he was being stubborn and immature. Once we had been close and could talk about anything, but now we were like two bulls locking horns whenever we tried to spend time together because one or both of us would always manage to bring up the medication issue.

Predictably, we became distant and began to avoid one another. This impasse lasted nearly seven years! But all that changed after I stumbled upon the techniques I will teach you in this book. Using these tools, I was able to turn our adversarial relationship into—once again—a close partnership which gave me the leverage I needed to convince him to take the medicine.

Despite this success, I wasn't always able to reproduce this result in other situations—impasses I encountered in my professional and personal life—because I did not have an easy-to-remember outline, or road map, that I could rely on. I knew the techniques but didn't always know when to use them or how to apply them systematically. That is how LEAP came to be. LEAP is a reliable method out of this kind of impasse, a road map for nearly any disagreement—really for all human relations.

The purpose of LEAP is not to get your opponent—and that is what he's become when you're at an impasse—to agree that you are right and he is wrong. The goal is to get him to agree to do whatever your need him to do.

That may sound like a contradiction, but it's not. If you are like most people, you lose sight of what you really need when you take the bait and end at an impasse. When we focus on the narrow issue of who's right, we lose sight of the bigger picture, e.g., the specific thing

we want the other person to do, the health of the relationship, longer term goals, etc.

Once you know how to LEAP, you will be able to unlock the impasse and persuade the other person to help you get what you really need. And, most importantly, you will do that without falling victim to the debilitating anger and frustration that too often end up wreaking havoc with your relationship.

The truth is, even though your adversary may not be a close friend, a loved one, or a family member, that your relationship with that person is important to you—at least in the moment. If it weren't, you wouldn't be arguing in the first place, because you'd be willing and able to walk away. On the face of it some arguments are about unimportant things, but in the moment that you're arguing, they don't feel that way because oftentimes the overt issues are a proxy for the real argument that lies beneath. The only time you can really be in a "who cares what you think" situation with another person is if you don't care about the person, don't care if the person continues to care about you, or don't need anything from that person.

So, what I'm going to be telling you is as much about preserving relationships and creating partnerships as it is about getting what you need. In fact, one of the things I'm going to be explaining is why you must first preserve that relationship in order to get what you need. That is why LEAP is much more than a method for conflict resolution. It is a set of well-studied psychological principles and specific skills that will make you more effective and fulfilled in all your relationships.

Although I gave birth to LEAP, its main principles are familiar. Sometimes people say "LEAP is just like…" not so much accusing me of plagiarism as much as recognizing the heritage. The American folk singer Woody Guthrie, writer of the song "This Land is Your Land," which we all learned as children, was sometimes accused of

stealing the melodies for his songs from old gospel tunes. In fact, he had never tried to hide his practice of borrowing from melodies that had already been written, saying, “There are no new melodies. They’re all used up!”

I feel that way about most insights into human psychology and relations. LEAP is new but, like Guthrie’s songs, it relies on what came before—from the philosophical traditions I quoted above, from the science of psychology, and from common sense. It is a method for easily remembering and using age-old truths in your everyday life. Like a melody that is catchy and hard to forget, once you learn LEAP you will find that you can call it up any time you need it.

Practice Makes Perfect

I’ve been using this method in my psychotherapy practice and teaching it to lay people in LEAP seminars for two decades. Its efficacy is not only scientifically based but also practically proven. It will work for you just as it has for thousands of others as long as you practice it with sincerity, honesty, and a true desire to move forward instead of staying stuck.

The key word here is practice. If you’re anything like the people who read I am Not Sick, I Don’t Need Help! (Vida Press, 2000) or have come to my seminars, and I think you probably are, much of what you will learn in this book will ring true to you. And if you’re anything like me, you will, nevertheless, keep taking the bait and diligently arguing your way into another impasse, all the while thinking, “That made sense when I read it, but it doesn’t work! Looks great on paper, but then words are cheap.”

And you would be right. Words are cheap, at least when it comes to advice. The only advice that helps—assuming that it’s good advice—is that which is used. Whenever I don’t practice what I preach, I

realize that the sermon isn't to blame. It's the lack of practice that leads me astray.

Practice is essential. How can you practice? It's simple, find a family member or colleague and roleplay the difficult conversations you encounter with the person you are trying to help. Give the other person you're practicing with their lines—the statement(s) your loved one or patients says—and have them say them. Then respond by trying out one or all seven of the LEAP tools you will learn in the pages ahead.

You can also watch videos at LEAPinstitute.org and when you see me do a roleplay with a seminar participant, pause the video before the participant tries to use the LEAP tool we are demonstrating and try it out yourself. Use the tool out loud. Then hit play to see how you did.

Finally, after you've read a chapter, try out what you learned the next chance you get. Read this book with a highlighter and reread the sections you highlighted. Or, if using a highlighter is not your style, dog-ear those pages you want to be sure to remember. Mark my words, as you read, light bulbs are going to go off. Make sure you mark the pages where that happened so you can easily go back to them. When you're done with the book, go back and read only the dog-eared pages. And take five minutes to go back and read the boxed quotes and bulleted lists you will see in the pages ahead.

It's just like learning a song for the first time. You don't learn the entire song the very first time you hear it. You have to repeat it until you get all the words and the melody memorized. But once it's in your head, it's impossible to forget.

PART I

Getting Ready to LEAP

1
I'm Right, You're Wrong: How to Recognize When You Need LEAP

I HAVE A NEIGHBOR who has a lot of opinions, most of them negative, about goings on in the neighborhood. The single-lane country road we live on is nearly deserted, and so I often walk my dog, Carli, off leash. My cousin, who was visiting me took Carli for a walk and was confronted by this neighbor—we'll call her Mrs. Kravitz—who shouted, "That dog should be on a leash!" and then admonished her grandchild to stay away from "that dog because she bites!" When my cousin relayed this false accusation, I was livid. I thought about knocking on Mrs. Kravitz's door and giving her a piece of my mind. Carli had never done anything of the kind.

I should explain how I feel about this dog. Years ago, I had a friend who seemed to be in love with her dog and I always thought her feelings were over the top. Until, that is, I met Carli. She was a stray wandering the streets of New York City when she adopted me. Over the years she's licked my tears away when loved ones died, dogged my every footstep when I was at home, wrestled gently with the children in my life and made me laugh every morning when I see the insane passion she has for chasing her ball.

"What's the point?" my cousin asked. I thought for a moment and realized the only goal I had was to strike back. To tell Kravitz she was dead wrong!

My answer to my cousin's question convinced me that nothing would be gained except a momentary venting of my anger. I didn't need to change her mind and I didn't need her permission to walk my dog off the leash. If I had talked to her with no other goal than to vent my anger, I would have been throwing gasoline on the fire. I would have said something like "How dare you lie about Carli!

You've known her for seven years and you can't name a single instance when she bit someone. What the hell is wrong with you?" Instead, I ignored the accusation and gave my neighbor a wide berth, and the dust settled. I *know* I'm right and she's wrong and I am able to leave it at that. I also know that disagreements do not always have to become arguments, and not all arguments end at an impasse. Some disagreements are of the "let sleeping dogs lie" variety. There's an impasse, but nothing will be gained by trying to break it.

Healthy Arguments

Many disagreements, unlike mine with my neighbor, require a resolution because something needs to be done, something has been asked for, or some decision must be made. We can't ignore them. For the most part, however, assuming the argument is healthy (i.e., the opponents have some trust, they listen and treat each other with respect), such disagreements rarely end at an impasse. And if they do, the dead-end is typically short-lived and poses no harm to the relationship. Let's look at an example:

I once had a disagreement with a colleague, a fellow professor at Columbia University, about whether or not one of our mutual doctoral students, who was analyzing data for her dissertation, should be allowed to consult with a statistician. I will call this colleague Professor David Holt. Professor Holt is an expert in statistics and I am anything but. In fact, more than twenty years ago, when I was accepted to graduate school, I was told by the chair of New York University's Ph.D. program in clinical psychology that I had achieved the distinction of having by far the worst math scores of anyone ever admitted to the program during its entire 30-year history! I take some consolation in believing that he was, in fact, giving me a backhanded compliment, saying that my other talents

outweighed this obvious limitation. But the simple truth was, and still is, that I am horrible at math.

During a meeting with our student, Mary, she had asked if she could hire a statistician to help her with a particularly complex set of analyses. I immediately said yes and asked her whom she had in mind (since I often use such consultants myself). She began to answer when Professor Holt weighed in.

“Hold on, Mary,” he said, “I didn’t say I approved of your hiring someone for this.”

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s not appropriate for a student to hire someone to complete part of her thesis. It’s not ethical. You shouldn’t suggest that it is.”

Mary flashed a worried glance my way, surely thinking I had been offended by the accusation that I had just told her to do something unethical. But I had known David a long time and was not offended or feeling defensive because we trusted each other. Still, I took the bait in the playful spirit of an academic debate. “You think that if she has a statistician conduct the analyses and write up the results for her, it would be a form of plagiarism?” I asked, reflecting back what I had heard.

“Essentially, yes.”

“I guess I would have to agree with you then.”

Smiling mischievously now, because he knew I was laying a trap for him, David said, “Then we’re agreed. Mary won’t use a consultant.”

Mary looked crestfallen, so I quickly jumped in. “He’s joking. We’re not done talking about this yet.”

I turned back to David. “Professor Holt,” I said, using his academic title to signal the start of a more serious debate, “are there any circumstances you can imagine when it would be appropriate for an investigator to hire a statistical consultant to do research?”

Smiling, he said, “You hired me on your last grant from the NIH. I don’t see anything unethical about that because I was credited as co-author on the paper we published from that research.”

“And how is this different?”

“Mary will be the only author of her thesis. The statistician you propose she hires will not have authorship, yet will have written some of the thesis in addition to performing the analyses.”

“Maybe we should just drop the whole idea,” Mary interjected, nervous about where she thought this was headed.

“Bear with us,” I reassured her, and then turned back to David. “Didn’t you help Mary with her last round of analyses?’

“Yes, I did.”

“Who was sitting at the computer keyboard? Who was designating the variables and actually running the analyses?”

“I was. I see where you’re going, Xavier, but that was different.”

“Why?”

“Because every step of the way I was teaching Mary, explaining what we had to do and why, and then—most importantly, I should add—asking her to explain it back to me so I knew she understood.”

“And that’s exactly how we should handle the work she does with the statistician. If she cannot tell us, in her own words, what was done and why, then I agree we have a problem.”

“What about the actual writing?” David asked, appearing to give some ground.

“The tables from those analyses—didn’t you give them to her?”

“I gave her the raw output, but she put the tables together, and I certainly didn’t write her results section.”

“And that’s exactly how we should handle her work with the consultant, don’t you think?”

“I see your point,” David conceded. Then, smiling at Mary, he said, “Well, you can’t hire me since that would be a conflict, but maybe I can save you some money and we can look at these analyses together.”

That’s how Mary got the help she needed—for free. I got the satisfaction of convincing my colleague to agree to my proposal and Professor Holt got to keep a consultant out of the mix.

Why did our initial disagreement turn into a friendly argument that ended well for all parties involved? Because it was healthy. We went into it with a great deal of respect for and trust in one another. But not just any kind of trust—we showed a very specific kind of trust that is crucial for a productive argument that ends well. We both trusted that, first and foremost, we would be listened to. Second, we trusted that we would not be personally attacked, called names, or disparaged in other ways. Third, and most important, we each trusted that we were well liked, if not loved, by the other person. David and I liked one another a great deal and had even developed a kind of love. This last form of trust may be hard for you to accept at the moment, and your defenses may be going up a bit—*Here comes the touchy-feely psychobabble BS!*—but by the end of this book, you will have a much clearer idea of what I mean by love and why I think it is the guiding star for any argument. When you feel respected, trusted, liked, and even loved, you will be at your best: open,

curious, flexible, and willing to give. And when you give those things with sincerity, you get the same in return. Under these conditions *no impasse is impenetrable*.

When you feel respected, trusted, liked, and even loved, you will be at your best: open, curious, flexible, and willing to give. And when you give those things with sincerity, you get the same in return. Under these conditions no impasse is impenetrable.

I argue every day. So do you. Gerry Spence, the famous trial lawyer, writes in his bestselling book, *How to Argue and Win Every Time,* that "Everyone wants to argue. Everyone does. Everyone needs to…We must argue—to help, to warn, to love, to create, to learn, to enjoy justice—to be." And I agree, as I do with much of his advice. Mr. Spence shows his readers how to win healthy arguments like the one I describe above. Indeed, in a courtroom—and I have been in many because of my work as a forensic expert—there are rules in place to insure that the arguing parties listen to one another (only one person may talk at a time and every single word is recorded), are treated with respect, and do not engage in name-calling. These arguments still turn toxic, but far less easily and commonly than they do outside the courtroom in everyday life. And when one does, the judge will usually stop the argument and call the offending parties to the bench to admonish them.

You don't have a judge to help you change course when your argument goes south. And you don't need one because with LEAP you'll have the tools you need to infuse health into an argument that has become toxic, created an impasse, and damaged your relationship. Before you can use those tools, however, you need to know how to recognize those instances when they are needed. The earlier you use them, the more quickly the impasse will be broken and the less damage you will do to your relationship.

Toxic Arguments: From Partners to Enemies

Ray and Bob were good friends who occasionally worked together. An entrepreneur, Ray had hired Bob to design a software package, which he then sold to a client. One warm summer afternoon they were standing by the barbecue, each having drunk almost a six-pack of beer. The occasion was intended as a celebration of the sale, but when Ray announced what Bob's share of the sale price would be, the atmosphere turned decidedly tense. Bob looked anything but happy and, seeing that his friend was ten miles from pleased with the news, Ray asked if there was a problem. Bob, uncomfortable because he appreciated the work, nevertheless said that there was.

"To be honest, that's not what I was expecting."

"Glad you're finally being honest," Ray said. And what exactly were you expecting?

A little put off by his friend's sarcasm, Bob went straight to the heart of the matter. "You told me when we started that I was getting ten percent of the sale, and now you're telling me I am getting half that."

"I never said that!" Ray practically shouted, beer spraying from his mouth.

"You absolutely did. Come on. Do you really think I would have dropped everything for two weeks to work on this if you hadn't promised a bonus?"

"Are you saying I'm lying?"

"No. Maybe you just don't remember."

"I told you I wanted to put this in writing, but you said I didn't have to. Now maybe I know why."

"I didn't forget anything. Ten percent is ten percent!"

“I said you would get ten percent of my profit, not of the sale price,” Ray stated slowly, as if he were speaking to a child.

“That’s not what you said, Ray.”

“So you are saying I’m lying!”

Let’s stop here and have a look at what’s happening. The health of this argument is failing fast. The concrete is already starting to dry on the impasse. Bob and Ray have gone round and round—I count four times—each essentially accusing the other of being dead wrong while maintaining his own complete infallibility. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. They should have stopped at the very first dead end, at the first “I’m right, you’re wrong.”

Bob: “You told me when we started that I was getting ten percent of the sale, and now you’re telling me I am getting half that.”

Ray: “I never said that!”

Bob: “You absolutely did...”

Instead, with every go-round the argument intensified and both friends, feeling insulted, flung insults in response. Ray felt he was being called a liar. Bob should have stopped the moment he heard that. Instead, he took the bait and said, “Maybe you just forgot.” Now, that may sound like he’s giving his friend the benefit of the doubt, and he *is* in a way. But it is also another way of saying “I’m right” while adding a more subtle insult. Because the implied accusation is that Ray unconsciously manipulated the situation. He *conveniently forgot* what he had promised. This is a form of name-calling—*you unconsciously wanted to screw me*—that is hard to detect at first because it is so subtle. At a minimum it was not a compliment, and it had the effect of throwing fuel on the fire.

Look at the result. What was Ray's reaction to Bob's statement that he probably just forgot? An insult to match the one he felt he'd been given: "I told you I wanted to put this in writing, but you said I didn't have to. Now maybe I know why." Whether or not his friend meant it, Ray heard "you forgot" as an accusation that he had changed the deal on purpose, albeit unconsciously. And so he flung the same insult back, but more bluntly. By doing that, he opened up a whole new battlefront. Ray had wanted to write down the terms of their agreement, which would have eliminated the problem. One can easily imagine him thinking, "but no-o-o, you didn't want to do that. Maybe now I know why!" Bob's suggestion that Ray may have forgotten was not a bad idea, but delivered when it was and in the way it was, it led to a toxic argument.

The 7 Habits of Healthy Arguments

When you win an argument, you can either feel closer and more trusting of the person you were arguing with or you can feel more distrustful and distant. I tell couples all the time that if their fights are healthy, they should be bringing them closer together. And if it's a business or other kind of relationship a healthy argument should leave the opponents feeling respected and positive about each other. There are 7 habits of healthy arguments that can get you there. Like exercise and low fat diets for heart disease, these habits will help you to avoid toxic arguments.

1. Stop insisting you're right.
2. Don't engage in insults or name calling.
3. Pick the right time.

4. Never use absolutes.
5. Don't "kitchen-sink it."
6. Listen without defending.
7. Reflect back what you have heard.

To illustrate the importance of these habits, let's look at an even more toxic argument.

I met Kimberly and Jason while working on a documentary for ABC News on how arguments can push a marriage to the brink of divorce. With automatic video cameras installed in their home, ABC taped more than 50 hours of Jason and Kimberly's arguments over a period of months. Kimberly is the early morning host of a radio program in upstate New York and Jason is the stay-at-home father of their eight-year-old daughter, Chloe. The family moved to New York because of Kimberly's career, and Jason had grown resentful of the fact that he'd given up his own career to care for Chloe. Here is an excerpt from an argument that started when Jason said he didn't think Kimberly appreciated all he was doing for her and the family:

JASON: I'm a friggin' stay-at-home dad that makes nothing, and I put up with everything, humiliation, everything.

KIMBERLY: You know what? You could have gone to work a year ago.

JASON: A year ago? Really! Where?

KIMBERLY: Wherever you wanted to go to work.

JASON: Where? Tell me.

KIMBERLY: I don't know!

JASON: Oh, come on, Miss Answers, tell me the answer!

KIMBERLY: I'm not responsible for you. Why am I responsible for you?

JASON: You had the question, and obviously you had the answer, because you brought it up.

KIMBERLY: You sit around whining.

JASON: [voices overlap] What am I getting? What am I getting?

KIMBERLY: And wondering why no one gives you anything.

JASON: [voices overlap] I, I'm nothing but a freaking slave to everybody.

KIMBERLY: Okay. Okay. I'm guessing we're going to have the conversation in front of Chloe.

JASON: Well, what am I getting?

KIMBERLY: Why does anybody owe you anything, Jason?

JASON: [voices overlap] You obviously have the answer.

KIMBERLY: [voices overlap] No, nobody owes you anything.

JASON: I never said peop—anybody owes me anything.

KIMBERLY: Well, then, quit feeling sorry for yourself. Poor me.

JASON: All right. Well, kiss my butt!

At this point on the videotape you can see Chloe sighing heavily. What, if anything, was being gained by this exchange? One might argue that they were blowing off steam. But, in fact, they later stated that they felt angrier after this exchange than they had when they started it. Let's look at the healthy habits that were missing.

1. Stop insisting you're right.

Kimberly and Jason just went round and round, repeating their positions and solidifying the impasse they were building. Jason's position was that his wife did not appreciate him and especially the fact that he had given up his job to support hers, and Kimberly's was that he was exaggerating and whining—he was wrong and could work if he wanted. What was gained by going round and round? Nothing was achieved other than each person becoming more adamant in their position.

2. Don't engage in insults or name calling.

Although Kimberly's accusation "you sit around whining" is not technically name calling—she didn't say "you're a whiner"—I know that Jason heard it that way. Later he revealed that he also heard "quit feeling sorry for yourself. Poor me." as another insult. He felt Kimberly was calling him a martyr. When he called her "Miss Answers" Jason was being more direct than Kimberly. And predictably she felt like he was accusing her of being arrogant and impossible. Whether or not you think either of them was correct in their assessment is not the point. The point is that whenever we engage in name calling we make people defensive, more angry and rigid.

3. Pick the right time.

Their timing was terrible in that they argued while clearly overcome by anger. Even without seeing the tape you probably understood just how angry they were by some of the things they said ("friggin," "kiss my butt"), the fact that they kept interrupting and talking over one another, that they were calling each other names, and by the poor judgment they showed in continuing to argue in front of their daughter even after they recognized they were doing so.

On a more positive note, they did not involve their daughter by trying to make her choose sides. Nevertheless, when they were later

asked to reflect on the wisdom of arguing in front of her, they both agreed it could not be good for her and that her presence also made them both feel more defensive.

4. Never use absolutes.

Kimberly and Jason were both experts at using absolutes. "You *always* nag, nag, nag" Jason said repeatedly during their fights. "You *never* think about me; it's *always* about you," was one of Kimberly's mantras. The response to such absolutes is always more defensiveness. Take a look at the following excerpt and see where those absolute statements got them:

KIMBERLY: It's *always* something. You're *never* satisfied with—you know, I could do something outside that needed attention, whether it's a lawn or weeding or something in the landscaping or what have you, on the house or anything, the deck, and you wouldn't take notice of it.

JASON: And then you pick me apart.

Given his defensive accusation I have to wonder if Jason heard anything Kimberly had to say other than the two words "always" and "never," which are, indeed, criticisms of him. Unfortunately, he was too angry and defensive to hear anything but those two words.

To be fair, let's now look at a situation in which Jason was the one using absolutes. The couple was meeting with me and, so that I could observe their fighting styles directly, I asked them to try and resolve an impasse they had reached concerning Jason's wanting to have more than one "boy's night out" with his friends during the week:

JASON: I don't treat you like you treat me. I don't control you. I'm not *always* saying I'm not happy with "you need to be doing this, you

need to be doing that, you need to be doing this, you need to be doing that."

[JASON AND KIMBERLY BOTH SPEAK AT ONCE]

DR. X: Jason, let me stop you. Hold on. Why am I stopping you right now, do you think?

[JASON AND KIMBERLY BOTH SPEAK AT ONCE]

DR. X: You were getting on a roll and I asked you to, and that was—that was great and I appreciate your trusting me.

KIMBERLY: And you see how he keeps on going, and that makes me so mad.

DR. X: Hold on, hold on. We're going to take turns. We're going to slow all this down. What did you just start to do? And how did that make you feel [Kimberly]? He started talking about your henpecking. How did you feel when all that was happening?

KIMBERLY: That he's blaming me for everything. And the frustration and the blood pressure rises. And then I just tune it out.

I could see Kimberly tense up. A shadow come over her face as soon as Jason accused her of *always* being unhappy with him and *always* trying to control him. And what was her response? Her blood began to boil and she tuned out.

Do you see how they each felt they had to defend against the absolutes? When we speak in absolutes, when we accuse someone of never doing such and such or of unequivocally being wrong, we are usually not telling the truth (no one is any one way 100% of the time) and asking for a defensive volley in return. What's more, we are practically insuring that the other person will stop listening to our position. Using absolutes is like hitting the mute button on your vocal chords. Your lips are still moving but no sound can be heard.

Using absolutes is like hitting the mute button on your vocal chords. Your lips are still moving but no sound can be heard.

By all accounts, Benjamin Franklin was a master at diplomacy, which is, by the way, the art of breaking an impasse in order to find mutually satisfying resolutions. In his autobiography Franklin writes, "I made it a rule to forbear all direct contradiction to the sentiment of others, and all positive assertion of my own. I even forbade myself the use of every word or expression in the language that imported a fix'd opinion, such as 'certainly' 'undoubtedly,' etc...And this mode, which I at first put on with some violence to my natural inclination, became at length so easy, and so habitual to me, that perhaps for these fifty years past no one has ever heard a dogmatical expression escape me." In short, as Franklin clearly understood, being one hundred percent certain about anything and using absolutes gives the person you are arguing with no room to maneuver—which equates to having no way to save face—and no option but to return fire.

5. Don't "kitchen-sink it."

Kimberly and Jason were also adept at "kitchen-sinking" it. Their fights never stayed focused on one topic. Instead, more and more hurts and loosely related accusations were heaped onto the smoldering ruins of the initial disagreement. For example, Jason felt he should be allowed to go out to a neighborhood bar at the end of the day after Kimberly returned home from work and the family had dinner together. He liked going out as many as five nights a week and believed that it was his right to socialize after being home all day doing housework. He invited Kimberly to go along, but because she had to get up early for work she was usually going to bed by the time he was ready to go out. Kimberly didn't think he was drinking

too much, but she resented his going to the bar, and she was also worried that he might be cheating on her.

This was a major impasse with serious underlying issues. Jason felt he should be able to go out as often as he wanted after his wife went to bed, and Kimberly felt that he shouldn't go out more than once a week. Neither of them was willing to give an inch. Each time the subject came up, Jason reiterated the fact that to support Kimberly's career move he had left a long-term job at the place where he had planned to work until his retirement. Because of this, and the many other sacrifices he liked to enumerate, he felt it was his "right" to go out. As he rumbled on about the list of concessions he had made for the sake of his wife and family, the original issue was soon obscured by the volcanic ash of several years' worth of complaints. Kimberly, for her part, tried to defend against every new accusation. Thus, instead of fighting a single battle, they ended up fighting a war on several fronts simultaneously, often forgetting what the original disagreement had been about.

If you find that you cannot remember how an argument started, you are involved in kitchen-sinking it and are bound to get nowhere but further from a solution.

6. Listen without defending.

Looking back at the excerpts above I cannot find one instance in which either spouse clearly heard what the other had to say without feeling compelled to defend him or herself and go on the counterattack. Let's look again at one of their exchanges:

KIMBERLY: It's always something. You're never satisfied with—you know, I could do something outside that needed attention, whether it's a lawn or weeding or something in the landscaping or what have you, on the house or anything, the deck, and you wouldn't take notice of it.

JASON: And then you pick me apart.

Did Jason even hear a word his wife was saying? She was telling him she felt unappreciated, and his response was to accuse her of criticizing him. He didn't really listen to what she said; he reacted to it—defensively. And because Kimberly did not feel listened to, she spoke more loudly and adamantly while at the same time trying to defend herself against the new accusation.

Kimberly was no better at listening without begin defensive and attacking. Remember this exchange?

JASON: I'm a friggin' stay-at-home dad that makes nothing, and I put up with everything, humiliation, everything.

KIMBERLY: You know what? You could have gone to work a year ago.

She's defending herself against his complaint about her by accusing him of being the cause of his own misery. In both instances nothing is gained other than more erosion of their trust, respect for one another and ability to control their anger.

7. Reflect back what you heard.

Reflecting back what someone has said to you is a powerful tool. In fact, it is the cornerstone of the LEAP method. It involves letting the person know that you have heard what he said and understood his perspective. It is as effective at lowering the temperature of an argument and building trust as it is simple. But this tool is often overlooked. Kimberly and Jason are no exception. If you look back at their exchange you will not see one instance of either of them reflecting back what the other has said. Each expression of hurt, each opinion or complaint, appears to be ignored. The speaker never has the experience that the listener has actually heard and understood him. Let me show you what I mean.

JASON: I'm a friggin' stay-at-home dad that makes nothing, and I put up with everything, humiliation, everything.

KIMBERLY: You know what? You could've gone to work a year ago.

Do you think Jason felt he was understood? Sure his words were heard because Kimberly's defense and counterattack was clearly based on them. But was he understood? Had she reflected back what she heard, she might have said something along the lines of, "If I heard you right, because you're a stay-at-home dad, you feel humiliated. Is that right?"

I don't have to wonder what Jason's reaction would have been to her doing this because soon after this exchange, I taught Kimberly how to reflect back what she heard and the result was one I've seen countless times. Jason became less angry, felt closer to Kimberly, and was more able to listen to her (more on this in Chapter 6). Because he felt she understood his perspective—not that she necessarily agreed with it—he was able to lower his defenses a bit.

These seven healthy habits apply to every kind of argument and are so important that I will list them here again.

1. Stop insisting you're right.
2. Don't engage in insults or name calling.
3. Pick the right time.
4. Never use absolutes.
5. Don't "kitchen-sink it."
6. Listen without defending.
7. Reflect back what you have heard.

Toxic Arguments: The Three E's to Watch For

Now that you have a picture of these healthy habits, how do you recognize when they've gone missing? There are three common warning signs that an argument has become toxic and is certain to damage to your relationship. I call them the "Three E's": **Evasion, Escalation,** and **Entropy.**

Evasion: One or both of you avoids discussion of the subject altogether because you never get anywhere and you're totally frustrated.

Escalation: Whenever you *do* talk about it, things just get worse. Accusations fly, you're calling one another names, and you end up feeling angrier or more depressed than when you started. Kimberly and Jason were, unfortunately, highly adept at escalation.

Entropy: The toxic argument has robbed you both of the energy you need to resolve the disagreement. Nothing is getting done and no one has the energy to revisit the problem.

The behaviors may sound rather childish to you, but as grown-ups we act a lot like children more often than we like to think. When the wife "forgets" to pick up her husband's suit at the cleaner because he "forgot" to pick up the milk…or when we get into an argument with a friend and then engage in a game of chicken to see who's going to make the first phone call, we are displaying one or more of the three E's.

People get into these power struggles all the time and, like a wound that's become infected, they just fester until they've poisoned the relationship entirely. That's why it's so important to recognize when an argument has turned toxic so that you can administer the antidote before the poison spreads. Here is an example from my personal life where all three E's can easily be seen.

I have four brothers. One is a recovering alcoholic who I will call Sam. Today I am very proud of Sam. He is sober and open about the fact that he has a drinking problem. But that was not always the case. Some years ago, when she was still alive, my mother phoned me to say that Sam was coming to live with her rent free because he was "between jobs." I was immediately critical.

"Mom," I said, "he's not just between jobs! He's drinking again and I think this is a very bad idea."

"Ay, Dios mio!" she said, slipping back into Spanish as she always did when upset. "He's your brother. You shouldn't say such things!'

"But it's the truth. He called me just last night and he was slurring his words. You must know he's drinking again."

"He told me he's not drinking. You shouldn't say that. That's not being a good brother. Family needs to stick together."

"I am too a good brother. Look, he's told you he's not drinking before and then you've found him passed out—come on, you're in denial!" No answer. Then her sobs could be heard.

"I know you don't like hearing this," I continued, "but in a week or two you're going to call me to ask I talk to him again because he's drinking. You're not helping him by denying the problem."

"Enough!" she shouted into the phone. "Your brother said he was not drinking and I believe him. Enough."

I could hear her sobbing again so I ended the conversation. "Fine, have it your way but don't call me to ask for help when you find him drunk and passed out."

We had reached an impasse to be sure. I was sure I was right and she was sure I was wrong. We both were angry. Although I later

apologized for saying she couldn't call me and assured her that she could, it didn't help with the ongoing argument we were having.

In the weeks that followed we both tried evasion. We talked about anything but how it was going with Sam. Then she called me one day and more or less confessed that she thought Sam "might" be drinking, "but she didn't think so." Still stuck on wanting to be right—instead of what I needed, which was for her to set some limits with my brother—I once again confronted her denial. Predictably the phone call turned into an argument in which we both, once again, escalated by calling each other names (she's a denier and I'm a bad brother), not listening and certainly not reflecting back an understanding of each other's position. She was, after all, Sam's mother and it was much harder for her to see and accept what was happening than it was for me. My mother was fiercely protective of her children. No bad word could be spoken about any of her angels—myself included. But at the time I didn't use that insight to calm myself down enough to practice some of the healthy habits to arguing.

Very quickly, after just a few rounds of arguing, entropy took over. We avoided the topic all together. It wasn't until Sam had a full blown relapse and ended with a DUI that we talked about it again. Unfortunately, by that time the issue was moot—I took no pleasure in being right—and some damage had been done to our relationship.

Practice the "Seven Habits to Healthy Arguments" and learn to recognize the "Three E's"—and you will begin to turn the tide and set the stage for getting what you need. The tools I'll provide in the pages ahead will help you to do this and much more.