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# Surrounded by Idiots

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**REVISED & EXPANDED**

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The Four Types of Human Behavior  
and How to Effectively Communicate  
with Each in Business (and in Life)

Thomas Erikson

**Vermilion**  
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## Introduction

# The Danger of Being Surrounded by Idiots

## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Reader be warned:

Since my readers' views on anything and everything mean such a great deal to me—for without you, dear reader, I would have achieved nothing—I wish to explain before the book begins just what it is you are holding in your hand.

This is an expanded anniversary edition of *Surrounded by Idiots*. In practice, this means that many parts of it are reworked and updated from the original edition of *Surrounded by Idiots*. Time flies, the world changes, and as an author I have a duty to keep up. This book is actually rather different from the original in that it includes the answers to the majority of questions people have asked me after reading the first. This is an expanded, heavily revised book specifically aimed at the reader who wishes to improve their relationships with the people around them. I've added a number of new sections that didn't make the cut in the original version on the grounds of length. I have also revisited and revised many other parts of the book, although some remain largely intact. The language has been updated and clarified, but this should really only be regarded as the application of new makeup.

In short, this is simply a more complete and—I believe—better book.

## Communication and Why It's So Important

### 1.1 IN ALL COMMUNICATION, IT'S THE RECIPIENT WHO IS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

People see what they see and they hear what they hear.

You knew what you wanted to say, so you said it as you saw it in your head. Setting aside for one moment how you expressed yourself, what you chose to emphasize, the tone of voice you adopted, and what your face looked like as you said it—what came out came out.

But what remains of what you said to someone after it has been filtered through that person's frame of reference, views, attitudes, experiences, prejudices, and preconceived notions is ultimately the message that has been understood. They may, for various reasons, perceive what you are seeking to convey in an entirely different way from what you intended. Of course, just how much is understood varies depending on whom you're talking to, but it's very rare that the full message arrives exactly as you pictured it in your head.

Perhaps it's even a little depressing to have so little control over what the recipient understands. No matter how much you want to hammer it into their thick skull, there's really not much you can do

about it, and therein lies the rub. Naturally, you can consider this one of life's many challenges. God knows we can learn from facing down our challenges, but there's no way to change what makes the recipient tick.

Most people are probably aware of and sensitive to how they would *like* to be treated. But as you and I both know, the world is rarely that simple. By *adapting yourself* to how other people want to be treated, you will become more effective in your communication.

### 1.1.1 What Does It Matter How We Treat Each Other?

You can help people understand you by creating a secure arena for communication—on their terms. That means the recipient can expend their energy on understanding what you're saying instead of consciously or unconsciously reacting to the way you communicate.

People really are very different. There are so many dimensions to consider that simply thinking about it can leave you a little perplexed. We all need to develop some flexibility so we can vary our communication style and adapt it when talking to people who don't function in the same way we do.

Because that's another truth: No matter how we choose to communicate, you, the individual, will always be in a minority. Whatever your type of behavior is, the majority will work in a different way. And there's always going to be more of them.

My mother was wrong. Don't treat others as you'd like to be treated. It's a nice thought—but a misguided one. Sorry, Mum.

You can't base everything on yourself. This flexibility and ability to interpret other people's needs and adapt yourself according to these observations is what characterizes a good communicator.

Being familiar with and understanding another person's behavioral style and way of communicating means that your guesses become more sophisticated in terms of how that person might react in different situations. This understanding also dramatically increases your ability to get through to said individual.

## 1.2 NO SYSTEM IS WATERTIGHT

By the time you've gotten your hands on this book, a lot will have happened since I wrote it.

*Surrounded by Idiots* makes no claims whatsoever to being comprehensive when it comes to how we humans communicate with each other. There is no book that can do that, since it would be impossible to fit all the different signals we are constantly broadcasting into one book. If we included body language, the differences between male and female dialogue, your position in your sibling group, cultural differences, and every other way there is to define difference, we wouldn't be able to get it all down on the page. It would be the world's longest book.

We could add psychological aspects, graphology, age, and astrology into the mix without achieving a picture that was 100 percent complete. Neuroscience—that's brain research to you and me—is making constant advances.

Tricky. But as far as I'm concerned, that's also the charm of it all. Not everything can be quantified. People aren't Excel spreadsheets. We're too complicated to be fully described. Even the simplest, most uncultured, lowest-ranking individual in our respective scales is more complicated than can be expressed in a book. But we can avoid the worst mistakes by understanding the basics of human communication.

There are simply no theories, tools, or aids that can fully describe a person. "We see what we do, but we do not see why we do what we do. Thus, we assess and appraise each other through what we see that we do." So said psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Different behaviors are what create dynamics in our lives. Everyone has to behave somehow or another. Certain behaviors will be ones you recognize in yourself, while there will be other types of behavior that we either don't recognize or don't understand. As you know, each and every one of us also behaves differently in different situations, which can be a cause for joy or irritation for those around us. It can certainly be refreshing, but it can be confusing at the same time.

There aren't really any behaviors that are right or wrong in this

regard, and most behaviors can probably be considered as perfectly okay. What I mean by this is that there is no such thing as correct or incorrect behavior. You are who you are, and there's really very little point pondering over why that is. You're good, no matter what you're like. Regardless of how you choose to behave or how you are understood, you are okay. Within reason, of course. Manipulative behaviors and generally psychopathic or narcissistic actions are very much not okay. But then again, you knew that already.

### 1.2.1 This Is Just How I Am, Okay?

In a perfect world, it would be easy to say, *I'm a particular kind of person and it's okay because I read it in a book. That's just how I am and this is how I act.* Sure, wouldn't it be great not to have to restrain your own behavior? To always be able to act and behave precisely as you feel at the time? You can do that. You can behave exactly as you wish. All you have to do is find the right situation in which to do so.

There are two situations in which you can be you, only you, and nothing but you:

1. The first situation is when you're alone in a room. Then it doesn't matter very much how you speak or what you do. It doesn't hurt anyone if you scream and swear or if you want to sit silently and ponder the great mysteries of life or wonder why Bill Gates is the biggest farmland owner in the US. In your solitude, you can behave exactly the way you feel. Great, right?
2. The second situation where you can completely be yourself is when all the other people in the room are exactly like you. Feel free to follow your mother's advice and treat others as you want to be treated. Excellent advice and very well intentioned. And it works, too—as long as everyone is like *you*. All you need to do is make a list of all the people you know who believe, think, and act exactly like you in all situations. Then all you've got to do is give these people a call and start hanging out. Exactly like you, remember.

In any other situation, it might be a good idea to understand how you are perceived and to learn how other people function. I don't think I will make headlines by saying that most people you meet aren't exactly like you.

The words and expressions we choose to use vary. The title of this book alone demonstrates our different interpretations of mere words. I've received several emails from people who think it was a poor choice of title. They say we shouldn't call each other idiots. And on the whole, I'm inclined to agree, while also noting that humor and irony are probably not for everyone.

But when you use the wrong word, well, maybe you are an idiot.

What do I know?

Well, I know this: We're all the idiot in *someone's* story.

### 1.2.2 Surrounded by Idiots—or Not?

Hang on just a second. What does this actually mean?

Somewhere along the way, I picked up the following analogy: Behavior is like a transmission. It doesn't work with just one gear. The more gears you have at your disposal, the smoother the drive. Just like with a gearbox, sometimes one of the gears is the right one, but other times that very same gear is very much the wrong one. It's fine to start the car in first—starting in eighth would be a little tricky. In other situations, it's hopeless trying to use first—for example, if you're doing sixty miles per hour.

In some situations, every single person ends up stamped, labeled, and categorized faster than you can say “stereotype.” On the other hand, before you draw your labeling gun and start firing words like “stupid,” “lazy,” or “generally weird,” let's explore the option of not putting labels on each other at all.

The benefits of not labeling people are just as amazing as finding extra french fries with your meal. Firstly, it makes life more exciting. Instead of simply seeing someone as “annoying,” you might discover that they are an unexpected source of entertainment.

Then there's the whole thing about avoiding embarrassing situations. Labeling someone as “dumb” can quickly turn embarrassing

when it transpires that the individual in question is a professor of astrophysics or a chess grand master. It's like pinning a note that reads "kick me" on their back and then realizing said individual is, in fact, a champion kickboxer.

But it's not all sunshine and rainbows when it comes to avoiding labels. Sometimes it feels as if our brains are programmed to automatically apply labels to people, as if we need to pigeonhole each other if we're to deal with each other, period.

Who is she, really? Age, fashion choices, profession. Married, single, cohabiting, straight, or something else. A college graduate? That much you could probably have figured out from the start. In what major? Oh, she's one of *those*. Does she live in a condo? Oops. A house, then? That explains it. Well-traveled or a couch potato? Kids? Why? Oh right, no kids? How come? Washes her car every Sunday? How dull. Never washes her car? Eww. Dirty.

And so on. Applying labels to each other—we do it all the time. I suspect it's baked into our DNA. We quite simply have to find ways to relate to one another; otherwise, it ends up being too difficult to keep track of everyone.

But next time you're tempted to pull the trigger on your labeler, stop to think about the advantages of refraining. You might find that life is a little more fun and that you make more unexpected friends along the way. And who knows, you might even avoid being labeled as a "label junkie" in the process.

But what does this have to do with our beloved idiots? Well, you see . . . in this book I also apply labels to people. And there are those who are opposed to the idea of sorting people into different personality types. Perhaps you're among those who believe people shouldn't be categorized in that way—that it's wrong to pigeonhole people. Even if—as I said—everyone does it.

Sometimes they may do so differently from the way I do in this book, but we nevertheless all note our differences. And the fact of the matter is that we are different, and pointing this out can in my view be a positive thing, provided that you do so in the right way and, most important, for the right reason. Anyone who labels people

out of downright prejudice is on the wrong track. But I believe those who do so in an attempt to understand are onto something.

Not that this comes without its risks. Used incorrectly, any type of tool can be harmful. I think it's more to do with who is using the tool than the tool itself.

As such, consider this book an introduction to how human behavior works and a dialogue on how we can adapt to each other in the best possible way. The rest of it is up to you.

### 1.2.3 Note the Following

Behavior . . . is relatively predictable. But:

- Every individual reacts according to their own routines to similar situations.
- It is impossible to predict every possible reaction before it happens.

Behavior . . . is part of a pattern.

- We often react in ways that are consistent. As such, we should respect one another's patterns. And understand that our own . . .

Behavior . . . is changeable.

- We should learn to listen, act, speak openly, and reflect—as the prevailing situation demands. Everyone can adapt.

Behavior . . . can be observed.

- We should be able to observe and understand most forms of behavior without being amateur psychologists.

Behavior . . . is understandable.

- We should be able to understand why other people feel and do what they are doing right now. Everyone can think about why.

- Behavior . . . is unique.
- Despite what we have in common, each person's behavior is unique to them. Everyone can succeed on their own terms.

Behavior . . . is excusable.

- Reject personal envy and griping—it helps to talk about it. Learn the arts of tolerance and patience, both with yourself and others.

Behaviors . . . are like a toolbox.

- Every type is needed. Depending on the situation, a tool can sometimes be right and sometimes wrong. A ten-pound sledgehammer is good for knocking down walls, but it's not the best if you're hanging a painting in your living room.

## How Our Behaviors Came into Existence

### 2.1 WHY DID WE END UP THE WAY WE ARE?

Where does behavior come from? Why are people so different? How come we're not all the same? You tell me. In short, it's all about the combination of nature and nurture. The foundations of the behaviors we exhibit in adulthood are laid before we're even born. Hereditary temperaments and traits of character influence our behavior, and these trigger a process at the gene level.

Scientists are still squabbling about exactly how this works, but I think we can safely agree that it matters. Not only do we inherit traits from our own parents, but we also inherit them from their parents, not to mention in varying degrees from other relatives. At some point or another, we've all heard that we speak like or look like an uncle or an aunt. As a child, I resembled my uncle Bertil—something to do with my red hair. To explain how this is genetically possible would take a tremendous amount of time. For the moment, let's simply accept that this inheritance lays the foundation for our behavioral development.

What happens once we're born? In most cases, children are born impulsive, intrepid, without any inhibitions whatsoever. A child does as it pleases. The child says, *No, I don't want to!* or *Yes I can!* They are immersed in the thought that there's nothing they can't do. This kind of spontaneous and sometimes uncontrolled behavior is, of

course, not always desirable to the child's parents. Then hey, presto, what was once an original pattern of behavior begins to transform, in the best- / worst-case scenario, into a copy of someone else's.

### 2.1.1 What the Science Tells Us

To begin with, we would need to find enough researchers who are sufficiently in agreement in order to know what the science is actually telling us. But fear not—there are clues. Our behaviors, no matter how diverse and complex they may be, originate from just a few different, identifiable sources. Of course, these sources are psychological, but they are also biological and social.

The nature-versus-nurture debate is one of the oldest chestnuts in psychology, especially in the study of human behavior. It revolves around the relative contributions of genetic inheritance (nature) and environmental factors (nurture) in human development and behavior.

In recent decades, consensus in the field has shifted toward a more nuanced understanding that emphasizes the interaction between genes and environment rather than seeing them as separate or opposing forces.

There are a lot of ways to look at this issue, including through the lenses of interactionist perspectives, epigenetics, gene-environment correlations, brain plasticity during critical periods, quantitative genetics, cultural and social factors, and neuroscience.

Biologically, our behavior is influenced by our brain's synapses and chemistry—and what we eat seems to be of greater significance than previously thought. All sorts of things affect how we process information, how we react to stimuli, and even how we communicate.

It's clear that we inherit a great deal from our parents. But which traits end up in your DNA? Are they the same as your sister's? Why or why not? I don't know. You don't know. No one knows. Yet another excellent question to which we don't have an answer.

Basically, why an individual ends up the way they are still remains something of a mystery. And perhaps it's not all that important, given that you and I are already the way we are. We're hardly likely to change to any great extent at this juncture in life.

Psychologically, our upbringing, experiences, and environment all play a significant role—and don't forget the social dimension.

There is increasing recognition of the impact of cultural, social, and individual experiences in shaping behaviors.

Our interactions, our culture, and our collective norms all influence the way we express ourselves. Context naturally plays a role. An individual might change a little (or even a lot) when they switch jobs, start a new relationship, move to a new neighborhood, join a club, or do just about anything else.

The prevailing view of the field at present is that human behavior is the product of complex interactions between genetic and environmental factors. This is not a question of nature versus nurture, but rather how one interacts with the other. The consensus is that almost all traits and behaviors are affected by a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

Understanding where our behavior comes from helps us understand and sometimes even predict why people act the way they do. As you read this book, remember these roots—the biological, psychological, and social factors. This isn't just about putting labels on each other; this is about understanding behavioral origins and learning how to navigate and react to them effectively. It's also about doing this without judging people, which is one of my core values.

## 2.2 MY CORE VALUES

And now for a smooth DJ transition: How to interpret the behavior you observe is an undeniably fascinating subject. Let's disregard the whole nature-and-nurture thing for now. Deep within me, in what eventually became my personality, are my core values—elements so deeply embedded in my character that it's barely feasible to alter them.

These are the things I learned from my parents as a child or that I learned in school when I was very young. In my case it was different variations of "study and do well in school so you get a good job when you grow up" or "fighting is wrong." The latter, for example, means

that I've never laid a hand on another person. I haven't fought since third grade, and I seem to recall that I lost then. (She was really strong.)

All of us carry many such core values. We know instinctively what is right and what is not. No one can take my core values away from me. They're just there.

### 2.2.1 My Attitudes and Approaches

The next layer is my attitudes, which are not exactly the same as core values. Attitudes are things I have formed opinions about based on my own experiences or on conclusions I have drawn from encounters in the latter part of my schooling, high school, college, or my first job. Even experiences later on in life can form attitudes. Everything I experience with other people will either reinforce or confirm my previously formed attitudes. Unfortunately, we rarely change our minds.

### 2.2.2 My Core Behavior

Taken together, both my core values and attitudes affect choices I make in my behavior, forming my core behavior—the person I most want to be. My core behavior is what I use with full latitude without any influence from external factors, when it's just about me.

I'm sure you've already spotted the challenge this poses: When on earth are we ever completely free from any external influences? When I discuss this issue with groups in different contexts, we usually settle on one situation where this is true: while we're asleep. We are otherwise subject to various influences more or less all the time.

If I'm comfortably reclining in my favorite chair with a good book on a Sunday afternoon and recharging my batteries ahead of another intense week of work and all that entails in the form of responsibility, there will always be someone else on my mind. As I tear through the pages of this novel I've been wanting to read for ages, I'll be listening out for my wife. Stereotype or not, if she catches sight of me idly sitting there, then you can be sure she'll find me something more useful to do.

But people are different. Some don't care. They're always themselves

since they've never stopped to think how others might perceive them. A liberating yet worrying thought, if you ask me. How you're perceived by others is sometimes the key to success rather than failure.

The stronger your self-understanding is, the greater your probability of adapting to the people around you. The self-preservation instinct, if you like.

### 2.2.3 Adapted Behavior

What the rest of us usually see is adapted behavior. It's an interpretation of a specific situation and a choice about how to act—this is the behavior that is put into practice. Think of it as a mask you wear to fit into a given situation: the mask you think is the right one based on the form of adapted behavior that will allow you to blend into that situation. That gives rise to an interesting reflection: Different people in the same situation put on different masks. Why? Well, we quite simply interpret the very same surroundings in different ways.

What's more, we may naturally have several masks. It's not at all unusual to have one at work and another at home. And maybe another one when visiting the in-laws (a wise choice, if you ask me). I'm simply noting that our interpretations differ and we then act accordingly.

### 2.2.4 Surrounding Factors

Consciously or subconsciously, surrounding factors cause me to choose a particular course of action. I don't claim in the course of this simplified explanation to have fully accounted for the many factors that create a person's behavioral patterns, but it serves as an introduction.

Take a look at this formula:

$$\text{Behavior} = f(P \times Sf)$$

- Behavior is a function of Personality and Surrounding factors.
- Behavior is that which we can observe.