

Eric Barker on *Plays Well with Others* Brainfluence

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SPEAKERS

Intro, Roger Dooley, Eric Barker, Outro

Intro: 00:00

Welcome to Brainfluence, where author and international keynote speaker, Roger Dooley, shares powerful but practical ideas from world-class experts, and sometimes a few of his own. To learn more about Roger's books, *Brainfluence* and *Friction*, and to find links to his latest articles and videos, the best place to start is rogerdooley.com. Roger's keynotes will keep your audience entertained and engaged, at the same time, he will change the way they think about customer and employee experience. To check availability for an in-person or virtual keynote or workshop, visit rogerdooley.com

Roger Dooley: 00:37

Welcome to Brainfluence, I'm Roger Dooley. If you like my writing, you're going to love today's guest. Eric Barker writes about being successful, being persuasive, and a lot more. And just about everything he writes could have the phrase based on science in the title. Eric looks at a topic, sees what the best research says, and turns that into writing that is both enjoyable and actionable. The last time Eric was here, we talked about his best-selling book, *Barking Up the Wrong Tree*. Eric's new book is, *Plays Well with Others: The Surprising Science Behind Why Everything You Know About Relationships Is (Mostly) Wrong*. Welcome to the show, Eric.

Eric Barker: 01:11

It's great to be here.

Roger Dooley: 01:13

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Eric, this book is about relationships and understanding people, and I think one of the most interesting depictions we've had of this is in the long-running TV series *Criminal Minds*, where every week FBI profilers catch a criminal, a serial killer, typically, by their uncanny ability to describe what he's like, what he looks like, what his personal characteristics are and so on. And I think that maybe encapsulates a belief that we all have that, well, we can understand people pretty well, it's just those profilers are better than the rest of us. What's the real science here?

Eric Barker: 01:48

Criminal profiling is basically pseudoscience. A UK study showed that only 2.7% of the time, was the profile actually helpful. And the reason I'm citing UK stats is because the FBI doesn't release stats on that. Research has shown that chemistry students in college produce profiles that seem just as valid and are just as useful as what professional profilers do. And what's funny about this, I use this story, this analysis, as a lead-in to just how really pretty bad most of us are at reading other people's thoughts and feelings. With strangers, we only accurately read their thoughts and feelings 20% of the time, with friends, we reach 30%, and with spouses, we only get up to 35%. So, whatever you think your partner is thinking or feeling, two-thirds of the time, you're wrong, we're just not really that good at it. But in the book, I do get into a number of things we can do to become better. But really, the key isn't so much trying to passively read people like Sherlock Holmes, the real key to reading other people better is to work less on trying to be a better people reader, and actually doing things to make the other person be more readable to have the other person send you stronger signals.

Roger Dooley: 03:08

Well, what would some of those things be Eric?

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Eric Barker: 03:10

Basically, first and foremost, we need to be more motivated. When people are on first dates, research shows that they're actually better at people reading. Because in a context like that, there's something to lose, there's something to gain. Generally, our brains are pretty cost-efficient, and that's kind of a euphemism for lazy. We need to feel like we've got something to gain here, and then our gray matter actually upsets the game a little bit. But beyond that, like I said, the real strong element here that can really make us better is getting the other person to send stronger signals. And what we can do there is think first about context. If we're just sitting across somebody at a table having coffee, there's not a lot of stimuli, but if I was to be playing a sport with someone by playing basketball, I'd be able to see how well do they cooperate? How do they make decisions on the fly? Do they cheat? So, your context can actually give you a lot more information about a person, what they're like, and the choices they make. Beyond that, having other people around, that's more stimuli, you're going to get to see someone react to a lot more things. If you only dealt with someone in the presence of their boss, would you feel like you were seeing the full them? Of course not. So, that, and the other thing we can really try to do is focus on asking questions that are a little more controversial, a little more emotional. Emotional reactions are typically more honest. When we get a person to react to something, we typically get a better idea of their opinions, their values, their thoughts, and feelings, than we do from talking about the weather. So, the goal here, again, is to make the other person more readable, sending you stronger signals, because that's a much more powerful way than relying on our typical brains, which just are not well suited for this.

Roger Dooley: 05:06

So, a typical situation might be for one of our audience members, maybe they're having coffee with a business contact for the first time. Maybe it's a sales situation,

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maybe it's just a networking situation, but they'd like to get to understand this person better. What would one or two things be that they could do to try and provoke that more emotional response without going over the top?

Eric Barker: 05:29

Well, first and foremost, if it is a sales situation or something like that, think about what you stand to gain or lose here. You're going to be a little bit sharper if you are focused on this isn't a scrimmage, this is game day. Beyond that, not just going through the motions. If you don't have to meet over coffee, it would be preferable to do something where there's a more participatory atmosphere so you can see how the person acts. But again, you don't have to get into politics or religion or something as extreme as that. But plenty of research has shown that when we're first meeting people talking about somewhat more controversial topics, something that does touch emotionally, people not only get more information about the person they're dealing with, but they actually enjoy the conversation more. Because typically, we play it too safe. Typically, it gets really banal, it gets kind of boring. If you try to connect with someone, not only will you read them better, they'll enjoy the conversation more, you'll enjoy the conversation more, if you step a little bit outside the standard conversational topics.

Roger Dooley: 06:33

Yeah, I guess, first of all, raising the stakes makes sense. And probably if it's an important sales call, maybe you're already aware of that. But there's probably a tendency to relax to just say, "well, it's only coffee, I can just sort of tune out here and think about what's next on my agenda," which would be the wrong move. Now, that makes a huge amount of sense, Eric, and then it also reminds me of some of these questions ... every couple of weeks you see an article about better questions to ask at a networking event, or at a cocktail reception, or something like that because you get that very simple sort of what do you do, what you hear, and there's

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always a dozen, much better, more interesting suggestions. And I think that's kind of what you're saying, if you ask something that is a little bit unexpected, a little bit unusual, but maybe probes a little bit more deeply than the totally expected, what do you do, then you're going to get a better response, maybe help you understand that person better.

Eric Barker: 07:28

And not only that, in general, as I talked about in my first book, *Barking Up the Wrong Tree*, networking events generally don't turn out to be the best way to really connect with people. What turns out to be a far better way to, research shows, is that if you go down your contact list, you're going to realize that a disproportionate number of the people you're connected with were introduced to you by a handful of people that researchers have called the super connectors. They're the hubs of the network. So, actually figuring out the scaling, "hey, these four or five people are the ones who introduced me to 80% of my contacts," reaching out to those people with requests, "hey, you know, I'm interested in X, I'm trying to achieve y, who else should I talk to?" Those people are the hubs of the network, and they are [unintelligible 00:08:17] in. In the past, they've been very successful in introducing you to people, and they're probably going to be more. That's kind of the 80/20 Pareto where with just a little bit of effort, you can get much better results. Because those specific people are really the powerful ones who have introduced you to people in the past, and they'll probably introduce you to good people in the future.

Roger Dooley: 08:35

Eric, we've both written about first impressions and their importance, and you have a section of the book devoted to first impressions. Why don't you explain a little bit, a little bit about the importance of them, and how to deal with them, and so on?

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Eric Barker: 08:48

The interesting thing is that, like I said, face to face trying to read people, we're generally pretty bad at that. What's interesting about first impressions is they're actually a double-edged sword. On one hand, we're actually pretty good at sizing somebody up extremely quickly. Roughly 70% of the time, our first impressions of someone are accurate. The only problem is, those first impressions tend to stick. So, that 30% of the time when we're wrong, those first impressions, and you've probably heard this before, the saying is true that first impressions matter. So, what's really critical here is we are judging people immediately, subconsciously. Within milliseconds, we're sizing people up. And what we need to do is be cognizant of those judgments. We can't prevent them, but be cognizant of those, and rather than just locking on to them ... because this is where it gets into confirmation bias, where once we've signed someone up, right or wrong, our brain doesn't generally act like a scientist hypothesis testing. Confirmation bias means our brains usually take the theories that already has, seeks out the information that confirms that, and dismisses what doesn't confirm what you already believe. So, what we need to do is realizing the judgments we're making, and then take a step back and hypothesis test them. Sit there and say, "Well, I'm getting the feeling this person is so difficult." Well, hold on, let me think about that, let me give them a second. Actually, let me ask them a question to see if they're still a little spiky, or maybe they're having a bad day. Because the issue here is that if you meet somebody, and they make a bad first impression, and then you don't deal with them again, you never get a chance to confirm, to really test it, versus if somebody makes a positive impression. They could be a bad person having a good day, but because they made a positive impression, you see them again, and you get a chance, you get multiple tries to try and get a more accurate read on them. So, we want to give people a second chance. We want a hypothesis test. Imagine when you're sizing somebody up, when those thoughts come to you, imagine you were deciding whether they get the death penalty or not. Again, stakes ... like okay, let me not rush to judgment

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here. Let me listen to what they have to say. Let me try and be a little bit more fact-oriented. And the other really critical thing that comes away from the first impressions as a corollary, is, like I said, they stick, and because they stick, you do want to do your best to make a first impression. You don't want to be deceptive or manipulative, but think about the best version of you, think about the version of you that you want people to see and remember, because they're going to.

Roger Dooley: 11:36

Any other tips on how to make a good first impression. The literature all says that first impressions can be very sticky, whether they're accurate or not. And definitely if for some reason, somebody would meet you and think that, well, you're not very smart, or you're just kind of sloppy, or something ... every little thing you do wrong after that is simply add to that impression and it's going to be very difficult to correct. If you are trying to make a good first impression, what should you do?

Eric Barker: 12:04

The debate here is do you want to put on a full method acting Oscar-worthy performance? Do you want to be yourself? And usually, people get caught in that trap where it's like, I don't want to be fake but I also want to make a good first impression. How do we balance that? And like I said, what the research shows is that you want to think about that version of you. Who were you on your best day? Don't try and be something you're fundamentally not. But ask yourself, it's like, okay, when I'm with my boss, I'm probably a little bit more like this when I'm with my family, I'm a little bit more like that when I'm with kids. What version of you do you want to present? Because that is not going to be insincere. That is a facet of who you are. You won't be lying. You won't be having to put on a performance. You can just say this is a personal context, I'm meeting someone, I want to be the person that I am around my friends. And that will be sincere. And it'll also be positive, because hopefully, you're positive around your friends. So, don't try and put on a

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performance because like I said, it's, it's not going to last over time. Try and be the version of you that is most suited to that situation when you're on your best day.

Roger Dooley: 13:22

When we do meet people for the first time, the question of trust comes up, and that's something else you write about. Talk a little bit about trust, Eric, and, how trusting should we be or how distrustful, how weary should we be?

Eric Barker: 13:35

The interesting thing about trust is that it's always the balance of sorts, but the research is consistent, that on a trusting scale with 10 being the most trustworthy, and one being the least trustworthy, the people who have the most financial and career success are people who trust at a level of about an eight, which is pretty high when you think about. But the issue is that ... people who score a nine or a 10 can be over-trusting and maybe they get taken advantage of, but what this study showed was that once you get down to the level 123, by not trusting, those people missed out on opportunities, often to the level, the equivalent of not going to college. Because they were not trusting, they didn't get a lot of opportunities. It's definitely better to err on the side of trusting a little bit more so that those opportunities come your way, rather than being too insular about things. And in terms of getting people to trust you, I talked about this in the friendship section of a book, where I basically took Dale Carnegie and gave it the MythBusters treatment. What's really interesting is most of what Dale Carnegie wrote about has been scientifically validated. The issue about Dale Carnegie is that his stuff is really only good for the beginning of relationships. It's basically to get to know you phase. But if you're trying to create a deep connection with someone, coworker, or boss or in your personal life, you have to go beyond some of Dale Carnegie's stuff like just bobbing your head, similarity saying their name. You want to get to issues of vulnerability, and this is what really creates trust. Basically, what makes people

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trust us when we trust them, and by admitting things that potentially could make you look bad, potentially show a weakness or a fear. This tells someone ... and again, not just words, you're not just saying I trust you; you're demonstrating it by opening up a little bit, saying something that maybe could be used against you. That is a clear demonstration, a costly signal that you've put trust in them, that you think they are not going to hurt you. And very often, people will reciprocate. And that creates a really safe environment. Not only that, not only does it create connections, but it's also much better for our health. People who don't open up, people who aren't vulnerable at times, especially people who are close to them, University of Pennsylvania research shows, this made them more likely to have prolonged illnesses, more likely to have a first heart attack, and there's higher potential that heart attack could be lethal. So, vulnerability creates trust, it's also really important for our health.

Roger Dooley: 16:17

That kind of lead me into the next topic, which is Dale Carnegie's book. Coincidentally, just a couple days ago, I received a copy of the newest addition, they've released yet another edition of his classic book, which apparently has some revisions. I don't know what the revisions are, but the core content is the as pretty much the same. And so, he clearly got a lot of stuff right in there. A book doesn't sell for, I don't know, 80-plus years, without it having some kernel of truth in it. And I think you're right, Eric, his developing friendships is a little bit more transactional, more suitable for the salesperson who is going to have new people coming in every day or even has maybe some longer-term relationships with customers, but not necessarily deep relationships with those customers. And I think in that context, it's very valuable. And considering he preceded Bob [unintelligible 00:17:19] and all behavioral science 40 years or something, he got a lot of stuff right.

Eric Barker: 17:25

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Yeah, but one critical thing he got wrong was Carnegie talks about trying to see something from the other person's perspective, to put yourself in their shoes, and it turns out, we're terrible at this. Nicholas [unintelligible 00:17:37], University of Chicago, specifically research this, and he just found this actually makes you worse at relating to people because you're making assumptions about where they're coming from, and we're often wrong. Much like the research on reading people, we're not that good at seeing where the other person is coming from, we make assumptions and work on those, and it actually takes us further away than if we just paid attention to the person, didn't jump to conclusions about their perspective. It's better to listen in that sense. But the majority of what Carnegie said early on in a relationship is very valuable. But Carnegie's perspective was much more transactional. It was much more about very quick, shallow, how to get your transactional relationships. Like I said, useful when you're first meeting somebody, but if you want to have deeper relationships with someone that are ongoing, that are close and personal, we need to send more costly signals like spending time and vulnerability, opening up about our deeper selves.

Roger Dooley: 18:39

Right. Well, I think that maybe the error isn't putting yourself in someone else's shoes, it's doing that before you have a real understanding of them and what their shoes look like. That really takes us into the topic of empathy. And I think that if you can really understand by talking to somebody or by using other techniques to really understand them, then that can be a valuable tool. But I totally agree that all too often, we think, oh, well, I understand what they're thinking so I can put myself in their shoes. And of course, it doesn't help. Talk to me a little bit about empathy.

Eric Barker: 19:20

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Empathy is really interesting because this is when you're getting much closer to someone. And what the neuroscience research shows is that the closer we feel to someone, the more our vision of ourselves and our vision of them overlap in our mind. And it was really crazy what I saw when I was researching the book was that 2000 years ago, Aristotle said that a friend is another self. And that's a very warm poetic statement, what's crazy is it's actually backed up. Arthur Aaron, who does research at Stony Brook University found this, that basically, we do, the closer we are to someone, the more our vision of ourselves and then overlaps like a Venn diagram. And so, I think it was fMRI research, when you mentioned women's best friend's name, in the MRI, the areas of the brain for self-processing actually light up. And if I was to ask you about close friends of yours, and I mentioned a personality trait, and I said is this true of you, or is this true of them ... The delay in your response would be longer with people you're close to than acquaintances because of that blurring that occurs between us and people we're close to. So, that's empathy at the more biological level, and it just creates this powerful feeling of closeness. And so, it's really critical to think about that, to realize that, really, our friends, they are another self, they are in many ways, biologically, as far as our brains are concerned, they are an extension of us.

Roger Dooley: 21:01

And I guess there are levels of empathy too. Past guests on the show, Martin Lindstrom has talked about increasing empathy. And many of the total failures that he's observed in customer experience and employee experience are because of a lack of empathy. The top managers think they know what the situation is on the ground, think they know what the customers are thinking, but it's only when they are put in that same situation that they realize, "oh, man, this is pretty bad," when they have to experience it themselves. And so, I think the closer you can get to the people or to the situation that they're in, the more empathy you'll be developing.

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Eric Barker: 21:41

Absolutely. That is where at the start, again, Carnegie's advice is really useful, is finding similarities. We do not feel very close to people we don't feel similar to. When we are in the early stages of meeting someone, talking to someone, it's really valuable to seek similarities, to be asking them questions, and finding those connections. I think a lot of people very often have a knee-jerk response of, "oh, well, we're not similar people," but there are so many facets of any individual. Maybe you're not the same religion, but maybe you grew up in the same state, or even the same town, maybe you have similar interests, maybe you went to the same school, maybe you follow the same sports teams. There are so many different elements that you could be similar with someone, you just need to ask questions, explore, listen. Because once we feel that issue of similarity, and the other person feels that issue of similarity, that's where empathy starts. And then like I said, to deepen it, we have to take it further, and we have to open up a little bit with vulnerability because that's what displays our trust, and that's what really inspires other people to start trusting us. So, that's kind of the empathy ladder of sorts.

Roger Dooley: 22:56

Yeah. And of course, when you establish that common ground, you're also invoking what Cialdini would call liking, and that makes you more persuasive as well and close with the other person. A term that you mentioned that I didn't expect to see in the book is frenemy. Often, I think about that in a business context where Apple and Google are mortal enemies in some areas, but cooperate a lot in other areas just because of the nature of their businesses. And you bring it up in a personal context. How do you define frenemy when you're talking about two people? And is this a common situation? And is there a way of improving that? Because frenemy itself doesn't sound like a very positive thing.

Eric Barker: 23:41

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No, actually, it's a terrible thing. This is actually researched by Julianne [unintelligible 00:23:45] and what she's found is that frenemies actually stress us out far more than enemies do. Which sounds crazy at first, but the issue there is with someone who's a clear enemy, we know what to expect, we know that they're against us, versus with a frenemy, we're always uncertain. And that's really stressful because we don't know is this going to be a good day where we cooperate or a bad day where they're out to get me? So, frenemies actually are much more likely to cause little high blood pressure, stress issues. And what's really crazy is that frenemies, the technical term is ambivalent relationships, they actually make up about 50% of our relationships, and we don't see them any less than we do our close friends. And this isn't just personal life. In fact, I think frenemies exist very often in the workplace, where we have coworkers who we need to deal with or partners in some aspect of business, people that we're required to deal with because of our jobs, because of our roles, who we are kind of ambivalent about, we don't know what it's going to be like. So, it's very stressful to have to deal with frenemies. Obviously, what I would say in terms of your personal life is you're much better off dealing with them less, just not dealing with them as much as you can. In terms of dealing with frenemies in the workplace where you don't have an option, that's where again, we can try and increase empathy, we can try and find similarity, seek overlap, use vulnerability to try and express trust and try and build a stronger relationship. But that's not going to work with everyone, and so I also talked about going beyond frenemies, I talk about the research on dealing with narcissists. And the issue there is there are things we can do with difficult, potentially toxic people, where if we emphasize similarity, vulnerability, community, these can help the other person, their empathy muscles reach out a little bit. But even if that doesn't work, what we need to shift to, especially in a workplace, where we don't have a choice, is we need to shift to a more transactional relationship, where we are much more focused on getting as much as we can. Because we can get difficult people to play ball, if we have something they want, we just need to be very, very specific

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and treated in a transactional business-like fashion. Because if there's not going to be an emotional connection, then to protect ourselves, we need to focus on being all business.

Roger Dooley: 26:23

So, first of all, that number of frenemies is pretty startling. So, like half of our contacts may fall into that ambivalent category. And probably some are much more stressful than others, but really, what you're saying is, maybe avoid some, if possible, try and convert others, if possible, by becoming closer, and more empathetic and building empathy in them, or in a third case, look to be more transactional and to say, "Okay, well, I'm not going to stress about this relationship. I'm just going to handle it as all business and not worry about the rest."

Eric Barker: 26:59

Absolutely.

Roger Dooley: 27:00

So, Eric, we're just about out of time here. How can people find you and your ideas?

Eric Barker: 27:06

Well, my new book, *Plays Well with Others*, has just been released that's available on Amazon and other bookstores. My previous book, *Barking Up the Wrong Tree*, which is focused on busting the myths of success is available as well. And my blog has a kind of difficult URL difficult to spell, so people can reach me if they go to ericbarker.org, which is e-a-r-i-c-b-a-r-k-e-r .org. And the best way to keep up with my writings and the research I'm uncovering is by signing up for my weekly newsletter.

Roger Dooley: 27:36

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Eric Barker on *Plays Well with Others* Brainfluence

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Great. Well, we will link there into any other places we mentioned in our conversation on the show notes page at [roger dooley.com/podcast](http://rogerdooley.com/podcast). Eric, it's been a pleasure having you back on the show.

Eric Barker: 27:47

Thanks so much. I really appreciate it, Roger.

Outro: 27:50

Thank you for tuning into Brainfluence. To find more episodes like this one, and to access all of Roger's books, articles, videos, and resources, the best starting point is [roger dooley.com](http://rogerdooley.com). To check availability for a game-changing keynote or workshop, in person or virtual, visit rogerdooley.com