

'No' Seems to be the Hardest Word

Interview with William Ury

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Positive thinking is hot. There seems to be an abundance of positive change approaches, for example solution-focused practice, appreciative inquiry, positive psychology, strength-based management, and positive deviance. Does this emphasis on the positive mean that we have to agree and go along with everything that we meet on our path? No, says negotiation expert William Ury, co-author of the well-known book *Getting to YES* and Director of the Global Negotiation Project, part of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School. William Ury is convinced that the skill of saying No is indispensable. However, according to him, saying No does not imply that you can no longer be constructive, respectful and positive. He explains this in his new book, *The Power of a Positive NO*. Here is an interview with him about the book.

First, I'd like to ask you about the importance of being able to say No. On page 5 of your book you say: "Whether and how we say No determines the very quality of our lives. It is perhaps the most important word for us to learn to say gracefully and effectively." What makes saying No indispensable?

No may be the word we need most in today's times. The world has sped up and we get overwhelmed with today's demands, whether it is demands at work or balancing our work and family lives. In fact, No may be the most powerful word in the language, the most needed word in these times of endless e-mail and overwhelm. At the same time, it can be the most destructive word in the language, destructive to relationships. For at the heart of every destructive conflict or war is the word No that people are hurling at each other. Because it can be so destructive, No is the word that is hardest for us to say. But, if we can learn how to say it gracefully, if we can learn how to say it positively, I believe it can really help transform our personal lives, our work lives and the larger world.

In your earlier work you did not focus much on saying No. When did you first fully realize how crucial saying No is?

About 25 years ago, I had the privilege of working with Roger Fisher on a book called *Getting to Yes*. Just a couple of weeks after it was published, there was a cartoon that showed up in the *Boston Globe*: There was a man looking for a book in the library. He says, "I need a good book on negotiation".

The librarian replies, "Well here's a new one, it's called 'Getting to Yes.'" The man's response is, "Yes isn't what I had in mind." That gave me the first inkling that maybe there was another side to this question. That there was not just "Getting to Yes," but also, "How do you say no?"

Then, a couple of years later, I had the opportunity to meet the investor Warren Buffet for breakfast. At one point, he confided in me that the secret to creating his fortune lay in his ability to say No. "I sit there all day and look at investment proposals. I say No, No, No, No, No, No—until I see one that is exactly what I am looking for. And then I say Yes. All I have to do is say Yes a few times in my life and I've made my fortune." This also gave me an important clue that No may be an important word, as important as yes.

And finally, in my personal life, I have a young daughter who has unfortunately had a lot of surgeries. After spending a lot of time in hospitals, I found that, as important as my skills at getting to yes were for dealing with doctors and insurance companies, just as important, if not more important was the word No. I needed to learn to say No in order to protect my daughter from unwanted medical procedures, medical students barging in in the middle of the night, and so on.

Through the years, you have developed a simple and elegant way of saying No gracefully. It is based on a sequence of [YES!-No-Yes?](#) Could you explain what this sequence means and how it works?

A Positive No requires you to challenge the common assumption that either you can use power to get what you want (at the cost of relationship) or you can use relationship (at the cost of power). It calls on you to use both at the same time, engaging the other in a constructive and respectful confrontation. In contrast to an ordinary No that begins with No and ends with No, a Positive No begins with Yes and ends with Yes.

To deliver a positive No, you first uncover your underlying interests, needs, and values and distill them into a powerful Yes! Perhaps the biggest mistake we make when we say No is to start from No. We derive our No from what we are against—the other's demand or behavior. A Positive No calls on us to do the exact opposite and base our No on what we are for. The next step is to deliver your No clearly and respectfully.

Once you've said No, it is tempting to leave it at that and think you have done your job: "Whew! I've said No." But if you stop at No, you are overlooking the opportunity to propose a positive outcome.

A Positive No can be compared to a tree. The trunk is like your No – straight and strong. But just as a trunk is only the middle part of a tree, so your No is the middle part of a Positive No. The roots from which the trunk emerges are your first Yes – a Yes to the deeper interests that sustain you. The branches and foliage that reach out from the trunk are your second Yes – a Yes that reaches out toward a possible agreement or relationship. The fruit is the outcome you seek.

I can imagine that following this approach can really help to increase the likelihood that people will understand and accept your No easier. Nevertheless, it is still possible that occasionally people will be very disappointed or even aggressive when you say no to them. What tips do you have for these kinds of situations?

Once you have delivered your Positive No, you still need to deal with the other's reaction. It can be difficult to receive a No. Your next challenge is to transform the other's reaction from resistance to acceptance. The sequence of emotions others experience when you tell them No can range from denial to anger to grief.

While you might not be able to stop the natural sequence of emotions from unfolding, you can help others move through them so they will have an easier time accepting your No. The most important things to keep in mind at this stage are to control your emotions, listen respectfully, and continue to stand your ground. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win."

Could you share with us one striking or beautiful example of the use of the positive No approach you have experienced or applied yourself?

An example is what a man I will call John did when he felt compelled to stand up to a domineering father, who also happened to be his employer. John worked in the family business, putting in long hours that kept him away from his wife and children, even at holiday times. Although John's workload and responsibilities far exceeded those of his co-workers—his three brothers-in-law—his father paid everyone the same salary. It was all about avoiding favoritism, his father explained. Fearful of confronting his father, John had never complained, although he privately fumed about the overwork and inequity. Finally, John realized something had to change. Summoning all his courage, he decided to speak up for himself.

"We were at a family dinner when I told Dad I wanted to speak to him privately. I told him I wanted to be with my family during the upcoming holidays, that I was not working overtime anymore, and that I wanted to be compensated proportionately for my work."

John spoke strongly, yet respectfully. The father's response was not what the son feared it might be: "Dad took it better than I anticipated. I wasn't trying to get one over on him. I just wanted to stand on my own two feet—not on his toes if I could help it. Maybe he sensed that: he said fine to no overtime and that we'd talk about the finances. I

sensed he felt angry and proud at the same time."

Previously, John had assumed it was either-or. Either he exercised his power or he tended to the relationship. Fearing his father's disapproval, he withheld his power—for years. He accommodated and avoided. What he learned when he said No to his father was that it is possible to use your power and at the same time to preserve your relationship. That is the heart of what it means to say a Positive No.

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