



The Power of a Positive No

How to Say No and Still Get to Yes

By William Ury

Published by Bantam, 2007

ISBN 0553804987

Introduction

The most powerful and needed word in the English language today — No — is also potentially the most destructive and, for many people, the hardest to say. Yet when we know how to use it correctly, this one word has the power to transform our lives profoundly for the better.

Every day we find ourselves in situations in which we need to say No to people on whom we depend. It might start at breakfast when your child begs for a new toy and continue through the day with your boss, a key client or a friend phoning to ask you to help out in a volunteer role with a charity. Saying No has always been important, but perhaps never as essential a skill as today.

At the heart of the difficulty in saying No is the tension between *exercising your power* and *tending to your relationship*. Exercising your power, while central to the act of saying No, may strain your relationship, whereas tending to your relationship may weaken your power.

There are three common approaches to this power-versus-relationship dilemma:

- **Accommodate.** The first approach is to stress the relationship even if it means sacrificing our key interests. That is the approach of accommodation. We say Yes when we want to say No. But accommodation usually means an unhealthy Yes that buys a false, temporary peace. It's a destructive Yes, undermining our deeper interests.

- **Attack.** The opposite of accommodation is to attack. We use our power without concern for the relationship. If accommodation is driven by fear, attack is driven by anger. We may feel angry at the other person for his or her hurtful behavior, or offended by an unreasonable demand, or simply frustrated by the situation. Naturally we lash out and attack — we say No in a way that's hurtful to the other and destructive of our relationship.

- **Avoid.** A third common approach is avoidance. We don't say Yes and we don't say No — we say nothing at all. Avoidance is an exceedingly common response to conflicts today, particularly within families and organizations. Because we're afraid of offending others and drawing their anger and disapproval, we say nothing, hoping the problem will go away, even though we know it won't.

The three A's — accommodation, attack and avoidance — aren't just three separate approaches. Usually one spills over into the other in what can be called the three-A trap. We start by accommodating others, then, feeling resentful, we explode, and then we lapse back into accommodation or avoidance.

The Way Out: A Positive No

Fortunately, there's a way out of the trap. It requires you to challenge the common assumption that *either* you can use your power to get what you want (at the cost of the relationship) *or* you can use the

Buy the Full Book!

www.amazon.com www.bn.com www.chapters.ca

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.

John exemplified this when he told his father — his domineering boss in the family business — that he wanted to be with his family during the upcoming holidays, was not working overtime anymore, and wanted to be compensated properly for his work .

John began with an opening Yes to his father: “Dad, my family needs me and I intend to spend the holidays with them.” Then he followed through with a matter-of-fact No that set a clear limit: “I will not be working during weekends and holidays.” He ended with a Yes — an invitation to the other person to reach an agreement that respected his needs: “What I propose is that we find a new arrangement that gets the necessary work done in the office while I spend the time I need with my family.”

In contrast with an Ordinary No, which begins with a No and ends with a No, this Positive No begins with a Yes and ends with Yes. Sandwiched between those, however, is a No, leading to a three-part sequence: *Yes! No, Yes?*

The first Yes expresses your *interests*, the No asserts your *power*, and the second Yes furthers your *relationship*. A positive No thus balances power and relationship in the service of your interests.

Note the distinction between the first Yes and the second Yes. The first Yes is internally focused — an affirmation of your interests — while the second Yes is externally focused — an invitation to the other to come to an agreement that satisfies those interests.

The key to a Positive No is respect. What distinguishes a Positive No from accommodation is that you give respect to yourself and what’s important to you. What distinguishes a Positive No from an attack is that you give respect to the other person too as you say No to his or her demand or behavior. The Positive No works because, in John’s words, “You stand on your feet, not on their toes.”

Using the Positive No technique involves three stages:

1. You need to *prepare* a Positive No.
2. You need to *deliver* a Positive No.
3. You need to *follow through*, turning the other’s initial resistance to your No into acceptance.

Each of those stages in turn has three key parts.

Prepare

Preparing your Positive No involves:

- **Uncover your Yes.** Perhaps the biggest mistake we make when we say No is to start from No. We derive our No from what we’re 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’re *for*. You need to root your No in a Deeper Yes — a Yes to your core interests and to what truly matters.

It involves moving from reactive to proactive by avoiding anger, taking a time out, and listening to your emotions. Once they’re under control, keep asking yourself why you’re rejecting the proposal, to uncover your interests. Then it’s useful to probe even deeper into your underlying motivations and needs. From there, you want to uncover the principles and beliefs guiding your life that are involved in this situation. Reach down to your core. What really matters here?

- **Empower your No.** Once you’ve distilled your interests into a clear and strong intention, it’s time to back up your intention with a Plan B, a practical backup strategy that will address your core interests in case the other refuses to accept your No.

Under trying circumstances, many people might think the purpose of their Plan B is to punish the other for their inappropriate behavior. But Plan B isn’t punishment. It isn’t an outlet for your frustration and anger. Plan B is simply what you’re going to do to help make sure your interests are respected even if the other doesn’t co-operate. Plan B isn’t so much power over the other as power to meet your own interests. That’s what makes it positive power. It will empower your No.

Teach your people the ideas in this execuBook summary

execuGo Media is now offering

execuClasses

60-minute business master classes taught (quite literally) by the people who wrote the book on their subjects — the authors of the great books we summarize into execuBooks

Contact us and ask about customizing execuClasses for your exact needs and interests:

Toll-free: 1-866-888-1161 (9 a.m. – 5 p.m. EST)

Email: info@execugo.com

- **Respect your way to Yes.** Now that you've prepared yourself to say No, your challenge is to prepare the other to say Yes to your No. How can you make it easier for the other to accept your No and respect your needs? How can you open a channel of communication that makes it possible for the other to hear and understand your No as essentially positive?

Respect is the key that opens the door to the other's mind and heart. When you give respect to others, don't think of yourself as doing them a favor. Think of it as doing yourself a favor — because in the end it can help to get your needs met. You can demonstrate this positive attitude of respect by listening attentively (rather than listening to refute) and acknowledging the other.

Deliver

Delivering your Positive No involves:

- **Express your Yes.** Rather than jumping to your No, you need to express your Yes so you can set up your No for success. It affirms your intention and it explains to the other why you're saying No.

Imagine, for instance, that you're declining an invitation to speak to a local community organization: "It's good to hear from you and good to hear of all the valuable work the center is doing. For family reasons, I'm not taking on any additional commitments at this time. Next year, if you're still interested, I'd be happy to consider it. Thank you for thinking of me." After the initial note of acknowledgement and respect, you begin the Positive No by expressing a Yes! to your interests: family.

- **Assert your No.** Now that you've expressed your Yes, it's time to assert your No. This is the very heart of the Positive No method, and it comes in the middle of the three stages and the middle part of the three-pronged Positive No statement. You should assert it, as in the example of the invitation to speak at the community group, in a matter-of-fact way that doesn't reject. You're setting a clear limit or boundary.

Because No is the word we use to express our power, the normal tendency is to overdo our Nos, so they come across as attacking — or to underdo our Nos, so they come across as weak and hesitant. The challenge is to get it just right. That's done by what might be called a natural No — a simple and straightforward No that flows effortlessly from your Yes.

- **Propose a Yes.** Perhaps the most common mis-

simple smart

aheadspace.com

Share a headspace with the best minds in business

See page 4 for details

take in saying No is to stop there and overlook the opportunity to propose a positive outcome. In response to the other's demand, we say what we won't do but don't say what we will do. In response to the other's behavior, we say what we don't want him or her to do but forget to say what we do want.

Remember that saying No is an exercise in persuasion, not just communication. You want the other to accept your No. You want him or her to change behavior. And often you want to keep the relationship. This is your chance to make your No persuasive — to make it easier for the other to do what you want by proposing a Yes? to an alternative solution.

Follow Through

Following through on your Positive No involves:

- **Stay true to your Yes.** Even though you've now arrived at No, the hard work isn't over since you still may be quite far from Yes. You now need to figure out how to deal with the other's reaction to your No and help him or her say Yes to your proposal. The first step in this follow-through process is to stay true to your underlying Yes, should it be challenged. Don't yield and don't attack, as the other goes through the stages to acceptance: avoidance, denial, anxiety, anger, bargaining, sadness and finally acceptance.

Choose not to react. Witness the drama and listen respectfully. Acknowledge the other's point, without conceding yours. Stand true like a tree during a storm, bending with the wind but not breaking.

- **Underscore your No.** If the other refuses to respect your No, you may see only two choices: submission and outright war. Yet there's a third choice,

exemplified by Gandhi when he took on Britain's tax on salt in India by breaking the law and making salt himself after a march to the sea that drew thousands to his side. The lesson is, don't overreact, underscore. Emphasize patiently that No in fact means No. It means continuing to stand up for what's important to you without destroying the possibility of a deal or a healthy relationship.

First, repeat your No to the other, as often as necessary. If that doesn't work, educate the other about the consequences of not respecting your No. Ask questions that illuminate the consequences, warning but not threatening. If that doesn't work, deploy your Plan B.

- **Negotiate to Yes.** The Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, 2,500 years ago, counseled leaders to "build a bridge for your opponent to retreat across." Use that advice, but frame it more positively. You need to build a golden bridge for the other to advance across — towards a positive solution.

This final stage is a journey in which you must elicit three Yeses from the other — a yes to a wise agreement, a Yes to approval, and a Yes to a healthy relationship.

Conclusion

Delivering a Positive No requires courage, vision, empathy, fortitude, patience and persistence. But it's within the reach of everyone every day, and the rewards are positively enormous. **e**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: William Ury directs the Global Negotiation Project at Harvard University.

Related Reading

Getting Past No: Negotiating in Difficult Situations, by William Ury, Bantam, 1993, ISBN 0553371312.

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In, by Roger Fisher and William Ury, Penguin, 1991, ISBN 0140157352.

Why Great Leaders Don't Take Yes for an Answer: Managing for Conflict and Consensus, by Michael A. Roberto, Wharton School Publishing, 2005, ISBN 0131454390.

Need a Competitive Edge?

Share a headspace with the best minds in business — visit aheadspace.com. Now you can learn, teach and inspire your people with a complete collection of resources and tools. These simple, smart, enterprise-wide learning solutions enable 100% of an organization's employees to quickly learn and apply the world's best business concepts at an unbeatable return on investment.

The resources include two of execuGo Media's most popular product lines — execuBooks business book summaries and execuKits turnkey workshop toolkits — plus innovative inspirational tools called execuClips. They enable all employees to build competitive advantage by equipping each other with a world-class business education easily and effectively right where they work.

To learn more, visit www.aheadspace.com or contact us at clientcare@execugo.com or 1-866-888-1161.