

HOW I GOT FROM YES TO NO

It started as a joke.

When Roger Fisher and I co-authored *Getting to Yes* twenty-five years ago, friends would joke about the next book being “*Getting to No*”. There was even a cartoon that appeared in the *Boston Globe* at the time in which a man in a suit was asking for a librarian for a good book on negotiation. “This one is quite popular,” the librarian answered, handing him a copy of *Getting to Yes*. “Yes isn’t what I had in mind,” the man countered.

Then there was a dawning insight. A few years after *Getting to Yes* was published, I had breakfast with Warren Buffett, the well-known and extraordinarily successful investor. He confided in me that the secret to creating his fortune lay in his ability to say No. “I don’t understand your work on getting to Yes,” he half-joked. “My work centers on saying No. I sit there all day and look at investment proposals. I say 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.”

There it was: the paradoxical secret that every important Yes requires a thousand Nos. You cannot truly say Yes to your priorities unless you can truly say No to other demands on your time, attention, and resources.

Then experience confirmed insight. Over the years, I came to realize in my work as a mediator and negotiation consultant that the main stumbling block to good agreements was often not an inability to get to Yes but a prior inability to get to No. All too often, we cannot bring ourselves to say No when we want to and know we should. Or we do say No but say it in a way that blocks agreement and destroys relationships. We submit to inappropriate demands, injustice, even abuse --- or we engage in destructive fighting in which everyone loses. “My people know how to say Yes - that’s not the problem. It’s saying No that’s tough for them,” as one client of mine, president of a Fortune 500 company, put it to me.

The experience was not only professional; it was also personal. When my infant daughter was hospitalized for multiple major surgeries, the key negotiating skill I needed to develop to protect her and my family was saying No. It began with saying No to the communication style of doctors who, however well intentioned, created unnecessary levels of fear and anxiety in the hearts of parents and patient. It continued with saying No to behaviors such as medical residents and students barging noisily into Gabriela’s hospital room in the wee hours of the morning and treating her as if she were an inanimate object. In my work life, it meant saying No to dozens of invitations, requests, and urgent demands to give my time, precious time I needed to spend with family or researching medical issues.

But my Nos needed to be nice. The doctors and nurses, after all, had my child’s life in their hands. They themselves were under huge levels of stress in a dysfunctional medical system that limited them to spending only a few minutes with each patient. My wife and I needed to learn to pause before responding in order to make sure that our Nos were not only powerful but respectful.

Like all good Nos, ours were in the service of a higher Yes, in this case, a Yes to our daughter’s health and well-being. Our Nos, in short, were intended to be not negative but positive Nos. They served to protect our daughter and create the possibility of a better life for her - and ourselves. We were not always successful, of course, but we learned over time to be more effective.

After all this experience came an impulse to capture the experience and distill it in the form of a book. Why not write a book on the subject of how to say No? It would be a challenge - and, besides, it would be fun to go to the other side of Yes and do justice to the word No. From Mr. “*Getting to Yes*”, all of a sudden I would become Mr. “No.” It was time for a change after twenty years. So, with a smile on my face, I began to outline the book.

To find the time to write the book, of course, took a thousand Nos to tempting invitations and requests, which only confirmed that to say Yes, you need to know how to say No. Five years later, here it is, the fruit of my Positive Nos.

So this book grew from a joke into an insight into experience, professional and personal. Then from a smiling impulse, it became a firm intention.

That’s how I got to No.

