

Introduction

THE GREAT GIFT OF NO

“A ‘No’ uttered from deepest conviction is better and greater than a ‘Yes’ merely uttered to please, or what is worse, to avoid trouble.”

—*Mahatma Gandhi*

No. The most powerful and needed word in the language today 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 profoundly transform our lives for the better.

A Universal Problem

Every day we find ourselves in situations in which we need to say No to people on whom we depend. Imagine all the occasions for No that might plausibly arise in the course of an average day:

Over breakfast, your young daughter begs you to buy her a new toy. “No,” you respond, trying to hold the line, “you have enough toys.” “Please, pretty please, all my friends have one.” How can you say No without feeling like a bad parent?

When you arrive at work, your boss invites you into her office and asks you to work through the weekend to complete an important project. It is the very weekend you and your spouse have been looking forward to for some much-needed getaway time. But it is the boss who is making the request, and your promotion review is coming up very soon. How can you say No without undermining your relationship with your boss and jeopardizing your promotion?

A key customer calls up and asks that you deliver the product three weeks ahead of schedule. You know from past experience just how much stress this will create internally and that, in the end, the customer may not be happy with the quality of the product. But it is your key customer and they will not take No for an answer. How can you say No without spoiling the relationship with the customer?

You are at an internal meeting and your boss’s boss turns angrily to your co-worker, attacks her work scathingly, insults her personally, and humiliates her in the most abusive fashion imaginable. Everyone is silent, fearful, frozen, but secretly glad that it’s someone else who is the target of abuse this time. You know the behavior is utterly inappropriate, but how can you possibly speak up and say No?

You come home to find the phone ringing. It is a neighbor and friend, asking if you will serve on a charity committee. The cause is a good one. “You have exactly the skills we need,” your friend cajoles. You know that you are already overcommitted, but how can you say No without feeling bad?

Over dinner that night, your spouse raises the problem of your elderly mother, who has reached an advanced age where it is not safe for her to live alone and who wants to come live with you. Your spouse is adamantly opposed and urges you to call your mother and tell her No. But how can you say No to your own mother?

You watch the evening news. It is filled with stories of violence and injustice. Genocide is taking place in a far-off country. Children are dying of hunger while food is rotting away in warehouses. Dangerous dictators are developing weapons of mass destruction. How are we as a society going to say No to these threats? you wonder.

Just before you go to bed, you put the dog out and he begins to bark loudly, waking up the neighbors. You order him to stop, but he won’t listen. Even with the dog, apparently, it’s not easy to say No.

Sound at all familiar?

All these situations have one thing in common: in order to stand up for what counts, satisfy your needs or those of others, you have to say No to a demand or request that is unwelcome, a behavior that is inappropriate or abusive, or a situation or system that is not working or not fair.

Why No, Why Now

Saying No has always been important, but perhaps never as essential a skill as it is today.

In the course of my work, I have had the privilege to travel the world extensively, visiting hundreds of workplaces and families in dozens of societies and speaking with many thousands of people. Wherever I go, I see people under increasing levels of stress and pressure. I meet managers and professionals who are being burned out by overwork. I see people struggling to juggle work and family, with a particularly heavy burden on women who work outside the home. I encounter parents who find little quality time to spend with their children, and I find children overloaded with homework and lessons, with less and less time for carefree play. Everywhere people are overloaded and overwhelmed. I count myself among them.

Thanks to the knowledge revolution, we have more information and more choices than ever before. But we also have more decisions to make and less time to make them as the pace of life picks up greater speed with each so-called labor-saving technological advance. The boundaries between home and the workplace are eroding as work reaches people by cell phone and e-mail, anywhere anytime. The rules are also eroding and the temptation to cut corners and bend ethical standards is powerful. Everywhere people are finding it hard to set and maintain boundaries.

No is today’s biggest challenge.

The Three-A Trap

No may be the most important word in our vocabulary, but it is the most difficult to say well.

When I ask the participants in my executive seminars at Harvard and elsewhere why they find it challenging to say No, the most common answers I receive are:

“I don’t want to lose the deal.”

“I don’t want to spoil the relationship.”

“I’m afraid of what they might do to me in retaliation.”

“I’ll lose my job.”

“I feel guilty—I don’t want to hurt them.”

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: We Say Yes When We Want to Say No

The first approach is to stress the relationship even if it means sacrificing our key interests. This is the approach of accommodation. We say Yes when we want to say No.

Accommodation usually means an unhealthy Yes that buys a false temporary peace. I give in to my young daughter’s demand for a new toy to avoid feeling guilty that I am denying her something she wants, only to find that it just leads to more and more demands—and both of us being trapped in an endless unhappy loop. When the boss asks you to work over the very weekend that you and your spouse have been planning to get away, you grind your teeth and give in, fearing you will lose that promotion you want, even if your family life suffers. All too often, we go along to get along, even if we know it is not the right decision for us. Our Yes is actually a destructive Yes, for it undermines our deeper interests.

Accommodation can also hurt our organizations. Take an example from Chris, a participant in one of my seminars: “I was working on a huge \$150 million deal with colleagues at my company. We had worked very hard on it and thought we had done a good job. Just before the deal was finalized I decided to double-check the numbers one last time. As I did the calculations, it became all too clear that the deal was not going to be profitable for us over the longer term. Because everyone was so excited about it, and people could not wait to make it official, I couldn’t bring myself to throw a wrench into the works. So I went along, knowing that the project was bad for us and that I should speak up. Well, the deal happened and, as I had feared, a year later we were cleaning up a huge mess. If I had that situation in front of me now, I have no doubt I would speak up. It was a costly but valuable lesson.”

Think about Chris' fear of throwing "a wrench into the works" particularly because "everyone was so excited about it." We all want to be liked and accepted. No one wants to look like the bad guy. That is what Chris was afraid would happen if he brought up the uncomfortable facts. Everyone's excitement would turn into anger against him, or so he feared. So he proceeded to OK a deal that he and others later came to greatly regret.

There is a saying that half our problems today come from saying Yes when we should be saying No. The price of saying Yes when we should be saying No has never been higher.

Attack: We Say No Poorly

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 for their 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 is hurtful to the other and destructive of our relationship. To quote one of my favorite lines by Ambrose Bierce: "Speak when you are angry, and you will make the best speech you will ever regret."

Consider what happened in one large business dealing between a state government and a large corporation the state had hired to build and run a computer system to manage the state's payments to the poor, elderly, and sick. A quarter of the way through the year, the computer system had eaten up half of the state's available budget. Naturally fearful that the budget would soon be exhausted, the state officials canceled the contract and took over the project from the company. The officials were angry at the company, and the company managers in turn were angry at the state, each blaming the other for the problem.

The state officials were nevertheless interested in acquiring the computer and its database from the company because of all its valuable information. The estimated value of the computer system was \$50 million. To the company, which had no alternative use for the system, the value of the system was nothing if they could not sell it to the state. To the state, the system was easily worth the \$50 million because trying to re-create the data might cost them more—and besides, they did not have the time. Normally, an agreement would not have been at all hard to reach since it was in the interest of both sides. However, because each side's anger led them to attack with destructive Nos, the negotiations descended into finger-pointing. Each side stood up for itself by attacking the other. The result was no agreement and \$50 million in value going up in smoke. Ten years later, the state and the company remained locked in litigation, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars a year on legal expenses. Both sides ended up losing heavily.

If many of our problems come from saying Yes when we should be saying No, surely just as many come from saying No but saying it poorly as the state government and its corporate supplier did. We

live in a world in which conflict is ubiquitous—at home, at work, and in the larger society. Think of family feuds, bitter strikes, boardroom fights, or bloody wars. Each time people attack each other, what message are they really delivering? At the heart of every destructive conflict in the world, small or large, is a No. What is terrorism, the great threat of today, if not a terrible way of saying No?

Avoid: We Say Nothing at All

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 or organizations. Because we are afraid of offending others and drawing their anger and disapproval, we say nothing, hoping that the problem will go away even though we know it will not. We sit at the dinner table with our partner in cold silence. We pretend that nothing is bothering us at work when in fact we are seething with anger at our co-worker's behavior. We ignore the injustice and abuse inflicted on others around us.

Avoidance can be costly not only to our personal health, producing high blood pressure and ulcers, but also to our organization's health, as problems fester until they become unavoidable crises.

Avoidance, in whatever domain of life, is deadening. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

The Combination

The three A's—accommodation, attack, and avoidance—are not just three separate approaches. Usually, one spills over into the other, resulting in what I call the three-A trap.

We all too often start by accommodating the other. Then, naturally, we begin to feel resentful. After suppressing our feelings for a while, there comes a point when we suddenly explode, only to feel guilty afterward at the destructive impact of our attack. So we lapse back into accommodation or avoidance, ignoring the problem and hoping it will disappear. We are like a mouse caught in a maze, rushing from one box to another but never getting to the cheese.

All three approaches were at work in the crisis that hit Royal Dutch Shell in April 2004, when it was revealed to have overreported its oil reserves by a whopping 20 percent. The company's public reputation was damaged, and its credit rating was reduced, while the chairman, the head of exploration, and the chief financial officer all lost their jobs.

The reason for the false reporting was the chairman's insistence that a barrel in oil reserves be recorded for every barrel pumped out of the ground—to which no one had the courage to say No, despite the clear evidence that what he was demanding was insupportable. Shell's head of exploration tried to raise the alarm but, pressured by the chairman, publicly accommodated even if he privately bristled. The tensions boiled over a year later when, after the chairman gave him a negative personnel evaluation, he counterattacked with a blistering e-mail message that surfaced publicly: "I

am becoming sick and tired of lying about the extent of our reserves issues and the downward revisions that need to be done because of far too aggressive/optimistic bookings.”

While the chairman attacked and the head of exploration alternated between accommodation and attack, the chief financial officer resorted to avoidance, hoping that somehow the problem would go away. But it didn't and, in the end, resulted in a huge mess with severe consequences for all involved.

The Way Out: A Positive No

Fortunately, there is a way out of the trap. It 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.

This was 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.

A Positive No Is a “Yes! No. Yes?”

In contrast to an ordinary No which begins with No and ends with No, a Positive No begins with Yes and ends with Yes.

Saying No means, first of all, saying *Yes!* to yourself and protecting what is important to you. As John described his core motivation: “I didn’t do it to get a particular response, although I still cared about what he thought. I did it because *I* thought, *If you don’t speak up now, you’ll have no self-respect!*” The way John expressed his opening Yes to his father was: “Dad, my family needs me and I intend to spend the holidays with them.”

John then 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 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.”

A Positive No, in short, is a *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; 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 is important for you. What distinguishes a Positive No from an attack is that you give respect to the other too as you say No to their demand or behavior. The Positive No works because as, in John’s words, you *stand on your feet, not on their toes*.

A Positive No can best 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 only 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 positive outcome you seek.

When it comes to standing up for ourselves, we can learn a lot from trees. They know how to stand tall. They know how to sink their roots deep while reaching for the sky. “Great rooted blossomer” is how the poet William Butler Yeats once described a chestnut tree. That is a Positive No—a strong trunk-like No rooted in a *deeper* Yes and blossoming into a *broader* Yes.



The Three Great Gifts of a Positive No

According to the sages of ancient India, there are three fundamental processes at work in the universe: creation, preservation, and transformation. Saying No is essential to all three processes. If you can learn how to say No skillfully and wisely, you can *create* what you want, *protect* what you value, and *change* what doesn't work. These are the three great gifts of a Positive No.

Create What You Want

Every day, each of us is faced with choices, small and large, where saying Yes to one choice means having to say No to others. Only by saying No to competing demands for your time and energy can you create space for the Yeses in your life, the people and activities that really matter the most to you. Here is the paradoxical secret: *you cannot truly say Yes until you can truly say No.*

I learned this lesson early on in my career from the well-known and extraordinarily successful investor Warren Buffett. Over breakfast one day, 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." *Every important Yes requires a thousand Nos.*

No is the key word in defining your strategic focus. Take the example of Southwest Airlines, the most successful airline in the United States and the original model for low-cost airlines worldwide. Its secret, if you think about it, is to deliver a Positive No to its customers. In order to say Yes to success and profitability (the first Yes), its strategy is to say No to reserved seats, No to hot meals, and No to interairline baggage transfers. Saying No to these three services, previously considered essential passenger benefits, enables Southwest to organize its planes for an incredibly quick turnaround at airports. This in turn allows Southwest to say Yes (the second Yes) to affordable fares and to a convenient schedule with reliable frequent flights—the qualities most valued by its customers.

Protect What You Value

Think for a moment about all that matters to you: your personal happiness, the safety of your loved ones, your organization's success, your country's security and sound economic base. Almost everything we care about can be affected or threatened by the behavior of others. A Positive No enables us to set, maintain, and defend the key boundaries—personal, organizational, and societal—that are essential to protecting what we value.

Consider how one group of mothers said No to a seemingly unstoppable epidemic of teenage violence among gangs in their neighborhood in Los Angeles. Feeling utterly helpless at first, the women found strength in prayer and sallied out from church one evening into the streets, where they engaged the teenagers who were waiting for a fight to start. The women talked with their sons and

nephews, offered them soda and cookies, and listened to their grievances. Surprised, the young men did not fight that night. So the mothers walked out the next night and the next and the next. Responding to the young men's concerns, they started a few small businesses and offered jobs to the youth as well as conflict resolution training. The violence in the neighborhood greatly abated. The mothers' secret was a Positive No. Their first Yes was to peace and safety, their No was to violence, and their second Yes was to helping the young men find jobs and build their self-respect.

Change What No Longer Works

Whether you are talking about making an organizational change at work, a personal change at home, or a political or economic change at a societal level, every creative change begins with an intentional No to the status quo. Your No might be to complacency and stagnation in the workplace, to dishonesty and abuse in family life, or to injustice and inequity in the larger society.

One family had a son who was destroying his life and his family's life through an addiction to gambling. So the parents and the siblings all got together one day in what is known as an "intervention" and constructively confronted the son. They began by telling him how much he meant to each of them (their first Yes) and then proceeded to tell him that he needed to stop gambling (their No) or lose their support. They invited him to seek help at a residential treatment program for gamblers (their second Yes). Faced with this Positive No, he agreed, got therapeutic help, and recovered from his addiction.

In addition to helping you say No to others, the Positive No method can help you say No to yourself. Almost everyone at times faces the challenge of saying No to temptations and to self-destructive behaviors such as excessive eating, drinking, or consuming. Often we respond by accommodating these temptations, or we attack them with self-judgment, or we simply remain in denial (avoidance) about what is going on inside us. Learning to deliver a Positive No to ourselves—protecting our higher interests while showing respect and empathy for ourselves—can be an invaluable aid in changing ourselves for the better.

How to Use This Book

The Positive No method is what I call uncommon sense: something we intuitively understand but too rarely practice because it goes against our normal impulses and reactions when we want to say No. This book organizes this uncommon sense in a practical framework anyone can use to stand up for themselves without spoiling their valued relationships.

You will find this book organized in three parts or stages. The first describes how to *prepare* a Positive No. The second explains how to *deliver* a Positive No. And the third shows how to *follow through*, turning the other's resistance to your No into acceptance. Each of these three stages is essential to your success.

In this book, you will find that each of these stages has three chapters devoted to it—the first focused on your underlying Yes, the second on your No to the other’s demand or behavior, and the third on your Yes to a positive outcome.

First you *prepare* your Positive No—you uncover your Yes, empower your No, and respect your way to Yes. Then you *deliver* your Positive No—you express your Yes, assert your No, and propose a Yes. Finally, and most important, you *follow through* on your Positive No—you stay true to your Yes, underscore your No, and negotiate to Yes.

I believe that you will obtain more value from reading this book if you keep in mind at least one challenging situation from your life in which you would like to say No. As the chapters lead you step by step through the Positive No process, I encourage you to apply the process to your situation and use it to help you develop an effective strategy.

Saying No is a human dilemma each of us faces at home, at work, and in the world. Everything you care about—your happiness and the well-being of your family, your success in your job, and the health of the larger community—hinges on your ability to say No when it counts. It can be challenging, but the Positive No process makes it easier because it offers a way to stand up for yourself without harming your relationships. No matter how difficult saying No may be for you, you can learn to carry out this simple three-step process and improve your skills with a little practice, patience, and effort. Indeed, the more familiar you become with the process, the more it will become second nature for you.

Once you have mastered the art of the Positive No, it can bring you perhaps the greatest gift of all: the freedom to be who you truly are and to do what you are truly here to do.