

THE
POWER
OF A

How to Say No

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POSITIVE No

and *Still* Get to Yes

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Author's Preface

GETTING TO NO

If your baby gets even a cold, she could die," the doctor announced almost offhandedly to my wife and me as we were finishing an appointment. My wife was cradling our infant daughter Gabriela in her arms. Our hearts froze with fear. Gabriela had been born with serious problems in her spinal column, and this doctor's appointment was only the beginning of what would prove to be a long journey through the medical system—hundreds of consultations, dozens of treatments, and seven major surgeries in seven years. While our journey is still ongoing, I am happy to write that, despite her physical challenges, Gabriela is healthy and happy. Looking back over the past eight years of negotiating the maze of doctors, nurses, hospitals, and insurance companies, I realize how the process has called on all of the skills I have learned over the years in helping others get to Yes with their negotiation issues. I also realized that, for me personally, the key skill I needed to develop to protect my daughter and our 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.

— This book is about the crucial art of delivering a Positive No in every area of life.

I am, by training, an anthropologist—a student of human nature and behavior. I am, by profession, a negotiation specialist—a teacher, consultant, and mediator. I am, by passion, a seeker of peace.

Ever since I was a child, witnessing quarrels at the family dinner table, I have wondered if there was a better way of dealing with our differences than destructive arguments and fights. Going to school in Europe, only fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, with the memories still alive and the material scars still visible, made me wonder all the more.

I grew up in the generation that lived under the threat, seemingly distant but constantly present, of a third world war, one that put humanity's very survival in question. We had a nuclear bomb shelter at school, and late-night conversations with friends about what we wanted to do with our lives sometimes ended up in speculation about whether we would even have a future. I felt then and feel even more strongly now that there has to be a better way of protecting our societies and ourselves than threatening one another with mass destruction.

In pursuit of answers to this dilemma, I became a professional student of human conflict. Not content to remain only an observer, I sought to apply what I was learning by becoming a negotiator and mediator. Over the past three decades, I have worked as a third party trying to resolve situations ranging from family disputes to coal mine strikes, corporate conflicts, and ethnic wars in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and Africa. I have also had the opportunity to listen and give counsel to thousands of individuals, and hundreds of organizations and government agencies, on how to negotiate agreement even under the most challenging circumstances.

In the course of my work, I have witnessed the huge waste and needless suffering destructive fights can cause—broken families and friendships, ruinous strikes and lawsuits, and failed organizations. I have been in war zones and seen the terror that violence strikes in the hearts of innocents. Ironically, perhaps, I have also seen some situations that made me wish there was *more* conflict and resistance—situations where spouses and children were silently suffering abuse, employees were being grossly mistreated by their bosses, or whole societies were living in fear under the yoke of totalitarian dictatorships.

From my base at Harvard's Program on Negotiation, I have worked on developing better ways to deal with our differences. Twenty-five years ago, Roger Fisher and I co-authored a book called Getting to Yes, which focuses on how to reach an agreement

that is beneficial for both sides. It became a best-seller, I believe, because it reminds people of the commonsense principles they may already know but often forget to apply.

A decade later, I wrote *Getting Past No* in response to the most common question I received from readers of the first book: how do you negotiate cooperatively when the other side is not interested? How do you get to Yes with difficult people and in difficult situations?

Yet over the years, I have come to realize that getting to Yes is only half the picture—and it is, if anything, the easier half. As one company president, a client of mine, told me, “My people know how to get to Yes—that’s not the problem. It’s saying No that’s tough for them.” Or as long-term British prime minister Tony Blair put it, “The art of leadership is not saying Yes, it’s saying No.” Indeed, not long after *Getting to Yes* was published, a cartoon appeared in the *Boston Globe*. A man in a suit and tie was asking 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.

Up to this point, I had been working on the assumption that the chief problem behind destructive conflict was an inability to get to Yes. People didn’t know how to reach agreements. But I was missing something essential. For even when agreements are reached, they are often unstable or unsatisfying because the real underlying issues have been avoided or smoothed over, the problem only deferred.

I slowly came to appreciate that the main stumbling block is 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.

When Roger Fisher and I wrote *Getting to Yes*, we were responding to the challenge of adversarial conflict and the increasing need for cooperative negotiation in families, at work, and in the larger world. The need for getting to Yes clearly remains. But now, the more immediate and pressing need is for people to be able to say No in a positive way that enables them to stand up for what they value without destroying their relationships. No is of equal importance to Yes and indeed is the precondition to saying Yes effectively. You cannot truly say Yes to one request if you cannot say No to others. No, in this sense, comes before Yes.

This book, *The Power of a Positive No*, completes what I have come to think of as a trilogy that began with *Getting to Yes* and continued with *Getting Past No*. Where the focus of *Getting to Yes* is on both sides reaching an agreement, and the focus of *Getting Past No* is on the other side, overcoming their objections and resistance to cooperation, the focus of *The Power of a Positive No* is on your side, on learning how to assert and defend your interests. Since the logical sequence is to start from your own side, I have come to see *The Power of a Positive No* not so much as a sequel to the other two books but more like a prequel. *The Power of a Positive No* provides a much-needed foundation for *Getting to Yes* and *Getting Past No*. Each book stands alone, yet complements and enhances the others.

I see *The Power of a Positive No* not only as a negotiation book but as a life skills book, for all of life is a dance of Yes and No. Each of us every waking hour is called upon to say No, whether to friends or family members, to our bosses, employees, or co-workers, or to ourselves. 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.

A word about language: I will use the term "the other" to refer to the other person or other side to whom the No must be said, and the demands of grammar notwithstanding, I will use

it with the antecedent “they” to avoid having to say “he or she,” or to choose one gender over the other. I will also capitalize the words “No” and “Yes” in order to highlight their importance and relationship.

And a word about culture: While saying No is a universal process, it can take different forms depending on the local culture. Certain societies in East Asia, for instance, put a premium on avoiding the use of the word No, particularly in the context of close relationships. People do say No in these societies, of course, but in an indirect fashion. As an anthropologist by training, I have deep respect for cultural differences. At the same time, I believe that the basic principles of the Positive No apply across different cultures, understanding that the particular techniques for implementing the principles will vary somewhat from culture to culture.

Let me conclude with a note about my own learning journey. Like most people, I find it challenging to say No in certain situations. In both my personal and professional lives, I have said Yes when in retrospect I found myself fervently wishing I had said No. Sometimes I have fallen into the trap of attacking or avoiding when I would have been much better off engaging the other side in healthy conflict. *The Power of a Positive No* reflects what I have learned from my own life as well as what I’ve seen and experienced during thirty years of working with leaders and managers all around the globe. My deepest hope is that you, the reader, will learn as much from reading this book about the essential art of saying No as I have from writing it.