

THE
POWER
OF A

How to Say No

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POSITIVE No

and *Still* Get to Yes

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Chapter Two

EMPOWER YOUR NO



“To be prepared is half the victory.”

—*Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra*

Saying No is not easy. The other may react strongly to your No. You need confidence to stand up for yourself in the face of the other's reaction. You need power to be able to follow through on your No if the other refuses to respect it. Just as critical as uncovering your Yes, therefore, is empowering your No.

Develop Positive Power

Once you have distilled your interests into a clear and strong intention, it is time to back up your intention with a Plan B, a practical strategy that will address your core interests in case the other refuses to accept your No. Plan B is positive power. While negative power is the power to punish the other, positive power is the power to protect and advance your interests and needs.

One person's story can serve to illustrate the enormous potential of positive power. She was born into the family of an oppressed racial minority and worked as a tailor's assistant in a

department store. The empowered No she delivered to racial prejudice in her hometown set in motion the civil rights movement in the United States. Her name was Rosa Parks.

At the end of a long workday in December 1955, Parks boarded a city bus to go home. At that time, in a large part of the United States, black people suffered the injustice of legalized segregation in all aspects of social life, including public transportation. They were treated as second-class citizens in a society that professed a commitment to human equality. Parks describes what happened next:

“I did not sit at the very front of the bus; I took a seat with a man who was next to the window—the first seat that was allowed for ‘colored’ people to sit in. We were not disturbed until we reached the third stop after I boarded the bus. At this point a few white people boarded the bus, and one white man was left standing. When the driver noticed him standing, he spoke to us (the black man and two black women across the aisle) and told us to let the man have the seat. The other three all stood up. But the driver saw me still sitting there. He said would I stand up, and I said, ‘No, I will not.’ Then he said, ‘I’ll have you arrested.’ And I told him he could do that. So he didn’t move the bus any further. Several black people left the bus.

“Two policemen got on the bus in a couple of minutes. The driver told the police that I would not stand up. The policeman walked down and asked me why I didn’t stand up, and I said I didn’t think I should stand up. ‘Why do you push us around?’ I asked him. And he said, ‘I don’t know. But the law is the law and you are under arrest.’ As soon as he said that, I stood up and the three of us left the bus together.”

Rosa Parks was put in jail. Although she was freed that night on the posting of a bond, her arrest galvanized the black community and triggered an unprecedented eleven-month boycott of the buses, led by a young local pastor by the name of Martin Luther King Jr.

Rosa Parks possessed the two essential ingredients of positive power: a strong intention and a practical Plan B to back it up. Her intention had been shared and refined during years of activism. In the popular retelling of the story, her refusal to give up her seat is often portrayed as the spontaneous action of a tired seamstress. In fact, Parks was an experienced and educated activist of strong beliefs, a long-term member of the local chapter of the NAACP, a national organization working for equal treatment for black people. The chapter's leaders had long been looking for a test case to challenge the legality of segregated bus seating and to win over public opinion with a series of protests. When the opportunity presented itself, Parks and her colleagues were ready with their Plan B.

A friend once described Parks as someone who, as a rule, did not defy authority but, once determined on a course of action, refused to back down: "She might ignore you, go around you, but never retreat." Parks was perfectly prepared to face the consequences of arrest and ready to take her legal case all the way to the Supreme Court if necessary. In the end, that is exactly what happened. The Supreme Court eventually ruled against segregation on public transportation, and the rest is history.

Parks' Plan B was intended not to punish anyone but rather to protect the deeper Yes behind her No, a Yes to dignity and equality for all. Even though she appeared to have little objective power in the situation on the bus, she had positive power to back up her No and support her Yes, and that was sufficient to trigger a revolution for human dignity that reverberated throughout the nation and, indeed, the world.

Turn Fear into Confidence

When faced with the task of devising a Plan B, many people resist, reluctant to engage in "worst-case thinking." They may

think that it is unnecessary or disloyal, or that they can do it later. In my experience, however, there is no more critical and ultimately effective exercise for you to undertake if you are to deliver a powerful No. For in addition to the objective power that it gives you, it helps transmute your fear and anger into confidence and resolve. Think of it not as “worst-case thinking” but as planning an alternative means of success.

If you believe you are totally dependent on the other’s cooperation, you effectively become a hostage. You naturally feel fearful and angry. The desperation you may feel can easily lead you to accommodate or to attack. Perhaps Plan B’s biggest benefit is that it gives you the psychological freedom you need to say No to the other effectively—without accommodating, avoiding, or attacking.

The great irony is that the more you *need* the other to do what you want, the more power you give them over you and the less power you have to influence the situation. In situations of conflict, the other is more likely to do what you would like them to do if you don’t *need* them to do it.

Consider a real-life marital dispute. Joan was extremely unhappy about the lack of communication with her husband, whom I will call Jack. She had a strong need for connection and, from her point of view, they rarely if ever really talked. For years, Joan had criticized and nagged him to talk with her, but the more she did, the more he retreated. Her No to his behavior only seemed to provoke the opposite response to what she was seeking. Their marriage was on the verge of disintegrating.

After lengthy counseling, Joan thought hard about her Plan B, which was to separate from her husband, something she did not want to do. Still, she came to terms with this as a real possibility if her core needs could not be met. She gathered her courage and stood up to her fears. She then felt empowered to adopt a different and more confident approach to saying No.

"I'm no longer willing to accept how rarely we talk," she calmly informed her husband, "and I'm no longer willing to push you to do it. But don't assume I'm accepting things the way they are because I won't be nagging or criticizing you anymore. For myself, I don't want to be pathetically grateful just because my partner talks to me. . . . And for you, I don't want you feeling pressured all the time by a screeching wife. I'll interpret what you do from here on as indicating your decision about how *you* really want to live. I'll make my decision about my life accordingly."

In other words, Joan was not trying to control how her husband would act. She was only choosing how *she* would act. She was committing herself to living a different kind of life, one that would address her needs, *regardless* of how Jack continued to behave. Paradoxically, this approach helped save the marriage and allowed it to deepen, for Joan's newfound confidence and power enabled her to stop her destructive criticism, and Jack responded by opening up and talking more about what he felt and needed. A Positive No made her closer to rather than further from her husband.

The challenge then in saying No is to express the "need"—the interest, desire, or concern—without the "neediness." The neediness creates stress for both of you—a feeling of coercion for the other, of weakness and dependence for you. You may have certain needs, but you don't "need" the other to cooperate. You would very much like them to cooperate, but if not, you have alternative ways to address your needs.

The challenge is to stand up to yourself first, as Joan clearly did—to face your fears about the loss of the relationship or the deal, your fears about what the other might do in reaction or retaliation to your No, and to move on from those fears to taking responsibility for meeting your own interests and needs, with or without the other's cooperation.

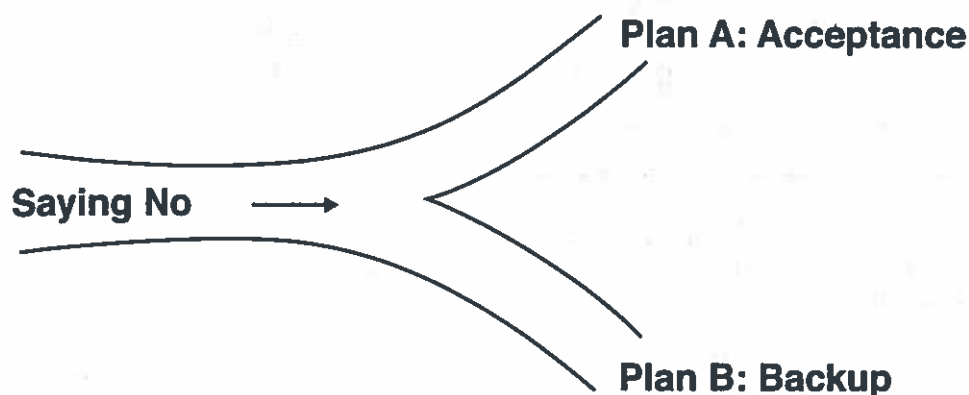
Devise a Plan B

Plan B is your best course of action to address your interests *if* the other does not accept your No. It is your capacity to address your needs *independent* of whether or not the other decides to respect your interests. In negotiation language, Plan B is called your BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement). *B* in this sense stands for *BATNA* as well as for *backup*.

If you are saying No to a boss's abusive behavior, your Plan B may be to seek a transfer to another department or to get support from human resources. If you are saying No to a customer who keeps pressing you with unreasonable demands, your Plan B may be to find a new customer, or it may be to involve your boss, who can contact your customer's boss to see if they can work it out. These admittedly may not be attractive alternatives, but they are important for you to keep in mind as you prepare to say No. If the other has more power than you, developing a practical Plan B can help you level the playing field so that you can say No with greater ease.

In my experiences dealing with the medical system on behalf of my daughter, I found it invaluable to have in mind a Plan B. To protect our daughter's well-being, for example, my wife and I needed to set firm limits on repetitive and often traumatic medical exams that were done for the benefit of medical students but that had no genuine benefit for our daughter. If medical staff did not respect these limits after repeated polite requests, our Plan B was to appeal as high within the system as we could and, if necessary, to change doctors and hospitals.

Plan B is an action you can take independent of the other's cooperation. Picturing the Positive No as a journey, imagine a fork in the road. One fork leads to acceptance of your No—call it Plan A, with the *A* standing for *acceptance* or *agreement*. The other fork leads to your Plan B, your backup.



The story of “the man who said No to Wal-Mart” demonstrates the power of a Plan B. Jim Wier was CEO of Simplicity, a company that owned Snapper, a high-quality brand of lawn mowers. Snapper did tens of millions of dollars of business with Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart was insisting on a substantial price reduction and dangling in return the prospect of dramatically increased purchasing. In the business world, it is widely considered suicide to say No to Wal-Mart, and most CEOs would have found this tempting offer impossible to refuse. But not Jim Wier, who had taken a hard look at where this process would lead over ten years: to continual price reductions and the inevitable sacrifice of the quality, reliability, and durability that Snapper stood for in the eyes of its consumers. Even though Wal-Mart represented almost 20 percent of their sales, Wier said No and chose to lose that 20 percent overnight—in order to say Yes to Snapper’s core values and, in Wier’s view, its long-term survival.

What enabled Wier to make this courageous decision was his Plan B. He had developed a plan to sell Snapper lawn mowers exclusively through an independent dealer network—ten thousand dealers who understood the product, could teach customers how to use it, and could service it if something went

wrong. "When we told the dealers that they would no longer find Snapper in Wal-Mart," says Wier, "they were very pleased with that decision. And I think we got most of that business back by winning the hearts of the dealers."

Backup, Not Fallback

Your Plan B is a *backup* plan. You would like to keep the customer if the relationship can be mutually profitable. You would prefer to stay in your job if your boss will give you the respect you deserve. You want to stay in your marriage if it is safe and non-abusive. But if it looks like you're not going to get what you need, your Plan B is your last resort, what you will do if the other does not accept your No.

Plan B is sometimes confused with a fallback option—something that the other could agree to if your No turns out not to be acceptable. But Plan B is *not* a fallback—a compromise or less preferred agreement. Plan B is not an *option* for agreement at all but rather an *alternative to agreement*, a course of action you could pursue independent of the other's agreement. Your Plan B if you cannot reach agreement with this customer might be to let this particular sale go and seek another customer. Options require the other's agreement or acceptance in the end. Plan B's do not.

Your Plan B can also be a valuable benchmark that you can use to evaluate any proposal you make as part of your Positive No or any possible agreement you might consider. At any point, you can ask yourself, "Which course of action is more likely to satisfy my interests—accepting this agreement or resorting to my Plan B?"

Empowerment, Not Punishment

Under trying circumstances, many people might think the purpose of their Plan B is to punish the other for their inappropriate behavior. If the other does not agree to respect your interests and needs, if your adult child ignores your request for advance notice before dropping off your granddaughter for babysitting, if your colleague continues to make offensive comments, you will make them pay for it.

But Plan B is not punishment. It is not an outlet for your frustration and anger. Plan B is simply what you are going to do to help make sure your interests are respected *even if* the other does not cooperate. In the case of the adult child who frequently expects babysitting without notice, your Plan B might be to say you are sorry, but you were just going out the door to meet a friend, and then leave the house. In the case of your colleague, your Plan B might be to bring the matter of your colleague's offensive comments to the attention of human resources or others who could persuade him to desist.

Plan B is not so much *power over* the other as it is power to meet your own interests. That is what makes it positive power.

At this stage of preparing to deliver your Positive No, it is important simply to know that you have a Plan B. We will discuss in Chapter 8 whether and how to mention your Plan B to the other. At this point, develop your Plan B for your own benefit and confidence.

Strengthen Your Plan B

Sometimes we feel at a loss because we can't think of an attractive Plan B. Take this not as a reason for discouragement but as

an impetus to improve your Plan B, as the following example illustrates.

A large U.S. company had recently launched a new product in the marketplace. They had hoped for a great success, but the sales were disappointing and competition was stiffer than expected. Knowing that many customers found the price high, the company was trying to cut costs wherever possible. It turned out that the biggest part of the cost was a key ingredient manufactured for them by a company in Europe.

The company asked the supplier to cut its price and offered to send in a team of cost-cutting consultants, but the supplier bristled at the request. "We have been in business for over two hundred years. You've hardly been a country for two hundred years. We don't tell you how to run your business, so don't tell us how to run ours!" The company executives were frustrated but felt they had little leverage, for they had signed a ten-year contract with this supplier on a cost-plus basis, guaranteeing to the supplier reimbursement of all of their costs plus a profit.

The company contacted my colleague Joe Haubehofer because they wanted help with this difficult negotiation. When Joe met with the company officials to prepare them for the negotiation, they were feeling demoralized and hopeless. How could they stand up for their interests in this situation and, in effect, say No to the supplier's recalcitrant behavior? They felt their hands were tied because they were absolutely dependent on this one supplier. There was nothing they could do. Or so they believed until Joe asked them, "What's your Plan B? What are you going to do if the supplier refuses to cooperate for the rest of the contract?"

"Plan B?" the managers chorused. "That's the problem. We don't have a Plan B! We're locked into this ten-year contract and there is no way out."

"Hold on a minute," Joe replied. "What you mean to say is that your current alternatives—breaking the contract or taking

the product off the market—are extremely unattractive. Would you be willing to spend a little time taking a hard look at whether there is any way to improve your Plan B?”

The managers agreed—skeptically, of course. An hour later, in the midst of an intensive brainstorming session, one of them asked, “Is there no other factory in the world that has the technology to make this product?” To which another replied, “Well, as a matter of fact, I seem to remember this plant in the Midwest that may have the necessary technology. But if my memory serves me right, it was closed by its owner.”

Someone was dispatched to check out the facts. Later that day, he reported back that the manager had been correct—the plant did have the appropriate technology, and it was closed, but it might be available for sale.

Within a day, the team had drawn up a business plan for purchasing the plant, putting it back into operation, and producing the necessary ingredient in quantity, at the right cost. The plan was presented to senior management and speedily approved as a contingency plan, a Plan B.

Then the team went to work preparing for their upcoming visit to the supplier. It was as if they were a completely different team, my colleague reported. With a satisfactory Plan B in hand, they were no longer demoralized but, on the contrary, confident. They carefully assessed the supplier’s interests and perceptions and sought to invent mutually advantageous options for cutting costs and preserving their partnership.

As it turned out, they never had to use their Plan B or even to reveal it. Their careful preparation gave them the confidence they needed to negotiate effectively with the supplier and reach agreement on a strategy for cutting operational costs. And the key factor in this unexpected success, the company negotiators told me later, was that confidence. It enabled them to transform their negatively charged emotions of fear and resignation into resolve and determination.

Brainstorm a Variety of Plans

In developing your Plan B, it is valuable to consider a variety of possible alternatives. The managers in this example began by participating in a brainstorming session and thus came up with a creative alternative that no one had considered before.

The biggest obstacle to coming up with creative alternatives is a little voice in the back of our head that keeps saying, "That won't work!" or "That's ridiculous!" These are phrases that kill off potentially creative ideas. That critical voice comes from the part of the brain that evaluates and judges. While useful and even necessary, it gets in the way of the creative part of the brain that generates new ideas. The whole secret of brainstorming is to separate the two cognitive functions. Invent first, evaluate later.

The golden rule of brainstorming is to suspend all criticism for a certain period of time, whether a few minutes or a few hours. Generate as many ideas as you can. Welcome wild ideas—many of the best plans start off as wild ideas. Then you can start to evaluate, sifting through the ideas and placing an asterisk by the most promising ones.

Brainstorming is often best done with others—friends, colleagues, and associates. Each person's contribution usually stimulates ideas in the others, like a firecracker setting off other firecrackers around it.

Develop one or several possible alternatives into concrete operational plans. This process takes what might otherwise remain a wild idea and turns it into a serious plan that can command respect and support—exactly what the managers did when they researched what sounded like an impossibility (finding another source) and wrote a business plan that could be presented to the company's leaders.

In coming up with alternatives, here are a few different types to consider:

Do it yourself.

One alternative is *unilateral* in nature: What can you do on your own to satisfy your interests and needs? What if you no longer depended on the other? How could you best manage independent of the other's cooperation? The managers in the case discussed above, for example, developed the possibility of manufacturing the needed ingredient independent of the supplier.

Exit.

Another unilateral self-help strategy is exit. What would it mean for you to leave the situation or relationship with the other? Coping with a difficult boss, an employee investigates other job possibilities within the same organization and outside. Faced with saying No to a difficult customer, a salesperson cultivates other customers. A woman being abused by her partner prepares to leave home with her children and take refuge in a family member's house. A lawyer I know was asked to work on a project she found "morally repugnant and offensive." She was able to say No effectively because she had made the decision beforehand "to quit my job if my No was not accepted."

Third side.

There are also *trilateral* alternatives. Are there potential third parties to whom you could turn for help if you cannot reach initial agreement with the other? If a neighbor continues to play loud music, you could ask the building supervisor to intervene or bring the matter up at a building residents' meeting. If you are unable to persuade your co-worker to stop asking the secretary to put your work aside in favor of his, you may need to go to the boss. Or your Plan B might be to use the court system, as Rosa Parks did in taking her case all the way to the Supreme Court.

Intermediate and ultimate plans.

If you cannot reach agreement with the other, your first resort may be not your full Plan B but a smaller intermediate step. You

can develop a sequence of plans starting from the smallest and leading up to the ultimate big plan. One restaurant chain, faced with saying No to a restaurant franchisee who was consistently failing to meet the quality standards associated with the brand, prepared an intermediate plan of putting the franchisee on probation. The chain's ultimate Plan B, if the franchisee did not bring their establishment up to standard, was to remove the brand from the franchisee.

Build a Winning Coalition

If the other is more powerful than you, one Plan B you could consider is to build a winning coalition.

In my seminars, I like to use a teaching story about a wise Zen master who in the course of giving a class to a group of students deliberately puts one of them in a quandary. As the student is lifting a cup of tea to his lips, the master says: "If you drink that cup of tea, I will beat you with this stick. And if you *don't* drink that cup of tea, I will beat you with this stick."

"What would you do if you were that student?" I ask the seminar participants.

The most common response I receive is: "I would drink the tea. I might as well enjoy it." Another common response is: "I would throw the tea in the master's face." Those are the two classic responses to superior power: submission because you have no choice and attack. Neither, however, usually proves satisfying.

Then people start to get imaginative with their answers: "I would offer him the tea." "I would ask why." "I would take forever so he couldn't tell whether I was drinking it or not drinking it." And so on.

As many possibilities as they generate, however, they almost always overlook another alternative—that of building a coalition. I think it is because, when we imagine the scene, we see in our mind's eye the master and the student. We all too often

forget that there are others in the room, too. "Help me, friends!" you can cry to your fellow students. Although the master with the stick may be more powerful than the student, he is not more powerful than all the students put together.

A coalition can level the playing field. A good question to ask ourselves is "Who shares my interests or might be persuaded to work with me to make sure my needs are respected?" If you are faced with an abusive boss, it helps to gather support from other employees so that collectively you can confront the boss about his behavior. If an aging parent is refusing to give up driving a car when he is clearly a danger to himself and others, it helps to enlist your siblings' support. Rosa Parks and her colleagues used the power of a broad-based coalition of blacks and sympathetic whites to support her No to segregated busing. "There are two kinds of power in this world," community organizer Saul Alinsky liked to say, "organized money and organized people."

Ask yourself: "Who could be possible, if unlikely, allies in my situation?" If you are in sales, for example, it may be the end users for your products who could say a supportive word on your behalf to the purchasing representatives who are pressing you hard. If you are in politics, an unlikely ally may be a political opponent who nevertheless shares a common interest with you in promoting a particular piece of legislation.

One telling example of building a coalition as a Plan B is the story of a pilot in one of the first passenger planes to leave Denver shortly after the horrifying attacks of 9/11. Before the flight took off, the pilot announced to the fearful passengers: "If anybody stands up and is trying to take over the plane, stand up together, take whatever you have and throw it at their heads. You have to aim for their faces so they have to defend themselves." The pilot also encouraged passengers to throw blankets over the heads of any hijackers, wrestling them to the ground and holding them until he landed. "We the people will not be defeated," he declared.

“Everybody on the plane was applauding,” said one passenger on the flight. “People had tears coming down their faces. It was as if we had a choice here, that if something were to happen we’re not completely powerless.”

That’s the point. Remember that you are not alone.

Anticipate the Other’s Power Moves

As you develop your Plan B, it is wise to think through the other’s possible power moves. If you say No to the other’s demand, what can they do to compel you to back down? And what can you do to empower your No so that you can continue to stand your ground?

Take Away Their Stick

If the other’s reaction to our No is to hurt or threaten us, our first instinct may be to hurt them back. A more effective strategy, however, is to neutralize the impact of their behavior. If, as in the story of the Zen master, they are threatening to hit you with a stick, don’t hit them back; just take away the stick. In other words, don’t attack the other, but simply remove their ability to attack you.

Imagine that you are dealing with a difficult customer who makes an unreasonable demand on you to lower your price. If you say No, you anticipate based on previous history that his response will be to get angry and go over your head to your boss in order to get his way. One way to counter this tactic is to speak to your boss in advance and explain that the customer will likely come to ask her for a discount. Ask your boss to refer the customer politely back to you. If there is any potential for flexibility in pricing, it should be yours to show; otherwise the customer will always turn to the boss in the future,

reducing you to the role of a messenger. When the customer then threatens to talk to your boss, you can say, "Please feel free. Here is her number." You have just taken away the customer's stick.

This strategy of taking away the other's stick without attacking them was used to great effect during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. I had the privilege of participating in a meeting in Moscow in 1989 that convened many of the key participants who were still living. My colleagues and I listened spellbound as former U.S. secretary of defense Robert McNamara, former U.S. national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, former Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, former Soviet ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin, and others tried to piece together the full story of what really happened during those tense thirteen days in which the world's future hung in the balance.

Among the many lessons, one stood out for me. It was how close we came to Armageddon without intending it and how fortunate we all are that both U.S. and Soviet officials were so skillful with their Nos. As you may remember, the Americans had discovered that the Soviets had dispatched nuclear missiles by ship to Cuba, where they would target the United States. President Kennedy knew he had to say No but was unsure how to stop the Soviets without starting World War Three. He tasked a group of his closest political and military advisers to come up with a plan. The Plan B they devised in case diplomacy did not work was to order an air strike on Cuba and follow it with an invasion. For the first two days of discussion, they had no other plan. As we found out during those Moscow meetings, that Plan B, which came perilously close to being implemented, would in all likelihood have been disastrous. Unbeknownst to the U.S. leadership at the time, the Soviets had over forty thousand troops deployed, the Cubans had over two hundred and fifty thousand well-trained troops prepared to fight,

and, in case of American attack, the Soviet forces were authorized to use nuclear missiles, some of which had already been activated.

“That was horrifying,” said Robert McNamara. “It meant that had a U.S. invasion been carried out, if the missiles had not been pulled out, there was a 99% probability that nuclear war would have been initiated.”

Fortunately, prodded by the president’s brother Robert Kennedy, the political and military advisers searched for a more creative Plan B, one that, instead of attacking, focused on taking away the stick. The plan called for a quarantine of Cuba, a naval blockade that would stop the Soviet ships carrying nuclear missiles from arriving in Cuba. That quarantine succeeded in underscoring Kennedy’s No and buying precious time for Robert Kennedy and Anatoly Dobrynin to forge an informal agreement whereby Soviet missiles were withdrawn from Cuba and, as had been President Kennedy’s intention all along, American missiles were pulled out of Turkey. Without the constructive Plan B and the skillful diplomacy that followed it, we might not be here today.

Consider the Worst Case

It can also be useful to think through in advance the worst-case scenario. What is the worst thing the other can do to you if you say No to them? The purpose of this exercise is not to create unnecessary fear for yourself but rather to distinguish fear from reality. As an executive once told me, “When I’m in a tough spot in a business negotiation, I find it helpful to ask myself, ‘What’s the worst thing they could do to me? If they’re not going to literally *kill* me, then I’m probably going to survive. I’ll be OK.’ Then I start to relax and can negotiate more effectively.”

He has a point. In moments of tension, we tend to let our anxiety and fear magnify the potential consequences of saying No. When we take a clear-eyed look, we come to realize that those consequences are usually not as bad as our imaginations can lead us to believe. Then, prepared for whatever comes, we can boldly stand up for ourselves and our concerns.

Reassess Your Decision to Say No

Now that you have uncovered your Yes and developed a strong Plan B to empower your No, you are in a position to ask yourself the question: “*Should I say No?*” The presumption may be yes, but it is always wise during your preparation process to reassess your decision. After all, saying No may carry significant costs and risks for you—and for the other. Saying No often means entering into contention with the other, and you will want to choose your battles carefully. Here is a way to think through your decision.

Ask Yourself Three Questions

In deciding whether to say No, it is wise to ask yourself three questions: “Do I have the interest in saying No? Do I have the power? Do I have the right?”

Do I have the interest?

Will saying No protect or advance a key interest of yours, worth buying a possible struggle with the other, especially now that you understand *their* interests? Listen to your inner voice. If your intention is clear and strong, that is a good sign to go ahead.

Do I have the power?

Do you have the ability to sustain your No and to ride out the other's forceful reaction? Is your Plan B sound? If so, that is a sign to go ahead.

Do I have the right?

In some situations, we may ask ourselves whether we are even allowed to say No. "Do I have the *right* to say No? Am I allowed to say No in this situation?"

In some situations, asking ourselves this question may be valid. If we have made a promise or signed a contract, it may not be right to break it. But in too many situations of abuse, inappropriate behavior, or unreasonable demands, we accommodate because we feel unsure about whether we have the right to say No. Battered spouses, for instance, ask themselves whether they have the right to leave the marriage. They do.

In the final analysis, the answer is that we all have the right to say No. It is our fundamental birthright as a human being. The hallmark of a free person is their right to make decisions for themselves and to take the consequences.

It is not always easy to say No, particularly to people on whom we depend. In case of doubt, it helps to remind yourself, after doing the work of preparation, that you have a compelling *interest* to say No, the *power* to say No, and the *right* to say No. When your interests, power, and rights are aligned, very little can stop you.

Remember that your duty is not to say Yes to the other, whoever they may be, but simply to give them respect, which you can do as you say No. Respect is the subject of the next chapter.