

# The Power of a Positive No

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LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

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Article by  
William Ury

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## About the Author

**William L. Ury** co-founded Harvard's Program on Negotiation and is currently a Senior Fellow of the **Harvard Negotiation Project**. He is the co-author (with Roger Fisher) of the best-selling *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* and author of *The Power of a Positive No: How to Say No & Still Get to Yes (2007)*. Over the last 30 years, Ury has served as a negotiation adviser and mediator in conflicts ranging from corporate mergers to wildcat strikes in a Kentucky coal mine to ethnic wars in the Middle East, the Balkans, and the former Soviet Union.



Twenty-seven years ago, Roger Fisher and I coauthored a book called *Getting to Yes*, which focuses on how to reach an agreement that is beneficial to both sides. It became an international bestseller, I believe, because it reminds people of the commonsense principles they may already know but often forget to apply.

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 former 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.

The importance of No was reinforced for me by a conversation I had with the well-known investor and financial sage Warren Buffett. Over breakfast, he told me, “I don’t understand all this Yes stuff. In my line of business, the most important word is No. I sit there all

day and look at investment proposals and say No, No, No, No, No, No – until I see 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.” No is the key to defining your strategic focus and every important Yes therefore may require a thousand Nos.

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I have come to appreciate that perhaps the main obstacle to getting to Yes is learning how to say No properly. 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.

The way out of this trap is what I call a Positive No. In contrast to an ordinary No which begins with No and ends with No, a Positive No begins with Yes and ends with Yes.

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## Yes without No is appeasement, whereas No without Yes is war.

Saying No positively means first of all saying Yes to yourself and your own deepest needs and values. When one executive I know in a family business had to say No to his father and boss's demand that he take care of the business over the Christmas holidays for the Nth year in a row, he drew on a deeper underlying Yes to his family and his self-respect. He told his father: "Dad, my family needs me and I intend to spend the Christmas holidays with them."



All Stop © Daniel Gómez - CC



In this TED talk, William Ury discusses his most recent project in one of the world's most conflicted regions. Abraham's Path (*Masar Ibrahim al Khalil*) is a route of walking and cultural tourism which follows the footsteps of Abraham or Ibrahim through the Middle East.

John, the executive, in a respectful tone, set a clear limit: "I will not be working this Christmas." He did not end with a No, however, but with a Yes, a positive proposal. "Here's my proposal for how we can get 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 needs and values, the No asserts your power, and the second Yes furthers your relationship. The key is respect – for yourself and for the other person.

The Positive No represents a marriage of the two most fundamental words in language: Yes and No.

The great problem today is that we have divorced our Yeses from our Nos. Yes without No is appeasement, whereas No without Yes is war.

Yes without No destroys one's own satisfaction, whereas No without Yes destroys one's relationship with others. We need both Yes and No together. For Yes is the key word of community, No the key word of individuality. Yes is the key word of connection, No the key word of protection. Yes is the key word of peace, No the key word of justice.

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## As former British prime minister Tony Blair put it, “The art of leadership is not saying Yes, it’s saying No.”

The great art is to learn to integrate the two – to marry Yes and No. That is the secret to standing up for yourself and what you need without destroying valuable agreements and precious relationships.

The way we say No may sometimes seem like a small thing, but over time it can make a huge difference in our lives, in the lives of others around us, and in the world at large.

In saying No well, we are giving ourselves a gift. We are protecting someone or something we value. We are creating time and space for something that we want. We are changing the situation for the better – and all the while keeping our friends, colleagues, and customers. In short, we are being true to ourselves. Through the simple daily practice of saying No positively, we are contributing to the quality of our lives, our success at work, and our happiness at home. It is a gift we owe ourselves.

Saying No can be a gift to the Other as well. “Tell me Yes, Tell me No, but tell me now” is a refrain I have heard from those on the receiving end. The Other often much prefers a clear answer, even if it is No, than continued indecision and waffling. A No allows them to go ahead and make their own decisions.

Indeed, a Positive No can bring us closer to the Other, into a more authentic relationship. If we do not speak our truth – our No – to the Other, it can distance us from them as there will always be something important that lies unspoken between us.

Saying No is a gift not only to ourselves and the Other, but to the larger whole. Imagine for a moment a world in which Positive Nos were the norm, not the exception:

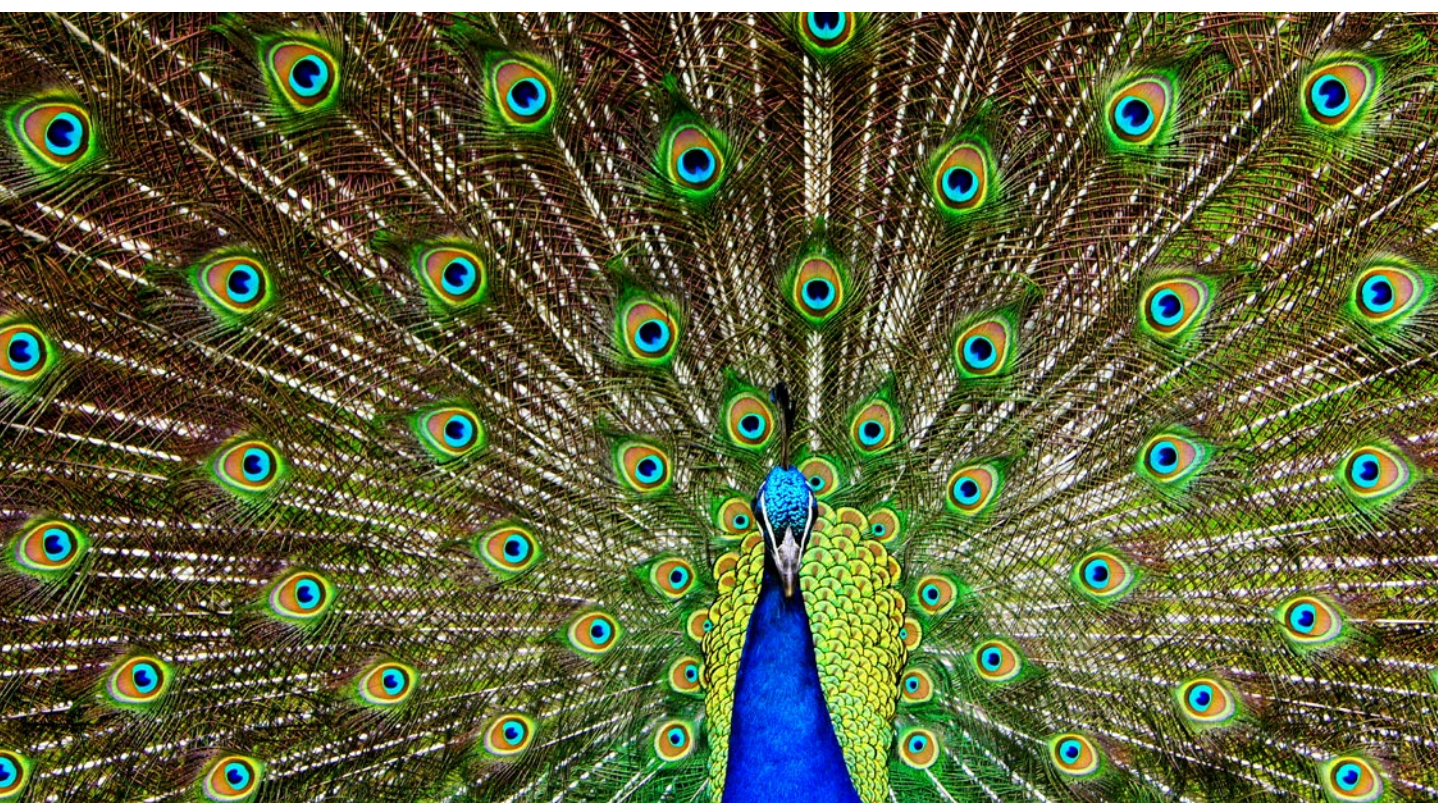
At home, parents who knew how to deliver respectful Nos to their children would see a lot less destructive strife, and their children would be less spoiled and much happier, as children are when they grow up with firm respectful limits. Those who are in troubled relationships would find that their marriages and their friendships have a much greater chance of succeeding. In the workplace, managers and leaders who knew how to say No would do a better job of keeping their organizations strategically focused. People in the finance, legal, information, and human resources departments who regularly have to say No to internal clients would be able to contribute more effectively to the organization’s strategic objectives.



Discipline © Average Joe - CC

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There is no doubt that delivering a positive no requires courage, vision, empathy, fortitude, patience, and persistence.



Peacock Patterns © Caitlin H - CC

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## Imagine for a moment a world in which positive Nos were the norm, not the exception.

People in sales would know when and how to say No to customers – and would feel supported in doing so. And everyone would be more empowered to balance work and personal life.

In the world at large, if leaders and nations knew how to say No positively, people would stand up for what is right in productive ways that lead to constructive solutions. The result would be more conflict, to be sure, but much less war and much more justice.

Finally, Mother Earth herself would be a prime beneficiary as her children learned how to say No to runaway excesses that threaten the natural environment on which we and future generations all depend.

Life, in short, would be a lot happier, healthier, and saner.

There is no doubt that delivering a Positive No requires courage, vision, empathy, fortitude, patience, and persistence. Changing old patterns takes practice. Fortunately, each of us is offered many opportunities a day to practice saying No. Think of it like exercise. You are building your Positive No muscle. With daily exercise, that muscle will get stronger and stronger. With practice and reflection, anyone can improve greatly at the art of saying No.

I wish you the kind of success that can come only from being true to yourself and respectful of others!

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The great art is to learn to integrate the two – to marry Yes and No. That is the secret to standing up for yourself and what you need without destroying valuable agreements and precious relationships.

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## More Information

For more information about the Positive No, visit:  
[www.williamury.com/books/power-of-a-positive-no.](http://www.williamury.com/books/power-of-a-positive-no)

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