

Why Almost Everyone Has Trouble Saying No

By **BARBARA KIVIAT** Thursday, Mar. 08, 2007 (TIME CNN)

John Kenneth Galbraith's housekeeper never had a problem saying no. One day President Lyndon Johnson called the Galbraith house wanting to talk to the great economist, who had lain down for a little shut-eye. "He's taking a nap and has left strict orders not to be disturbed," said the housekeeper. Johnson replied, "Well, I'm the President. Wake him up." The response: "I'm sorry, Mr. President, but I work for Mr. Galbraith, not for you." Click.

If only it were that easy for the rest of us. Saying no can be awkward, guilt inducing, nerve racking, embarrassing, even risky to friendship and career. "No may be the most powerful word in the language, but it's also potentially the most destructive, which is why it's hard to say," says William Ury, director of the Global Negotiation Project at Harvard University, who addresses that struggle in his new book, *The Power of a Positive No: How to Say No and Still Get to Yes*. Ury, a professional negotiator whose work has taken him to such conflict-ridden locales as Chechnya, Israel, Nepal and Aceh, Indonesia, is widely known for co-writing the 1981 book *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, a volume that remains required reading in fields from mediation to industrial psychology.

In *The Power of a Positive No*, Ury offers guidance on the flip side of reaching an agreement: how to deal with a situation in which you simply want to put your foot down. No is so often hard to say, Ury writes, because it highlights the "tension between exercising your power and tending to your relationship"--in other words, between getting what you want in the short term and keeping everyone happy for interactions down the road. People often err in one direction or the other, prioritizing either the relationship by saying yes when they long to say no or their own power by brusquely saying no and alienating the person they're dealing with. Then there is the ever popular route of avoidance--saying nothing at all and gaining neither what you want nor goodwill.

The better option, according to Ury, is to serve your no sandwiched between two yeses. It will go down more easily and preserve your relationship yet still allow you to take a stand. Say you're a dutiful son who works in the family business and always covers weekend shifts--kind of a drag if you have a wife and kids at home. When you go to talk to Dad, start by saying yes to your own interests (my family needs me), then move on to your no (I can't work weekends anymore) and finish up by saying yes to your relationship with Dad (together, let's figure out how we can get the work done and let me spend time with my family). Ury highlights great no-sayers, from Gandhi to Warren Buffett to Larry Bird's agent.

Anyone who has read *Getting to Yes*, or almost any other negotiations text, will recognize much of Ury's advice. Classics include focusing on underlying interests instead of positions (discussing what you want instead of the way you've decided to get there), developing another option (what Ury calls Plan B but Yes fans will recognize as BATNA--best alternative to a negotiated agreement) and making it easy for people to agree with you (Ury holds up Disney CEO Bob Iger as a master of letting others save face). Ury also includes ways to say no without saying no--I would rather decline than do a bad job; I have plans--which can be handy whether you're saying no to your best client or your overbearing in-laws.

Although we may intuitively understand how to effectively say no, we often don't because of other concerns swirling in our head. Yet today, Ury argues, in a world with more information, more options and more demands for productivity than ever before, the stakes are incredibly high. "To say yes to the right things"--and not be overwhelmed, overworked and generally stressed out--"you have to say no to a lot of other things," Ury says. The payoff, he notes, can be twofold, since delivering a respectful, decisive no can paradoxically strengthen your relationship with the person on the receiving end.

Just consider what happened when Galbraith woke from his nap and returned Johnson's call. "Who is that woman?" the President asked, inquiring about the housekeeper who had dared tell him no. "I want her working for me."