

John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

Better Conversations, Better Outcomes

Session 18: The Power of a Positive No

"I made mistakes because I felt under pressure to be ready for my manager. I panicked. I needed more time but didn't like to say. I never say No to my boss. I wouldn't know how to...."

Reading these words in a recent email immediately brought to mind one of the outstanding series of books authored by William Ury, entitled **The Power of A Positive No**. It is a few years since I pulled it from my bookshelves. But here it is, even signed by the author during his first visit to Edinburgh in 2009.

The beauty of this book is its simplicity and its adherence to the principles of Getting to Yes. It is ok to say No. Indeed, you must say No sometimes, both for yourself and for the other person. It is a matter of dignity, honesty, maturity and... Getting to Yes. Anything else will be sub-optimal.

The more we subordinate our own interests to those of others, the more we lose our sense of self-respect, purpose and meaning. We are merely cogs in someone else's wheel. And that of course could bring about a corresponding loss of respect for us, a conscious or unconscious leaning towards exploitation and presumption, even carelessness. Carelessness towards us by whoever the other person may be.

"Don't treat me like a naughty child" the writer had eventually written to the boss. Festering frustration or even fear had spilled over into anger. Avoidance or even acquiescence had metamorphosed into attack. Not being able to say No is a recipe for unhappiness, disintegrating relationships - and poor productivity.

William Ury quotes Martin Luther King: *"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."*

Ury offers us advice on how to address these things. Firstly, he commends identifying our own needs and interests. What matters to you? Why? What happens if you give up on that? Be clear and specific. Then, identify their needs and interests: what matters to them and why? This takes me back to an earlier podcast (podcast 6) on the kind of preparatory questions that help us to have really good meetings.

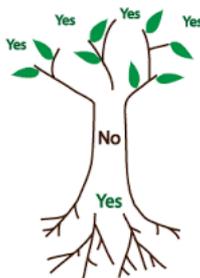
As I think about it, these questions help us to Get to Yes by, if necessary, saying No. They help us to get under the surface and identify the real issues rather than skating on the surface and reaching unsatisfactory compromises which only defer the real problem. You run the risk of foregoing a long-term solution by accepting a short-term sticking plaster.

Having identified your real interests (your Yes), you need to empower your No – and do so respectfully and objectively, separating people from the problem (as we discussed in podcast 10); standing on your own feet, not on their toes, as Ury picturesquely puts it.

It is a Yes to yourself, a No to what is not in your interests and then identifying a Yes to something better for all concerned, based on real needs and building healthy relationships. That third stage may require exploration, brainstorming, negotiation, proposals and counter proposals and so on until you build the Golden Bridge, as Ury describes it. But the key is to do so from a position of strength in your own Yes.

You can of course use the framework of PRUDDIE (podcast 12) to help you approach this in a structured way. I have no doubt that AARREE would work really well at the No stage. I am sure we also have to use the power of the pause which we explored in podcast 11 to implement the Power of a Positive No. And really good listening throughout. No doubt a healthy dose of reframing will be helpful too, as we discussed in podcast 16. And so on, it all fits together really well.

Ury's book goes into much more detail. I'll leave you to read it. I do love his tree analogy: your Yes is the deep roots; your No is the strong trunk; your common Yes is the branches with flourishing foliage. I've included the illustration of this in the transcript of this podcast available on our website.



So what about our writer who couldn't say No to the boss. Perhaps after listening to or reading this, the narrative might change.

Consider this: "I'd love to be able to do this piece of work by tomorrow at 11 and I can see that it is important to you; however, my daughter is at home this evening and I need to spend time with her on her homework. That is important to me. I also want to be sure that I do the preparation for you to the best of my ability. That is also important to me. If I rush, I tend to make mistakes. So, I cannot commit to being ready by 11. However, I am prepared to work through my lunch hour and be ready by 2 when I see you have a diary slot available. Shall we meet then?"

Over to you!