

NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

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TAKING THE NEGATIVITY OUT OF "NO!"



■ Raphael E. Lapin

It is possible that after a good-faith attempt to engage another party in negotiation and problem solving, no progress is made. They may be insistent and demanding or unreasonable and uncompromising. They may just be unwilling to work jointly towards a solution or trying selfishly to impose their demands. In this situation, many of us avoid saying "no" even though we should. We become anxious about how the other may take it and the defensiveness and anger that it may arouse. We may deal with this by avoiding the issue altogether and leaving the other party confused about where we stand. Or, even worse, we may say "yes" when what we really mean is "no". Never concede to anything which is unacceptable just because of a fear of being assertive and saying "no". John F. Kennedy's famous statement: "Don't fear to negotiate but don't negotiate out of fear" is a good rule to remember in this situation. Knowing how to say "no" constructively and positively is a skill that we all need in order to manage our relationships with authenticity and effectiveness. In this column, we provide a three-step formula for saying no while taking the negativity out of the "no!" and without even uttering the word.

EXPLAIN YOUR NEEDS, CONCERNS AND CONSTRAINTS

The first step in saying "no" is to explain your own needs or constraints. Let's say a coworker asks you to prepare a client proposal to be ready by tomorrow morning. You are busy with an assignment that

has priority and that cannot be deferred or delegated. Explain your constraint by saying for example: "Understanding the urgency of the client proposal and truly wanting to help, I am however occupied with a top priority assignment which I am unable to delegate due to the specific expertise that is required. I will be done with this and available by tomorrow evening". By first explaining your constraint and its extent in a reasonable and legitimate way, they will understand that you are unable, not stubbornly unwilling – an important distinction in conveying "no".

INVITE THEM TO SUGGEST ALTERNATIVES

Once you have adequately explained your own needs and constraints, invite them to brainstorm possible alternatives that could get their needs satisfied. In our example about the client proposal above, you might say: "Let's think about alternative ways that we could get the client proposal ready for tomorrow. Is there anyone else that is qualified to do it? Do we have perhaps a similar one that we did for another client that would require only minor modifications? Are there any further ideas that you can think of?" By inviting them to engage in problem solving, you are demonstrating that even though you are saying "no" to their request, you are saying "yes" to helping them resolve their problem.

TELL THEM WHAT YOU CAN DO

After explaining your limitations in fulfilling their request, and inviting them to brainstorm alternative solutions with you, tell them what you *are* willing to do. You could say: "I would be happy to take the proposal home with me tomorrow evening and have it ready for you first thing Thursday morning if that is acceptable. It might also be a good idea for me to call the client in the meantime and tell

him when he may expect the proposal". This three-step formula to taking the negativity out of "no!" works because by saying yes to helping them look for alternatives and yes to what you *are* able to do, makes the no to their specific request much less significant. And notice that you have said no without actually using the word "no" thereby avoiding defensiveness, anger and a sense of rejection on the other side.

Finally, always remember to replenish the relationship. Even though the other party may comply with your constructive "no", the relationship could be adversely impacted or in some instances depleted. Furthermore, a long term working relationship may require you to say "no" again in the future. It is therefore necessary to balance your

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"no" with replenishing the relationship. Look for opportunities to nurture the relationship. Get together with them for coffee or lunch and include them in events. Demonstrate that your saying "no" was not personal. Reach out to them and rebuild the confidence in the relationship. You can do this by verbal

acknowledgement of the difficulties and thanking the person. An example might be: "I know this proposal was really important to you and I want to thank you for respecting my needs" Follow the advice of William Shakespeare: "Do as adversaries do in law, strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends".

■ Raphael E. Lapin is a Harvard trained negotiation and communication specialist who trains and consults for large corporations both in the United States and around the world. He can be reached via his company's website at www.conflict-management.net or directly at relapin@conflict-management.net