

Getting Past No, by William Ury; ISBN 0-553-37131-2

The subtitle for this book is “Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation.” It is a book teaching the art of negotiation. I decided to review it because it emphasizes the same techniques I see for classroom management and for getting along with people in general. It also offers useful techniques for calming yourself down and getting focused when the situation gets stressful. I will concentrate my review on the relevant parts.

In Part II of this book, “Using the Breakthrough Strategy”, the author starts with an interchange between two people where the first states the problem but then they both react emotionally to each other’s words. At the end of the conversation, the problem has been lost in the battle of hostile words and negative feelings. “Action provokes reaction, reaction provokes counterreaction, and on it goes in an endless argument.” (GPN, pg 12)

“Human beings are reaction machines. The most natural thing to do when confronted with a difficult situation is to react – to act without thinking. There are three common reactions...” (GPN, pg 12) Those reactions are: striking back, giving in, and breaking off.

The author describes striking back first.

When the other side attacks you, your instinctive reaction is to attack right back, to “fight fire with fire” and “give them a taste of their own medicine.” If they take a rigid and extreme position, you do the same.

Occasionally, this shows them that two can play the same game and makes them stop. More often, however, this strategy lands you in a futile and costly confrontation. You provide them with a justification for their unreasonable behavior. They think: “Ah, I knew that you were out to get me. This proves it.” Escalation often follows in the form of a shouting match, a corporate shutdown, a lawsuit, or a war.

(GPN, pg 33)

Once the hostilities increase, it is difficult to scale them back. “Even if you do win the battle, you may lose the war.” (GPN, pg 33) Furthermore,

The other problem with striking back is that people who play hardball are usually very good at it. They may actually be hoping that you are going to attack them. If you do, you put yourself on their home turf, playing the game the way they like to play it.

(GPN, pg 34)

The reaction of giving up is described as “the opposite of striking back.” (GPN, pg 34)

The other side may succeed in making you feel so uncomfortable with the negotiation that you give in just to be done with it. They pressure you, implying that you are the one who is blocking

agreement. Do you really want to be the one responsible for dragging out the negotiations, disrupting the relationship, missing the opportunity of a lifetime? Wouldn't it just be better to say yes?

...

Giving in usually results in an unsatisfactory outcome. You feel "had." Moreover, it rewards the other side for bad behavior and gives you a reputation for weakness that they – and others – may try to exploit in the future. ...

Sometimes we are intimidated and appease unreasonable people under the illusion that if we give in just this one last time, we will get them off our back and will never have to deal with them again. All too often, however, such people come back for further concessions. There is a saying that an appeaser is someone who believes that if you keep on throwing steaks to a tiger, the tiger will eventually become a vegetarian.

(GPN, pgs 34-35)

The third common reaction is to "break off." That is, to withdraw from the relationship or situation. This can be an appropriate reaction in some cases. For example, "if continuing means being taken advantage of or getting into fights again and again ... Sometimes, too, breaking off reminds the other side of their stake in the relationship and leads them to act more reasonably." (GPN, pg 35) It is also important to consider the costs of this action, both financially and personally. They are often high, and you need to decide if breaking off is worth it. It might be better to explore the motives and reasons behind the conflict in an attempt to preserve the relationship.

Next, the author explores the dangers of reacting without thinking.

In reacting, we lose sight of our interests. ...

Often the other side is actually trying to make you react. The first casualty of an attack is your objectivity – the faculty you need most to negotiate effectively. They are trying to throw you off balance and prevent you from thinking straight. They are trying to bait you like a fish so that they can control you. When you react, you are hooked.

Much of your opponent's power derives from the ability to make you react. ...

Even if reacting doesn't lead to a gross error on your part, it feeds the unproductive cycle of action and reaction.

(GPN, pgs 36-37)

So what are we to do? The author describes a technique he calls, "Go to the Balcony."

... the good news is that you have the power to break the cycle at any time – *unilaterally*. How" by *not* reacting. ... *Objects react. Minds can choose not to.*

...

When you find yourself facing a difficult negotiation, you need to step back, collect your wits, and see the situation objectively. Imagine you are negotiating on a stage and then imagine yourself climbing onto a balcony overlooking the stage. The “balcony” is a metaphor for a mental attitude of detachment. From the balcony you can calmly evaluate the conflict almost as if you were a third party. You can think constructively for both sides and look for a mutually satisfactory way to resolve the problem.

...

Going to the balcony means distancing yourself from your natural impulses and emotions.

...

you should go to the balcony at every possible opportunity throughout the negotiation. At all times you will be tempted to react impulsively to your opponent’s difficult behavior. But at all times you need to keep your eyes on the prize.

(GPN, pgs 38-39)

Next the author provides techniques for suspending our natural reactions.

Often you don’t even realize you are reacting, because you are too enmeshed in the situation. The first task, therefore, is to recognize the tactic. In ancient mythology, calling an evil spirit by its name enabled you to ward it off. So, too, with unfair tactics – identify them and you break the spell they cast.

(GPN, pg 39)

There are many tactics, but the author groups them into three categories: obstructive, offensive, or deceptive:

Stone walls. A stone wall tactic is a refusal to budge. The other side may try to convince you that they have no flexibility and that there is no choice other than their position. ... Any other suggestion on your part is met with a no.

Attacks. Attacks are pressure tactics designed to intimidate you and make you feel so uncomfortable that you ultimately give in to the other side’s demands. Perhaps the most common form of attack is to threaten you with dire consequences unless you accept their position ... Your opponents may also attack your proposal ..., your credibility ..., or your status and authority ... Attackers will insult, badger, and bully until they get their way.

Tricks. Tricks are tactics that dupe you into giving in. They take advantage of the fact that you assume your counterpart is acting in good faith and is telling the truth. One kind of trick is manipulating the data – using false, phony, or confusing figures. Another is the “no authority” ploy, in which the other side misleads you into believing they have the authority to decide the issue, only to inform you after you have given up as much as you can that in fact someone else must decide. A third trick is the “add on,” the last minute additional demand that comes after

your opponent has led you to believe you have already reached agreement.
(GPN, pgs 40-41)

There are advantages to recognizing the methods used to manipulate you.

The key to neutralizing a tactic's effect on you is to recognize it. If you recognize the other side's tactic as a stone wall, you are less likely to believe that they are inflexible. If you recognize an attack, you are less likely to fall prey to fear and discomfort. If you recognize a trick, you will not be taken in by the deception.

...

Many ploys depend on your not knowing what is being done to you. ... Recognizing the tactic puts you on your guard.

The hardest tactics to recognize are lies. You need to watch for *mismatch* – between their words, on the one hand, and their previous words or actions, facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, on the other. Whereas liars can manipulate words, they cannot easily control the anxiety that raises their voice pitch. Nor can they control the symmetry of their facial expressions; a liar's smile, for instance, may become crooked. Bear in mind that anxiety can stem from other causes and that one clue alone is unreliable. You need to look for multiple clues.

Watching out for tactics means being alert, not overly suspicious. Sometimes you may have misunderstood the other person's behavior. ...

So put on your radar, not your armor. Make a mental note when you detect a possible trick or subtle attack. Neutralize it by naming it, and keep it in mind as a possibility, not a certainty. Look for additional evidence, remembering that difficult people rarely limit themselves to a single tactic.

(GPN, pgs 41-42)

To summarize so far, you need to recognize your reaction to a difficult situation. You should “go to the balcony” to help you maintain your perspective during the discussions. You should be on alert for various tactics used by the other side that are designed to distract you and allow them to control the situation. The next part addresses your reaction and going to the balcony in more detail.

... you need to recognize not only what they are doing but also what you are feeling.

The first clue that we are reacting usually comes from our bodies. Our stomachs get tied up in knots. Our hearts start to pound. Our faces flush. Our palms sweat. These are all visceral responses signaling that something is wrong and that we are losing our composure in the negotiation. They are cues that we need to go to the balcony.

Each of us has certain emotional susceptibilities, or “hot buttons.” ...

If you understand what your “hot buttons” are, you can more easily recognize when your opponent is pushing them. Recognizing them in turn allows you to control your natural reaction. ...

We live and work in competitive environments. So expect verbal attacks and don't take them personally. Remember that your accusers are hoping to play on your anger, fear, and guilt. They may want you to lose control of your emotions so that you cannot negotiate effectively. ...

When you are being attacked, it may help to see your opponent as someone who doesn't know any better.

(GPN, pg 43-44)

Techniques for “going to the balcony” are for buying yourself time for thought and composure.

Pause and Say Nothing

The simplest way to buy time to think in the middle of a tense negotiation is to pause and say nothing. It does you little good to respond when you're feeling angry or frustrated. Your judgment is distorted. ...

Pausing will not only give you a chance to step up to the balcony for a few seconds, but it may also help the other side cool down. By saying nothing you give them nothing to push against. Your silence may make them feel a little uncomfortable. The onus of keeping the conversation going shifts back to them. Uncertain about what is going on in your head, they may respond more reasonably.

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You obviously can't eliminate your feelings, nor do you need to do so. You need only to disconnect the automatic link between emotion and action. Feel the anger, frustration, or fear – even imagine attacking your opponent if you like – but *don't* channel your feelings and impulses into action. Suspend your impulses; freeze your behavior. While it may feel like hours, it will probably last only a few seconds. This may not be easy when your opponent is shouting or stonewalling, but it is necessary for successful negotiation. ...

Rewind the Tape

You can only pause for so long. To buy more time to think, try rewinding the tape. Slow down the conversation by playing it back. Tell your counterpart: “Let me just make sure I understand what you're saying.” Review the discussion up to that point.

...

An easy way to slow down negotiation is to take careful notes. Writing down what your counterpart says gives you a good excuse: “I'm sorry, I missed that. Could you please repeat it?”

...

Take a Time Out

If you need more time to think, take a break. ... A time-out gives both sides a chance to cool off and go to the balcony.

...

Don't Make Important Decisions on the Spot

In the presence of the other person, you are under strong psychological pressure to agree. One simple rule of thumb will help keep you out of trouble: Never make an important decision on the spot. Go to the balcony and keep it there.

...

Once you are away from the table, the psychological pressure eases. It no longer seems so urgent to reach a decision. Having suspended your initial reaction, you can now consider the decisions in a more objective fashion ...

In sum, the most natural thing to do when faced with a difficult person or situation is to react. It is also the biggest mistake you can make.

(GPN, pgs 45-50)

My Response to Getting Past No

What appealed to me about this book is how it teaches personal control in the face of difficulty. Now that I am more aware of it, I am more likely to recognize my internal reactions and control them better.

What drew me to this was recalling incidents I have had with students and their family members that were hostile. I was not always pleased with my reaction to them and wished I could have done a better job handling it.

In one instance, a parent came in to my office and instantly began yelling at me. We did not exchange names; she did not state why she was there or even ask if she could talk to me. The immediate hostility put me on edge and we ended up having a yelling match. If I had the techniques listed here, I could have taken control of the situation by inviting her to sit, by introducing myself and asking her for her name, and then by asking her to please explain her purpose and her concerns. Perhaps that would have defused the situation, at least somewhat, and pressured her to be more civil in her communications.

Then, using the balcony techniques, I might have been able to help her realize that what she was asking for was unreasonable and unfair to other students in the class.

Other instances come to mind, and I think all of them would have benefitted from my using Mr. Ury's techniques.