Get past no

Marty Spence was logging off his computer on Friday afternoon and eagerly looking forward to picking up his family to head to their lakeside home for the weekend. His boss suddenly appeared and said, “Marty, I need you to finish the Delcourt proposal so it’s on their desks first thing Monday morning. I’ve got to catch a plane. No problem, right? I know I can count on you.”

Spence quickly calculated that it would take most of the weekend to finish the proposal. Everyone else had already left, and his boss was headed for the door. The job would be dumped in his lap if he didn’t say something fast. He was furious; this wasn’t the first time his boss had asked him to take care of a problem he should have handled himself. What should he do?

As William Ury, author of Getting Past No: Negotiating with Difficult People (Bantam Books, 1991), explains, we all have to negotiate at times with difficult people. They might be stubborn, arrogant, hostile, greedy, or dishonest. Even ordinarily reasonable people can turn into opponents: A teenage daughter can be charming one moment and hurl insults at you the next. Your boss can be collaborative and understanding most of the time but make unreasonable demands on a Friday afternoon.

**Holding your ground.** Dealing with difficult people can be challenging, and doing it effectively calls for special skills.

In Getting Past No, Ury describes his five-step strategy for dealing with hard bargainers and difficult people. He calls his method “breakthrough negotiation,” a way to “change the game from face-to-face confrontation into side-by-side problem-solving.” (See the sidebar “Breakthrough Negotiation.”)
When his boss demanded his help, Marty Spence’s first impulse could have been to strike back. “You’ve had three months to work on this proposal, and I’ve asked several times if you needed help. I’m not giving up my weekend plans to bail you out at the eleventh hour.” If he chose this path, he would be standing up for himself but possibly jeopardizing his relationship with his boss. Alternatively, he could have caved in and said, “Sure, you can count on me.” Then he would have had to face his disappointed family and deal with his own anger at having been unfairly used.

Another option would have been to try to engage his boss in joint problem solving. “You’ve got a plane to catch, and I’m headed out the door to pick up my family. It’s important that I be there on time. I’d like to help you. I wish I had known about this earlier. Let’s see what ideas we can come up with.” This response acknowledges the boss’s predicament—he has a plane to catch—while establishing that Spence has his own commitment. It suggests that together they may be able to come up with a solution (e.g., bring in someone else to help, each cut their weekend short by a half day, submit an incomplete report, or tell the client the report will be delivered at the end of the day on Monday).

**When you need to just say no.** Sometimes, even with joint problem solving, you need to convey a firm and clear “no.” No, you won’t work all weekend. No, your household budget cannot afford a new Jaguar. No, your assistant can’t work from home two days a week. No, it’s not acceptable that your supplier’s delivery will be a month late. How do you say no while still preserving the relationship?

In his book *The Power of a Positive No: How to Say No and Still Get to Yes* (Bantam, 2007), Ury suggests sandwiching the no between two “yeses.” First, say yes to your own interests and needs. Then say no to the particular demand or behavior. Finally, say yes as you make a proposal.

In the case of the assistant wanting to work from home, you may learn about her interests and still decide that they aren’t compelling enough for you to agree to her request. You first explain your interest: “I want to have our team here working together
and sharing ideas. I value your contribution and need you to be part of that team.” Then comes the no: “I understand your concerns about the long commute, but I’ve decided that you can’t work from home two days a week.” Finally, a proposal: “We can talk about having you work from home occasionally, and we can talk about arranging your hours differently so you avoid peak commuting hours. Or we can discuss reassigning you to a different job where it’s not as important for you to be here physically.”

**Facing the challenge.** It can be extremely challenging to stand up to difficult people who may have an arsenal of weapons, including ridicule, bullying, insults, deception, and exaggeration. In some cases, they might attack you; in others, they might avoid confrontation. Sometimes you are taken by surprise; at other times, there might be a chronic problem you need to address.

For example, if your ex-husband regularly belittles you in front of your children, don’t just trade insults. Find a time when you can have a real conversation without interruption. Let him know how his remarks make you feel. Encourage him to talk about why he says these things. Ask questions, and make him feel heard. Then discuss your shared interest in the children’s happiness.

Whenever possible, prepare in advance for difficult negotiations. First of all, know yourself. What are your hot-button issues? What is essential to you? What is unacceptable? Next, think about what you are likely to hear from your opponent and plan how you might react.

Consider the following golf analogy. Jack Nicklaus says that every golfer should regularly take a lesson that focuses on basics such as grip and alignment, because if your setup is sound, there’s a decent chance you’ll hit a reasonably good shot. Similarly, every skilled negotiator should do a prenegotiation inventory. Ask yourself, What are my goals? What is my strategy? What is my walkaway point? Like the proper setup in golf, if you plan your negotiation with focused preparation, you improve your chances of ending up with a good outcome.
**Build a golden bridge.** Once you have brought your difficult opponent to the table, you may need to build a “golden bridge,” Ury’s term for letting your opponent save face and view the outcome as at least a partial victory. Even when your boss comes into your office on Friday afternoon with an inconsiderate request, you need to say no in a way that conveys your respect for him as your boss. And you want your assistant to feel that you appreciate her contributions, even if you can’t agree to let her work at home. Finally, you want your ex-spouse to know that you value his parenting, even while you ask him to stop belittling you for the good of the children.

So how do you help your difficult opponent save face, while still standing up for yourself? Ury suggests reframing the problem so that you draw your opponents in the direction you want them to move. By way of example, he relates a story told by filmmaker Steven Spielberg, who was relentlessly bullied by an older boy when he was about 13 years old. Spielberg figured he couldn’t beat the bully at his game, which was to use physical force, so he *changed the game*, inviting him to play a war hero in a movie he was making about fighting the Nazis. As Spielberg describes it, “I made him the squad leader in the film, with helmet, fatigues, and backpack. After that, he became my best friend.”

This illustrates a key concept: involve your opponent in finding a solution. It’s unlikely that a difficult person is going to accept your proposal fully, no matter how reasonable it is. Give him some choices: Would you prefer to meet at your office or mine? I could either pay a lump sum or make payments over time; which is better for you?

Hostage negotiators look for ways to build rapport and let the hostage takers save face, with the hope that the hostage takers will become more reasonable. The negotiators listen attentively to what the hostage takers want, whether it’s an apology, a conversation with a loved one, a cup of coffee, or an acknowledgment of their grievance. The negotiators take careful notes, hoping to find something that will give them leverage.
Similarly, you should pay careful attention to your opponent, realizing that some of her needs may be unstated. A business owner who won’t engage in problem solving to help close a deal to sell her business may turn out to have deep-seated ambivalence about selling. Realizing that, you might structure the deal as a joint venture, with a role for her in the new company.

**Listen to learn.** If there is a common denominator in virtually all successful negotiations, it is to be an *active listener*, by which Ury means not only to hear what the other person is saying but also to listen to what is behind the words. Active listening is something frequently talked about but rarely done well; it is a subtle skill that requires constant, thoughtful effort. A good listener will disarm his opponent by stepping to his side, asking open-ended questions, and encouraging him to tell you everything that is bothering him. Beyond that, Ury says, “he needs to know that you have heard [and understood] what he has said.” So sum up your understanding of what he has said and repeat it in his own words.

Ury points out that there is a big payoff for you: “If you want him to acknowledge your point, acknowledge his first.” And you may find you have little choice but to do this—how else to avoid a stalemate?

**You don’t have to like them.** Dealing with difficult people does not mean liking them or even agreeing with them, but it does mean acknowledging that you understand their viewpoint.

Lakhdar Brahimi, a United Nations special envoy to Afghanistan in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, was given the daunting task of negotiating with warlords and others who had caused many deaths, to try to create a stable government. He spoke of the need to negotiate with difficult people: “The nice people are sitting in Paris… To stop fighting, you’ve got to talk to the people who are doing the fighting, no matter how horrible they are… If I don’t want to shake their hands, I shouldn’t have accepted this job.”
Whether you’re negotiating with someone who is dangerously angry or only mildly annoying, the same skills are helpful in getting the results you want. Find out what your opponent wants and begin to build a case for why your solution meets her needs. If you’re successful, you can turn your adversaries into your partners.

**Breakthrough Negotiation**

In *Getting Past No*, William Ury outlines five steps for negotiating with a difficult opponent, whether it’s a boss, coworker, customer, salesclerk, or spouse.

1. **Don’t react: Go to the balcony.** When someone is difficult, your natural reaction might be to get angry—or to give in. Instead, take yourself mentally to a place where you can look down objectively on the dispute and plan your response. Anytime you find your hot buttons getting pushed, try “going to the balcony.”

2. **Disarm them by stepping to their side.** One of the most powerful steps to take—and one of the most difficult—is to try to understand the other person’s point of view. Ask questions and show genuine curiosity.

3. **Change the game: Don’t reject—reframe.** You don’t have to play along with a difficult person’s game. Instead of locking into a battle of will or fixed positions, consider putting a new frame on the negotiation.

4. **Make it easy to say yes.** Build a golden bridge. Look for ways to help your opponent save face and feel that he’s getting his way, at least in some matters. Using objective standards of fairness can help create a bridge between your interests.

5. **Make it hard to say no.** Bring them to their senses, not their knees. Use your power and influence to help educate your opponent about the situation. If she understands the consequences and your alternatives, she may be open to reason.

“When Life Gives You Lemons: How to Deal with Difficult People”
by Susan Hackley (Managing Director, Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School). First published in the *Negotiation* newsletter, November 2004.