

FIFTY SHADES OF 'NO'

Mick Crews

"After the final 'no' there comes a 'yes' and upon that 'yes' the future of the world depends." - Wallace Stevens

Prior to being invited to write this piece, I didn't know the source of this quotation. The first time I heard it was when the remarkable Joan Holmes, CEO of The Hunger Project, was training me as a fund raiser. When debriefing an unsuccessful attempt she would often say, "Well Mick, that's just one more 'no' on the road to 'yes'." How refreshing! Somehow it washed away all of the explaining and rationalizing.

It was then that I first began to explore the power of 'no'. Consider your own experience as you take a moment to say 'no' a few times, and then to say 'yes' a few times. When I do this, I notice that when I say 'no' I experience far more power and possibility. 'No' has the power to open up new thinking, new action, turn around and change.

I've come to realize that it's important to examine what I feel inside when I say a clear 'no'. It puts the conversation into the domain of reality not theory. Kabir¹ says that until we have experienced something, it is not real, no matter how many holy books we've looked through or how many gods sculpted of wood and ivory we've consulted. What I usually feel following a clear 'no' is quiet, calm, and at ease – a surprising experience of harmony!

I recall a senior colleague who was overwhelmed by his job. Twelve hour days were routine. When I asked if he would prefer to make it eight hour days his look said, "Are you crazy?" I introduced him to a coach, who in turn introduced him to the power of saying 'no'.

He took it on and the effect on his colleagues and the CEO at the next Board meeting was shocking. When asked to take on a new task he said 'no', and asked later to take on another, he said 'no' again. After the third repetition and a kind of explosion from the

CEO, he explained the coaching he'd had. His repeated 'no's opened up a creative space for finding other ways of proceeding, and also resulted in more reasonable working hours for him.

Things are not always (if ever) what they seem to be. Some of the most amusing books I come across, really classy works of fiction that are often tragically funny, are to be found on the 'management' shelves. The management of organizations is frequently the domain of 'yes men'. A liberal dose of 'no' would be a blessing in many places.

With a colleague, I worked on an assignment to support a management team bringing more products to market. The request was to help them be more creative in product innovation. Before developing creativity workshops we looked at their new product development processes. There was absolutely no shortage of promising ideas. In fact, there were too many ideas clamoring for attention and making demands on the available capacity. In a culture that encouraged new ideas, there was not a place for creative "no's". As a result, many good ideas failed to make it through the crowd.

Let's go back to the exercise of saying "no" out loud to ourselves, with a variety of inflections. While there may not actually be *fifty* shades of 'no', I'll bet it isn't far short. It's such a powerful little word:

- 'No' demands attention, while 'yes' can easily slip by without being noticed.
- "No" is unexpected and usually unwelcome, while "yes" is expected and comfortable.
- 'No' is often hidden under euphemisms like, "That's interesting.., I'll give it some thought."

We perhaps could have called this piece, *Fifty Euphemisms for "No"*. How about this one: *"There is some value in saying that."*.., with absolutely no commitment to asking the questions which might dig out value.

In preparing this I did some Google research, and while I am not sure that Google gives a truly balanced view, what did get revealed was that 'no' in and of itself has no bias towards provoking positive or negative outcomes. It has no personality -- it's just a tool. 'No' can result in an ending or a beginning.

It is probably true to say that "no" usually results in a negative reaction, at least at first blush. New ideas face a lot of "find the flaw" listening. To have potency, the 'no' we say must be contextualized, either by the way it is said, or by explanation. A positive outcome depends upon speaking in a way which will provoke questioning thought. (Edward de Bono's Red Hat idea is one refreshing way of doing it.)

In the 1960's, Blake and Mouton, most well known for their work devising the "Management Grid" (a starting point for many of us in looking at management styles), also produced a work on negotiating. An invaluable observation I found from this was that frequently negotiations are overshadowed by previous ones. Sorting out what is actually getting a "no" or "yes" requires sensitive and acute listening, and being willing to go beyond the obvious. The ground-breaking work done by Fisher and Ury (*Getting to Yes* and *The Power of a Positive "No"*), merits a few hours of thoughtful reading, followed by a lifetime of reflective thinking and application.

I am so grateful for the invitation to contribute this short piece. The work has taken me back to the roots of my understanding of the importance of a constructive "no". I value deeply all those who have been so patient with me as I have developed my own practice and understanding of its fundamental importance in building open and honest relationships. The opportunities are always there. As I deal with the death of my first wife, they are most certainly present. Practice does not necessarily make perfect, but does support the possibility of more productive and healthy outcomes.

Two guys from out of town were lost driving in New York. At a stop light they got the attention of a cabbie. "*How do you get to Carnegie Hall?*" they asked. "*Practice,*" he

replied. Saying “no” productively is an art that requires practice. The rewards are enormous.

¹ Kabir was a mystic poet and saint of India whose writings greatly influenced the Bhakti movement, and is today carried forward by the Kabir Panth ("Path of Kabir")

