B Asking for a little can go a long way.

Throughout this book we've attempted to provide evidence to support our claims that we can successfully and ethically move people to say yes. But in certain situations and environments it's also important to understand why people say no to reasonable requests, such as a request to donate to a legitimate charity.

Along with several colleagues, one of us set out to do just that. We thought that, when asked to make a donation, even those who would like to support the charity in some way say no, because they can't afford to donate very much, and they assume that the small amount that they can afford wouldn't do much to help the cause. Based on this reasoning, we thought that one way to urge people to donate in such a situation would be to inform them that even an extremely small sum would be helpful.

To test this hypothesis our research assistants went door to door to request donations for the American Cancer Society. After introducing themselves, they asked the residents, "Would you be willing to help by giving a donation?" For half the residents the request ended there. For the other half, however, the research assistant added "Even a penny will help."

When we analyzed the results we found that, consistent with our hypothesis, people in the "even a penny will help" half of the sample were almost twice as likely to donate to the cause. And the amount the individuals gave was also found to be more or less the same in both halves, so the people in the "even a penny" half did not donate less.

The study suggests that if you want somebody to do something for you, simply pointing out that even a little assistance on their part would be acceptable is likely to be an effective strategy. Applications in the workplace might be: to a co-worker regarding a joint project, "Just an hour of your time would really help;" to a co-worker whose handwriting is illegible, "Just a little more clarity would help." The chances are that this little step in the right direction won't prove so little after all.