

Saying "No" to the Unimportant

We need to say "no" more often to avoid stress and burnout and to make room in our lives for the things that really matter

By Sue Stephenson

Have you read books and attended seminars on time management? Do you still feel out of control? For many of us there is a missing piece in the time management puzzle: the art of saying "no" graciously. This least polished of skills sets boundaries, frees time for real priorities and brings with it a rare, strong feeling of satisfaction. In *The Disease to Please*, Harriet Braiker says, "You need to say 'no' to some people, some of the time, in order to preserve your ability to give to the people that really matter most in your life."

"Yes" is such a positive and pleasant little word, and we all want to be seen as agreeable and helpful. But it's a word that can become our enemy. The habit of saying "yes" to almost every request not only wastes time but can lead to stress and burnout in both our professional and personal lives.

THE REALITY OF TODAY'S JOBS

The reality of the workplace in this era of downsizing has many of us doing multiple jobs and working longer hours with less support than we had just a few years ago. Breitman and Hatch tell us, "Every day we are confronted by forces – some serious, some petty – that eat up our time, deplete our resources and add noise and clutter to our lives. We don't need more ideas about how to hurry up and do things faster. While making lists and becoming more organized will help, it is only part of the solution. Saying 'no' is a way to pare down the list and create more calm." Braiker agrees, saying, "The more you do, the more people will ask of you – until you just can't keep up. It becomes a self-perpetuating stress pattern." This pattern is not limited to those who go out to work. Those who work at home feel the same pressures.

DECIDING WHAT TO SAY "NO" TO – SETTING PRIORITIES

It's easy to be efficient without being effective. Nothing is so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all. Setting priorities is the first step towards becoming more effective, a step that naturally leads to conversations – at home and at work – about a shared vision of success. A compelling, positive vision is a magnet that draws us toward the future. With a clear, optimistic vision, it is far easier to see what should come first, what can wait until later, what we should stop doing or what we should say "no" to.

There will always be things in life that we cannot fully control, but setting priorities where we do have some control helps us make better choices. Urgent things appear important. They're often not! Knowing and doing what's important rather than simply doing what's urgent is the key.

Try using Cheryl Richardson's Absolute Yes List. Richardson suggests we prioritize the demands on our time according to what is really important. Write your priorities on a file card, make several copies and put the cards in

prominent places – your desk, your time planner, even your car sun visor! These reminders will inspire you to use your gift of time differently. "Once you have determined what you want to say 'yes' to, the ability to say 'no' becomes an important muscle to build. You decide what you will and won't do. If you don't say 'yes' the schedule won't fill. And if you say 'yes' only to those things that you really want to do, you can avoid feeling frustrated or angry later on when you feel forced to do something you'd rather not do," says Richardson.

THE POWER OF FEAR AND GUILT

Why is such a short word as "no" so hard to use? The answer has a lot to do with our own feelings. Richardson poses this question: "If you could say 'no' to someone or something, knowing that there would be absolutely no hard feelings or negative consequences, who or what would you say 'no' to?" Make a list of five things in the space below.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Now, identify the feelings you have for each situation. Do you feel threatened? We often feel it can be very dangerous to say "no". Do you worry about other people's feelings or about disappointing them? These are often people we care about and we value our relationship with them. Do you fear anger and conflict – unpleasantness at the least?

Frequently it is guilt or fear of confrontation that leads us to take on "just one more" project or to invest our own limited time in someone else's priorities. Braiker says guilt is the most common obstacle to taking care of ourselves. It takes real willpower – or "won't power" – to face our fears head-on and overcome them. We need to recognize how often feelings of fear and guilt stop us from saying "no" to demands that do not reflect our own personal or professional priorities.

PEOPLE PLEASER SYNDROME

People Pleasers try to please others by responding to their every desire. They are afraid of offending by saying "no" to requests that are important to others but not to themselves. Braiker calls this "disease to please" a compulsive, even addictive, behaviour pattern. People Pleasers' self-esteem is tied up with how much they do for others. Their deep fear of negative emotions is based on a desire to be liked by everyone. Yet conflict often arises when we agree to do things solely to please others or when we commit to tasks for which we have no time.

People Pleasers believe that:

- nothing good can come from conflict, so they keep conflicts inside
- the first job is to look after others, and they feel virtuous overriding their own needs
- nice people get approval
- delegation is a sign of weakness

Here, again, we are victims of guilt and fear. It is not selfish to make yourself a priority. Indeed, if you don't have passion and happiness in your own life, you cannot give it to others. Bill Cosby says it best: "I don't know the key to success but the key to failure is to try to please everyone."

THE ART AND SKILL OF SAYING "NO": FIVE METHODS

Of course, you can't turn down every request that you think is a waste of time, but there are some strategies that can help you be more assertive without being either aggressive or submissive. You will need to find your own style. Braiker suggests five methods that you can build into your repertoire.

1. Change Your Mind

It is OK to say you have changed your mind about a decision. Your co-workers may be disappointed or angry at first but this usually passes with time. Be direct, honest and gracious, and always apologize. It's easier to say "no" to the request, not the person. Change your mind, say "no" and move on.

I have reconsidered the plans I made with you. At the time I was really excited about it, but I have changed my mind. Please accept my sincere apologies for any confusion or disappointment this may cause you, but I need to put myself first. I hope you understand.

As you reconsider your priorities, you will become accustomed to making better choices in the moment and you won't have to change your mind as often.

2. Buy Time

Slowing down a response is another critical step in learning how to say "no". This requires you to think before you speak. Put some space between the request and the answer, and don't make "yes" automatic. Delaying an immediate response is a useful method and is not to be confused with stalling or being evasive. Delaying protects you from over-booking yourself and gives you a sense of control.

If it's a face-to-face conversation, excuse yourself from the room if possible: Let me think about it. I have to take care of something right now. I'll be right back.

On the phone or e-mail, it's easier to buy time. I need a little more time to think about that. I'll call you back later. Tell me the best time to reach you. Try taping a list of "Buying Time" phrases to your phone, computer, time text, wallet or purse. Rehearse these phrases so you sound firm and pleasant. Remember you are not asking for time, you are taking time. You may decide to say "yes" once you have thought about the request.

3. The Sandwich

Put your "no" between a sympathetic phrase and a constructive suggestion or compromise. Smile, even when you are on the phone. Be final and brief. Avoid whining or being overdramatic. Mean every word you say.

Normally I would be keen to take on that kind of a project; however, because of other deadlines I cannot take this on. Have you thought about anyone else to ask?

Thank you for inviting me to help you with the fundraiser. I'm sorry I can't participate right now. I hope you'll think of me next time.

4. The Broken Record

If the Sandwich Strategy is not forceful enough, try the Broken Record. This is a very powerful technique that can be used to buy time or to say no directly. It involves saying what you mean over and over (like a broken record).

Acknowledge the other person's feelings, paraphrase them back to show that you have heard the request and say "no" clearly. Simply, calmly repeat your original statement or reply until it sinks in. Don't allow yourself to get drawn into a debate. Don't get into your reasons or over-explain. Say it and remain silent. Sometimes "no" just has to mean no.

I know you will be disappointed with my decision not to join the fundraising committee...I cannot join the committee... I won't be joining this committee.

5. The Counter-offer

The Counter-offer is a negotiated, workable compromise with a concrete alternative. Use this only when you want to soften the refusal by making suggestions and modify the demands to meet your conditions. Braiker calls this the Reverse Sandwich Technique. You sandwich your positive – what you are willing to do – between two negatives. The first negative informs the requester that you will not be able to do exactly what has been asked. The good news is you can do less – the counter-offer. If that doesn't work and you can't find a compromise, you can retreat to a firm flat "no".

Unfortunately I won't be able to work for two weeks in the summer... but, I can come for 3 days. If that won't work I am afraid you will have to make other arrangements.

ADDED BENEFITS – HELP! HELP! HOORAY!

Once you have customized these five strategies to fit your personality you will start to feel the benefits of polishing your "no" skills. You will feel more relaxed as you see the progress you are making on your own priorities – your Absolute Yeses.

When you begin to say "no", you will put in motion a lifesaving side-effect. Saying "no" encourages you to start delegating and reinforcing the skills of those who work or live with you. You will begin to see how many tasks you have been doing that others can handle. Now, without feeling guilty, you can actively share the workload.

SUGGESTED STEPS

Put time aside for quiet reflection and personal awareness. Become more aware of your conflict style and how you make decisions. Use a journal to record your attempts.

Keep track over a week of how many times you give in to less than an Absolute Yes. Mark it in your time planner and count up at the end of the week. You may be surprised.

Take small steps towards big results. Make a commitment to change and try it for two months. Practice on non-threatening situations, then stretch into more challenging situations. Always use your best judgment. Practice saying "no" in the mirror to get used to hearing yourself. Say the phrases out loud until they are natural for you.

This gets easier with practice. The old acronym "KISS" – keep it short and simple – works well. Be reasonable, polite, respectful and sensitive.

Tell your friends and family what you are trying to do and ask for their support. Share reactions and results with a colleague, a coach or a support group. Make it a topic of discussion at work and at home.

Groups can say "no" as well as individuals. Gather others together and have a Work Smart session. There is strength in numbers. Decide together what you can do and collectively say "no" to the rest.

It always helps to consider the many "no's" you have received in your life. Learn to take "no" for an answer yourself. Watch and listen to how other people say "no".

As Oprah Winfrey says in the March 2002 issue of O Magazine, "I believe so many of our frustrations could be avoided if we get brave enough to handle difficult conversations honestly – beginning with learning how to say no... When you stifle the urge to stand up for yourself, you slowly strangle your spirit."

Polishing the "no" skill will lead to big changes in how you think, feel and act. Treating yourself as well as you treat others is not selfish. It is necessary!

References

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