

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

SAYING 'NO' – WHY IS IT SO HARD?

Have you ever said 'yes' to a project or proposal only to regret it later, sometimes almost immediately? **John Niland** explores why that happens – and explains how to say 'no' more effectively when appropriate.

Yesterday I agreed to do something that I know I shouldn't have. Why?

There is not a single answer to this question. Part of me is intrigued by the project... I want to know more. Part of me wants to be of service to the organisation involved. Part of me cannot let go of the opportunity that might (even if it is a slim 'might') come out of this.

Yet the bottom line is that I have added something unplanned to an already-overcrowded 'To do' list. If this is so obvious to me now, why could I not see it yesterday?

Of course, saying 'No' can simply be a matter of basic confidence, ie we dare not do it because we fear what might follow. If the request comes from a boss or a customer, the status that such a person occupies in our heads may leave no space in which to say 'No'.

But there are many possible factors at work making us say 'yes' when we should, perhaps, say 'no'. On the left is a list (including some of the elements already mentioned) – which may ring some bells.

Personally, looking through the list, I can tick numbers 3, 4, 5 and 8 – particularly the last – as preventing me from saying 'no' yesterday. The project in question is something new and different, and I am a sucker for variety.

What does that tell me? Probably it means I need to leave more room for variety, and not allow 'the plan' to occupy 100% of my time. On the other hand, it probably also means I need to ask what my taste for variety might be costing me.

How to say no

But what about the actual mechanics of saying no? Having found out your triggers for saying yes, and identified the ones that perhaps have scant justification, practise the following next time you are asked to do something:

- ask 'What is it that makes this (request) important?';
- try the sandwich-technique for saying 'No': the good news, the bad news, topped with the good news. For example: "Thanks for asking, unfortunately that won't fit in this week's plan, would you like me to add the request to next week's planning meeting on Friday?";
- if it is the boss or a customer making the request, ask: "How does the priority of this compare with x, y and z?"; and
- remember, 'Ten priorities means no priorities', so work to a top-three of priorities at all times. ■

FACTORS AT WORK WHEN WE DECIDE

1. I dare not say 'No' – 'they' have 'the power'.
2. I always say 'Yes' – it has become a habit.
3. I like saying 'Yes' – I see that it pleases people and I like to do that.
4. It might lead to opportunity, and I cannot pass up an opportunity.
5. It looks interesting, and I cannot say 'No' to something like that.
6. The option of saying 'No' does not even occur to me: requests and tasks (and emails) are there to be done.
7. The fact that they asked means that I am trusted and/or needed, and saying 'No' would be negating their trust.
8. The request constitutes variety in my work, and I need that. (Maybe I will say 'No' to something else, explicitly or implicitly.)
9. What I have been asked is a challenge – near to impossible – and I like the impossible. (Similar to 5, but specifically about challenge rather than interest.)
10. I feel that it's my job, ie my responsibility, to do this.
11. I could not find the language to say 'No', so I agreed instead.
12. I need to get permission to refuse each request.
13. If I don't do this, there might be a flaw or a mistake, and I am 100% committed to quality and perfection.

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