Tips for saying no

It’s a simple fact that you can never be your most effective if you take on too many commitments — you simply spread yourself too thin. But requests for your time and input are coming in all the time.

Have you ever said ‘yes’ to something, only then to feel a tightness in the pit of your stomach, wishing you had said ‘no’? Saying yes to things you don’t really want to do can exhaust you mentally, waste your time and distract you. Recognise that you have a limited amount of time in a day. If you say yes to everything that comes your way, then it'll be difficult to focus on your own priorities.

What’s so hard about saying no? Well, to start with, it can hurt, anger or disappoint the person you're saying no to, and that’s not usually a pleasant task. Second, if you hope to work with that person in the future, you’ll want to continue to have a good relationship with them, and you may fear that saying no in the wrong way could jeopardise that.

Understanding the reaction to say yes

Knowing your own motivations and psychological triggers can help you tame the agreeable beast within you. Take some time to think about the last time that you said yes to someone, even though the nagging, sickening feeling in your stomach was screaming that this would cause an overload to your system. Think through the reason why you ended up saying yes. Does it stem from a need to appear in control at all costs, and turning down new requests or responsibilities would appear as a sign of weakness or failure? Does it come from a belief that saying yes makes you popular and highly thought of? Do you think it would be easier to do it yourself? Is it led by a need to be permanently busy because having a five minute break in which you could evaluate your life might cause too many difficult issues to be raised? Whatever the reason, knowing yourself and your tendencies can help you decide when you should be saying no.

Deciding when to say no

Have a set of questions to ask yourself when a new request comes in. Ask yourself if you want to answer yes because of your motivations above. Challenge yourself if that is reason enough to agree to the extra responsibility. Ask yourself if you have time to add extra workload to your already full schedule. Decide if adding the task benefits you in any way, or whether it could be detrimental to you. Following a logical flow helps to take the emotion out of the equation.

How to say no

• Value your time. Know your goals and priorities, and how precious your time is. Then, when someone asks you to dedicate some of your time to a new commitment, you'll know that you simply cannot do it. Tell them: ‘I really can’t right now … my plate is full.’

• The important thing here is to be firm. You simply don't have the time available. Be cautious of offering an apologetic ‘If you can't find anyone else come back to me’, because this is an equivalent of telling them not to bother finding anyone else.
• Remember that there are only so many hours in the day. This means that whatever you choose to take on limits your ability to do other things. So even if you somehow can fit a new commitment into your schedule, if it’s not more important than what you would have to give up to do it (including time for relaxation and self care), you really don’t have the time in your schedule.

• Don’t apologise for turning down a request. A common way to start out is ‘I’m really sorry but …’ as people think that it sounds more polite. While politeness is important, apologising just makes it sound weaker. You need to be firm, and unapologetic about guarding your time for the things that matter to you/your role.

• Some people feel that they always have to say yes to their boss — they’re the boss, right? And if we say ‘no’ then we look like we can’t handle the work — at least, that’s the common reasoning. But in fact, it’s the opposite — explain to your boss that by taking on too many commitments, you are weakening your productivity and jeopardising your existing priorities. If your boss insists that you take on the project, go over your project or task list and ask him/her to re-prioritise, explaining that there’s only so much you can take on at one time.

• It’s often easier to pre-empt requests than to say ‘no’ to them after the request has been made. If you know that requests are likely to be made, perhaps in a meeting, say to everyone as soon as you come into the meeting, ‘Just to let you know, my week is already full and I won’t be able to take on any new requests.’

• Instead of providing an answer there and then, it’s often better to tell the person you’ll give their request some thought and get back to them. This will allow you to give it some consideration, and check your commitments and priorities. Then, if you can’t take on the request, simply tell them: ‘After giving this some thought, and checking my commitments, I won’t be able to accommodate the request at this time.’ If asked for an explanation, remember that ‘It doesn’t fit with my priorities,’ is quite adequate.

**Keep practising**

Like anything that you’re not used to, it’s hard at first, but becomes easier as it becomes a more familiar habit!