

CONFLICT

How to Say No to Taking on More Work

by Rebecca Knight

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Sometimes you have too much on your plate or you're just not interested in taking on a project you've been asked to work on. You might not have a choice in the matter, but if you do, how do you turn down the opportunity in a way that won't offend the person offering? How can you avoid being labeled "not a team player" or "difficult to work with"?

What the Experts Say

For most of us, saying no doesn't come naturally. You feel lousy disappointing a colleague, guilty about turning down your boss, and anxious denying a client's request. "You don't want to be seen as 'no person,'" says Karen Dillon, coauthor of *How Will You Measure Your Life?* "You want to be viewed as a 'yes person,' a 'go-to person' – a team player." Trouble is, agreeing to work on too many assignments and pitching in on too many projects leaves you stretched and stressed. Saying no is vital to both your success and the success of your organization – but that doesn't make it any easier to do, says Holly Weeks, the author of *Failure to Communicate*. "People say, 'There is no good way to give bad news.' But there are steps you can take to make the conversation go as well as possible." Here are some pointers.

Assess the request

Before you respond with a knee-jerk "no," Dillon advises assessing the request first by determining how "interesting, engaging, and exciting the opportunity is," and then by figuring out whether it's feasible for you to help. "Think about what's on your plate, whether priorities can be shuffled, or whether a colleague could step in to assist you [on your other projects]," she says. "Don't say no until you're sure you need to." The assessment ought not be a solo endeavor, adds Weeks. She suggests providing the person who's making the request – be it a client, a coworker, or your manager – with "context" about your workload so he can "help you evaluate the scale and scope" of what he's asking. You need to know, for instance, "Is this a small thing that won't take too long? Or is it a longer-term project? And how important is it?" She says the goal is for you to understand "how much your saying no is going to cost the other person" and for your counterpart to grasp the "repercussions of what he's asking."

Be straightforward

If you realize you have neither the desire nor the bandwidth to help, and, therefore, need to turn down the request, be honest and up front about your reasons, advises Weeks. "Too often people start with lightweight reasons and hold back the real reason they're saying no because they think it's too heavy," she says. "But the little, self-deprecating explanations are not persuasive and are easily batted aside. Or they come across as disingenuous." To limit frustration, be candid about why you're saying no. If you're challenged, stay steady, clear, and on message. Dillon recommends describing your workload and the "projects on your plate" by saying something like, "I would be unable to do a good a job on your project and my other work would suffer."

Offer a lifeline

To maintain a good relationship with the person you're turning down, it's critical to "acknowledge the other side," says Weeks. Be empathetic. Be compassionate. She suggests saying something like: "I realize that by saying no, this [chore] is going to be put back in your hands.' The other person might not be happy with your answer, but he will be able to tolerate it." Dillon suggests offering a lifeline by asking if there "are small ways you can be helpful" to the project. Perhaps you can attend brainstorming sessions, read first drafts, or simply serve as a sounding board. Even in saying no, you want to "convey team spirit," she says. If you're unable to offer small favors, be sure to keep workplace optics in mind. "If you're saying you're too busy to help, don't cut out early and don't be seen taking long, chatty breaks at the water cooler."

Don't be mean, but don't be too nice

"The manner in which you say no is so important," says Dillon. "Don't make the other person feel bad for asking you for help." No sighing, no grimacing, no it's-not-my-turn-why-don't-you-ask-Donna? "Be kind, but firm." Watch your tone and your body language, says Weeks. Don't shuffle your feet and "don't use facial expressions to express reluctance or demurral." Strive for a neutral no. It's also vital that you don't leave your counterpart with false hope that your no could eventually turn into yes, she adds. "There is tremendous temptation to soften the no to get a better response," she says. "But when your no is reluctant, flexible, and malleable, it gives the impression of 'maybe I'll change my mind,' and it encourages your counterpart to keep pushing." At the same time, she says, it's reasonable to state that while the answer may be no today, things could change in the future.

Adjust your expectations

Even if you follow all the steps above, you should prepare for negative feedback. Your colleague or client "may not be happy; he may punish you or be perfectly content to burn a bridge," says Weeks. "You can influence how the other person reacts, but you can't control it." She suggests "adjusting your expectations" on what you hope to accomplish. You can't please everyone. "Don't look at it as a choice between confrontation and preserving a relationship," she says. Dillon agrees, noting that you shouldn't read too much into the help-seeker's initial reaction. "He feels frustrated. But it may not be personal. Don't assume he's going to be mad at you for three weeks."

Practice

To get better at saying no, Dillon suggests practicing saying it out loud – either alone, behind closed doors, or with a trusted friend or colleague. “Listen to yourself,” she says. Your tone should be clear and your demeanor diplomatic. “You want to say no in a way that makes people respect you.” Saying no is a skill you can learn, and eventually it’ll become easier, adds Weeks. “Think of all the people who have to say no for a living – lawyers, cops, referees, judges,” she says. “They do it with dignity. They own what they’re saying. And they are accountable for it regardless of strong feelings on both sides.”

Principles to Remember

Do

- Evaluate whether you have the desire and the bandwidth to help with the request and ask if priorities can be shifted or trade-offs made
- Show a willingness to pitch in by inquiring if there are small ways you can be helpful to the project
- Practice saying no out loud – eventually it will become easier

Don't

- Use a harsh or hesitant tone, and don't be overly polite either. Instead, strive for a steady and clear no
- Hold back the real reason you're saying no. To limit frustration, give reasons with good weight up front
- Distort your message or act tentatively because you're trying to keep your colleague happy. Be honest and make sure your no is understood

Case Study #1 – Provide context about why you're saying no

Katherine Hays, the founder and CEO of Vivoom, the Cambridge, MA, mobile advertising company, says that she constantly must remind herself that “saying no is one of [her] most important responsibilities.”

“At a startup, the opportunity is so big and there’s so much to accomplish that it’s tempting to [take on] everything,” she says. “But if you don’t have time to do [something] well, you’re doing a disservice to the person you said yes to.”

A couple of months ago, Katherine had to say no to a potential client – we’ll call him Edward – who wanted to use Vivoom’s platform for a new advertising campaign. Ordinarily this would have been a prime opportunity. But Edward wanted to launch his campaign in less than a week, and Katherine’s team typically needs two to three weeks to get a client up and running on its system.

“I am an entrepreneur, so I am optimistic by nature,” she says. “But I had to think long-term [about the request]. Sure, there was a shot it could have worked in that timeframe, but hope is not a strategy.”

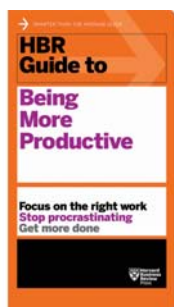
When she told Edward no, she first acknowledged that she knew it wasn’t what he wanted to hear. She then explained how the Vivoom team operates and provided context about why the process takes multiple weeks. There simply wasn’t enough time.

Edward pushed back. He promised to understand if the results of the ad campaign were not as strong as they could be.

But Katherine held her ground. “I told him that I wanted his first campaign on our platform coming out of the gate to be successful, that had I said yes it would have felt good in the short term but not in the long term, [and] that we wanted to work on his next campaign.”

This approach helped her win both his trust and his business. His first Vivoom campaign launches early next year.

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Case Study #2 – Evaluate your capacity and desire; say no with clarity and kindness

For Beth Monaghan, the principal and cofounder of InkHouse, the PR firm, saying no used to be a struggle. She’d feel guilty about turning down

requests from colleagues and clients, but agreeing to all of them left her feeling stretched and overwhelmed.

Something had to give. A few years ago, she made a list of her top three personal and professional goals for the year. “I carry the list with me wherever I go,” she says. “It helps me say no more easily because I see immediately whether or not [the request] fits with my goals. It makes me feel less guilty about saying no and makes me more purposeful about how I choose to spend my time.”

Recently, Beth received an email request from a colleague – we’ll call her Susan – who runs a business organization with which InkHouse works closely. Susan wrote to ask Beth if her team would be willing to do some in-kind pro bono work for her organization.

Beth was torn. On one hand, Susan’s project might be good exposure for InkHouse. On the other hand, Beth had only a certain number of pro bono hours, and she preferred to allocate those to cause-related organizations. (Beth’s professional goals include diversifying InkHouse’s client base, strengthening its West Coast presence, and “doing good in the world” by donating time and expertise.)

During Beth’s assessment phase, she weighed other factors too – namely, projects to which her team had already committed. “I knew that if we didn’t have the resources and ended up doing a bad job on the event, it would burn a bridge and be worse than saying no in the first place,” she says.

Beth decided to decline the opportunity and called Susan to explain why. Her goal was to say no with “clarity, kindness, and respect,” she says. “I was really honest about it. I told her my reasons. Her goal was worthy but it just didn’t align with mine at this moment – and she understood. But I also told her that even though the answer was no now, things could change in a year.”

Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Financial Times.

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Vijay Dinavahi 3 years ago

More relevant and important points discussed in the today's organizational context with demands from different corners of the business. Sometimes 'NO' costs the individual and his performance though the relationship is long and affects the relationship depending on how mature is the manager (who can understand the aspirations). However we can come to know what type of manager he/she is where he/she wants always 'YES' answer inspite of providing reasoning of the choices an individual makes. The individual needs to be firm and be ready to accept some untoward behavior because an individual is one who knows himself better than anyone.

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