# How to Say No

Some things you wouldn't think you'd have to re-learn how to do as an adult. Next time you're around a toddler, pay attention to just how early people get good at saying *no*.

We grown-ups should be great at it, but we're not. Saying *no*, especially at work, isn't easy. It can feel like a failure — like we're not being that *yes* person we're supposed to be. The toxic message is that being a collaborative person requires you to say *yes* to whatever.

On top of all that, you may not feel like you have the authority to say *no*. Overly hierarchical orgs and orgs with trust deficits alike have a vested interest in convincing us of this. Decisions are for leaders, people, not for you.

> ***The truth is that saying no is both healthy and necessary.*** *The trick to doing it well is recognizing that yes/no is a spectrum, and the best* ***no*** *leaves the asker feeling like they got a* ***yes****.*

There are three simple techniques for saying *no* effectively. Using them gives you power and legitimacy, it promotes collaboration, and it drives impact. And anyone can do it.

# The Pain of No

If you think it's hard to say *no*, trying hearing it.

When someone asks you for something, they're putting themselves out there. When you say *no*, even if you don't mean to, you're creating cognitive dissonance. And as a social psychologist I can tell you, cognitive dissonance is like a flying kick to the psyche.

*Delivering a "no" can feel like a flying kick to the face… unless you know how to do it right!*

Cognitive dissonance is stress that's caused by encountering something contradictory to your beliefs. Decades of research have highlighted the incredible lengths people will go to live in a stable and consistent world.

We make difference choices, for example by seeking out specific people and information (see, e.g., filter bubbles and confirmation bias). We also rationalize and reinterpret messages to create the blissful consistent world we want to live in.

> *When you want to say no, you have all these powerful forces stacked against you. It's not always a pretty or safe place to be.*

But it gets worse. If we interpret *no* as a type of social rejection, research suggests that our neurological response can be the same as when we feel physical pain. So a *no* isn't just a metaphorical roundhouse kick, it can feel like a literal one.

Ouchie.

# Why Say No

Scared? Don't be. The reason to understand how difficult it can be to hear *no* is to emphasize how important it is to get good at it. I'm far from the first to argue this.

Among the many good reasons to say *no* I'll focus on just three:

- **Impact.** Saying *no* to things that don't matter is how we work on the right things. Many requests aren't worth the time it took to make them, and effectively saying *no* helps us spend our time on the things that truly matter.
- **Avoiding burnout.** Everyone deserves to be a co-pilot in their own workload. Sure, sometimes we all have to say *yes* to more than we'd like. But on a consistent basis, getting really good at saying *no* keeps us from burning out or spreading ourselves too thin.
- **Leadership.** Contrary to what some may think, learning to manage *no* is a sign of strong leadership. You establish yourself as a productive, action-oriented person with ideas. You're generative, collaborative, and you bring people and ideas together.

Don't conclude from all this that you should meet every request with a brick wall. I've worked with plenty of (awful) people who thought that seeming smart meant undermining every idea that came their way.

**In reality you should almost never start with *no*.** Be encouraging, engage, show interest and support. Remember that yes/no isn't usually a dichotomy, it's a spectrum. Your job is to make a decision about where on the spectrum you'll land, given their needs, your needs, and the context.

# The Three Types of No

There are three types of *no* that work well in almost any situation. Next time you want to say *no*, try one of these instead. Pretty soon you'll find yourself a more active participant in all the decisions that surround you.

### The Yes No

The Yes No is by far the most common strategy. You're saying *yes* to the need, but *no* to the ask. It all starts with asking questions. Not critical or skeptical questions, but open-ended *tell me more about that* type questions. The goal is to get the person talking. Specifically you want them talking about why they're asking you for the thing. Spoiler alert — it's probably not for the reason you (or they) initially thought.


So, for example, an engineering manager asks for a fast turnaround research project that doesn't make sense at first. Once you've asked some questions, though, you find a way to loop it into an existing project. Together you agree on a quick analysis of a previous study to satisfy the urgent need. You won't be doing the thing that person asked you for, but you'll leave them feeling like you said *yes*.

Or maybe a PM comes to you asking for some specific design changes. You've worked on similar changes before, so you're reluctant to do it again. Again with the questions, you find out a new product director is the source of the idea. The PM needs a win, and you have an opportunity for relationship

building. You put together a quick prototype of the previous designs, and together with the PM you present it to the new director. You both look like heroes.

**The Material No**

It wouldn't be a good idea to dig a hole with your bare hands, no matter who was asking. Reasonable people need tools and materials. Sure, get scrappy with what's available. There are lots of ways to dig a hole! Asking for a backhoe when you just needed a sharpened stick is a bad look, but so is going at it with your fingernails.

So the simple trick here is not to say *no* at all, but to say *yes* with a reasonable materials list.

*Absolutely, I'd love to help with that. Let's discuss what I'd need to get started.*

You might need a product spec or PRD. You might need scheduled stakeholder meetings or a kickoff. You might need access to data, or some budget. Or maybe the timing is off. You need to see next quarter's roadmap or the results of an ongoing A/B test first.

You have to be careful not to hold the request for ransom. Sure, it'd be fantastic if every request came with an ideal set of materials. That's not realistic. Sometimes you've got to do your best with what you have. But defining a set of materials a project needs to succeed is just good leadership.

With The Material No, sometimes you end up doing the project, sometimes you don't. That's ok! Usually, you either got what you needed to be successful, or you seamlessly delayed the project until it was obvious no one needed it anyway. Win-win!

**The Priority No**

This technique is a simple nod to the laws of physics.

*Yes, I'm happy to take on that project. Which thing should this replace on the priority list?*

You're turning a request into a conversation about what's most important, which is a very leader-ly thing to do.

Of course, all this requires that you actually have a priority list — something I really recommend. Rank your work in terms of urgency and importance. Socialize the list with stakeholders. Make sure it's strongly tied to things like roadmaps and goals. Update it regularly.

If you've done a good job with that, when a new request comes along it's much easier to collaboratively evaluate it against the things that are already on your plate.

In spite of all this, you will likely still encounter the dreaded 'executive ask' — a request that is assumed to live outside of space-time because someone higher up in the org chart made it. Often that means you've got to get it done. Fine. That just means it gets to skip to the top of your list. Everything else still gets pushed down. If someone doesn't like that, well… you can tell them who to talk to!