

Chapter 2: Saying No



"Do; or do not. There is no trying."

— Yoda

February 4, 2025

Administrivia – So you want to put up a website?

- Contact Zach Estreito (zestreito@unr.edu):
- Include:
 - Subject line: [CS 426] would be helpful
 - A brief technical summary of their project and what ports they think they need open
 - The netids for everyone on your team

In This Chapter...

- Professionals speak truth to power. Professionals have the courage to say no to their managers
- How do you say NO to your boss?
- Professionals are expected to say NO
- Good managers crave someone who has the guts to say NO



Adversarial Roles

- Hard decisions are best made through the confrontation of adversarial roles
- Professionals will pursue and defend their objectives as aggressively as they can
- The best possible outcome is the goal that you and your manager share
 - The trick is to find that goal, and that usually takes negotiation

The Players....

- Paula – Developer/Project Manager
- Mike – Development Manager
- Don - Director of Development (Paula and Mike's Boss)
- Charles – CEO (Don's Boss)

The Log-in Page Needs to be
Done by Tomorrow...

A Pleasant Conversation

The Log-in Page Needs to be Done by Tomorrow – Pleasant Conversation

- Were both parties behaving unprofessionally?
 - Paula knows full well that the login page is going to take her team longer than a day, so she's just lying.
 - She might not think of it as a lie.
 - Perhaps she thinks she actually will try, and maybe she holds out some meager hope that she'll actually get it done. But in the end, it's still a lie.
 - Mike, on the other hand, accepted the "I'll try" as "Yes."
 - He should have known that Paula was trying to avoid confrontation, so he should have pressed the issue by saying, "You seem hesitant. Are you sure you can get it done tomorrow?"

The Log-in Page Needs to be
Done by Tomorrow...

Another Pleasant Conversation

The Log-in Page Needs to be Done by Tomorrow – Another Pleasant Conversation

- Was this conversation better?
 - As pleasant as that was, it was also terribly dysfunctional and utterly unprofessional.
 - Both parties failed in their search for the best possible outcome.
 - Instead of asking whether two weeks would be OK, Paula should have been more assertive: “It’s going to take me two weeks, Mike.”
 - Mike, on the other hand, just accepted the date without question, as though his own objectives didn’t matter.
 - One wonders if he’s not going to simply report back to his boss that the customer demo will have to be postponed because of Paula.
 - That kind of passive-aggressive behavior is morally reprehensible.

The Log-in Page needs to be
done by tomorrow...

The Best Possible Outcome

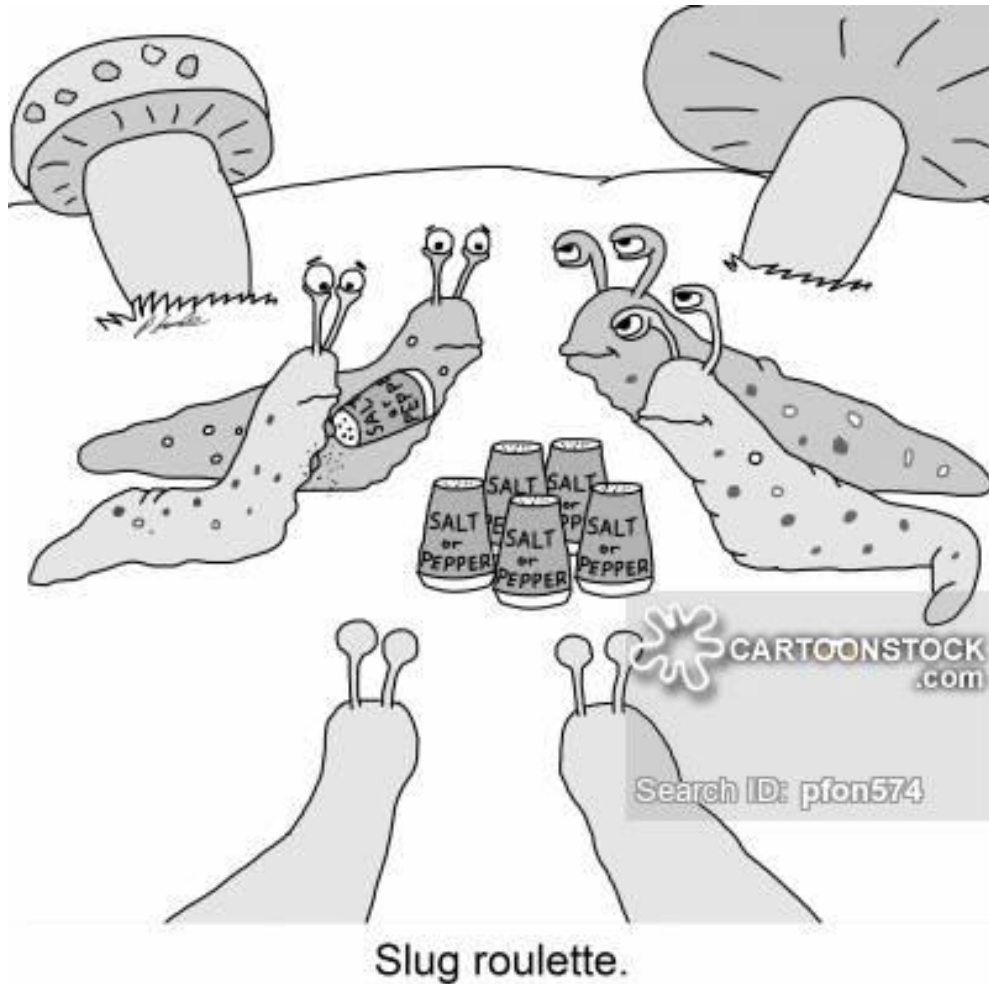
The Log-in Page needs to be done by tomorrow – The Best Possible Outcome

- Why is this the best possible outcome?
 - They did this by saying no and then working out a solution that was mutually agreeable to both.
 - They were acting like professionals.
 - The conversation was a bit adversarial, and there were a few uncomfortable moments, but that's to be expected when two people assertively pursue goals that aren't in perfect alignment.

What about the why?

- The why is a lot less important than the fact
 - The fact is the login page will require 2 weeks
 - Why it will take 2 weeks is just detail
- Providing too much detail can be an invitation for micro-management

High Stakes



- The most important time to say no is when the stakes are the highest
 - The more valuable No becomes
- When stakes are high, be determined to give your managers the best information you can.

High Stakes

The higher the stakes, the
more valuable no becomes ...

High Stakes - The higher the stakes, the more valuable no becomes

- Don vs Charles, What should have been done?
 - Charles should have told Galitron no three months ago when he first found out about the new estimate
 - Doing the right thing calling them (and the board)
 - If Don didn't stick to his guns, those calls might have been delayed even longer

Being a “Team Player”

- Being a team player means playing your position as well as you possibly can, and helping your teammates when they get into a jam
 - Communicates frequently
 - Keeps an eye out for his teammates
 - Executes his or her own responsibilities as well as possible
 - Does not say yes all the time



Team Player

Not Saying “Yes” all the time...

Later in the Director's Strategy
Meeting...

Being a “Team Player”

- Mike vs. Paula
- Who were the real team players in this scenario?
- Paula – represented what could, and could not, be done to the best of her ability
 - She aggressively defended her position, despite the wheedling and cajoling from Mike
- Mike – team of one – committed her to something she explicitly said she could not do
- Why did Mike do this?
 - He wanted Don to see him as a team player, and he has faith in his ability to wheedle and manipulate Paula into trying for the six-week deadline

Trying

- The promise to try is an admission that you've been holding back, that you have a reservoir of extra effort that you can apply
- By promising to try you are committing to succeed
 - This puts the burden on you
- If your “trying” does not lead to the desired outcome, you will have failed
- By promising to try you are promising to change your plans – new plan
- If you are not holding back some energy in reserve, if you don't have a new plan, if you aren't going to change your behavior, and if you are reasonably confident in your original estimate, then promising to try is fundamentally dishonest.

Three Weeks Later...

Passive Aggression

- What should Paula do?
 - Let Mike take the fall?
 - Make sure that all copies of all the appropriate memos were on file?
 - Or she could try to head off the disaster by communicating directly with Don?

Two Days Later...

What happens to Paula and Mike?

- Paula has behaved very professionally
 - She has said no at all the right times, and in all the right ways
 - No when pushed to amend her estimates
 - No when manipulated, cajoled, and begged
 - No to Mike's self-delusions and inaction
 - Paula was playing for the team
 - Mike needed help, and she used every means in her power to help him

The Cost of Saying Yes

- We want to say yes
- Healthy teams strive to find a way to say yes
- Managers and developers in well-run teams will negotiate with each other until they come to a mutually agreed upon plan of action
- To get to the right yes, you have to be unafraid to say no



Chapter 2: Saying No - Summary

- Hard decisions are best made through the confrontation of adversarial roles and Professionals will pursue and defend their objectives as aggressively as they can
- The best possible outcome is the goal that you and your manager share, this usually takes negotiation
- The why is a lot less important than the fact
- Being a team player means playing your position as well as you possibly can, and helping out your teammates when they get into a jam
- Being passive aggressive does not help you meet your goals