

# NOBLE OBJECTIONS

Do you often say 'yes' because it's easier than saying 'no'?  
Mike Clayton offers some tips for beating decision fatigue



Decision-making is at the heart of a corporate treasurer's role: where to invest, which deals to do, how much to pay for funds and what risk profile to accept. This constant pressure to make decisions can have a profound effect on your private life, your career development and your personal effectiveness.

It's a nasty little problem called 'decision fatigue'. What happens is that making decisions reduces your effectiveness at making your next decisions. The more decisions you need to make, the more fatigued your mental processes become. It takes effort – mental energy – to make a decision and this energy eventually becomes depleted. You run out of 'decision power'.

As your energy declines, the consequence is that your decisions either take longer, as you struggle to marshal the energy they take, or you take shortcuts and fail to evaluate the evidence properly. Typically, your default response is what you perceive as the lowest risk.

In an interview with *Vanity Fair* magazine in October 2012, US president Barack Obama said: "You'll see I wear only gray or blue suits. I'm trying to pare down decisions. I don't want to make decisions about what I'm eating or wearing. Because I have too many other decisions to make."

## The 'yes hazard'

One of the typical results of decision fatigue is our almost automatic 'yes'

response to any request that comes our way in the office. This has doubtless been a good strategy for you in the past – and maybe it still is – for a period. At the start of our careers, we often progress by being good at saying 'yes' and delivering. And at the start of our careers we imagine that, as we progress, the workload will diminish, as we have more people to delegate to.

Sadly, that isn't true – it is the opposite. As you progress through your career, rising up the professional and corporate ladder, there will be more and more responsibilities, more and more calls on your time, more and more things to say 'yes' to. This is not sustainable. There is a limit to how much you can take on before you start failing, losing a grip on the quality, running late, getting stressed and failing to deliver.

If your only response is 'yes', then not only will you fail, you will soon start to lose the respect of your senior colleagues. It may even affect your promotion prospects. Sure, they will still like you – you are an easy touch, and people come to view you as a bit of a doormat. They ask you do. It's easy. But liking is not respect and too little discrimination in what you say 'yes' to will mean that your workload

will be crowded with things that you really ought not to be doing.

## The alternative to 'yes'

The most powerful word in time management is 'no'. Indeed, 'no' is the solution for people who are great at time management, but still can't get everything done. But there is a problem for most of us. You probably think that the trouble with 'no' is that it is just too negative for you. Nobody wants to sound negative. So, here's the magic...

What if you could transform 'no' from a negative to a positive response? You can. 'No' is positive when it is not a word, but an acronym. N.O. stands for 'Noble Objection'.

When you make a Noble Objection, you decline to do something for a noble reason, because it is not the best use of your time.

There are two criteria for a NO to be noble:

◆ You must decline for a good reason.

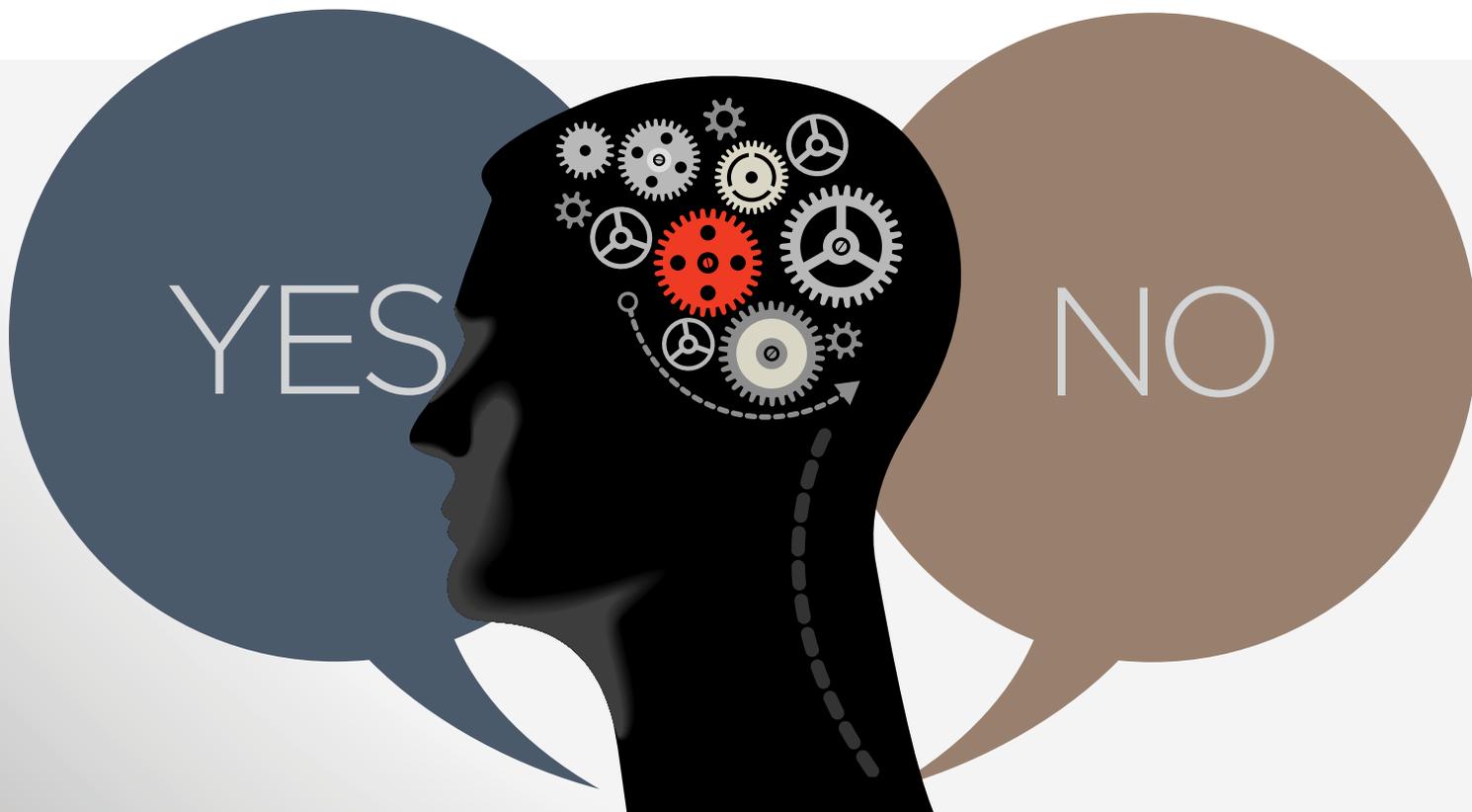
You have too many commitments and are overloaded. You have to make choices.

The better you understand your role and the objectives of your department and organisation, the better placed you are to prioritise. A sound NO is a choice to prioritise other uses of your time that will deliver greater value to your business.

◆ You must decline in a respectful manner.

When I ask you to do something for me, it matters – to me. Any response that fails to respect that and to respect me is not noble: it is petulant, even rude.

'No' is the solution for people who are great at time management



### How to say NO

There are four steps to saying NO.

#### Step 1: Robust choice

Your first response to any request must be to acknowledge it, and to recognise that, no matter how inconvenient the request may seem, the requestor has the right to make it. But you have the right to respond as you choose if it is a genuine request, rather than an instruction or a command. Decide how to respond: 'yes' or 'NO'?

#### Step 2: Confident NO

A confident NO is polite yet firm. You don't need to be defensive, but if you are genuinely sorry that you cannot say 'yes', then say so. Take responsibility for your choice by using 'I': "I am unable to do this" or "I would rather not". If you blame your NO on someone else or on circumstances, you will sound weak and it will not be respectful.

Nothing betrays a lack of confidence as clearly as your body language. Your voice should be firm and steady: neither too loud (defensive) nor too quiet (passive). Speak slowly and stop at the end of your sentence. Look the person in the eye and give a small shake of your head to reinforce the NO. Stand or sit straight, and position your body squarely towards the person you are speaking with.

#### Step 3: Powerful because

One word has a huge power to soften a NO: 'because'. When we hear 'because' it seems to trigger a response in our brain

## FIVE THINGS TO SAY NO TO

### 1. Your 'to don't' list

That list of 'shoulds' that you never get around to doing. You never will: they are the poor relations of the 'musts' that you do with gritted teeth. But feeling guilty about them wastes energy. Mark them 'To don't' and just say "NO".

### 2. Negative thinking

We all have setbacks; it is how you interpret them that matters. Negative thinking is toxic. Say "NO" to: blaming yourself when it isn't your fault (if it is, say sorry and move on); believing there is no way out - there always is; and thinking nothing can change (take action instead).

### 3. Petty thinking

Focus on things that matter. Big people avoid pettiness of all sorts. They turn a blind eye to small failings and direct their attention to the big issues.

### 4. Mindless repetition

What can you automate to make your life simpler and create more space for important and creative things?

### 5. Meaningless distraction

We all need a break, but know the distinction between distraction and relaxation. You need to properly relax and recharge. But letting yourself get distracted from what is important is 'purposeless procrastination'.

that says: "Oh, there's a good reason. That's OK then." Experiments by Harvard University psychology professor Ellen Langer and colleagues showed that we are more prepared to grant concessions when a request is accompanied by 'because...' - as long as the concession is not too great. So try saying: "No, I am not able to help you with that, because..."

Of course, your 'because' must give a real reason, not an excuse. Excuses are not respectful and will not win you the trust or respect you want when people read deception in your body language.

#### Step 4: Empowering alternatives

The ultimate approach to softening a NO is to genuinely soften the impact, not just the perception. Do this by making a helpful suggestion for how the other person could get help. When you give a real alternative alongside your NO, you are demonstrating that you really care and that you want to help, by investing the time and effort to put some thought into the other person's needs. ♥



**Dr Mike Clayton** is a business speaker and author of nine books. His latest, *The Yes/No Book*, was published in October 2012 by Pearson. Find out more at: [www.mikeclayton.co.uk](http://www.mikeclayton.co.uk)