

# The hardest word

IN LIFE AND BUSINESS WE OFTEN SAY YES WHEN WE'D RATHER SAY NO. CHRIS MERRINGTON EXPLAINS THE BENEFITS AND SHARES SOME STRATEGIES ON HOW TO SAY NO WHEN APPROPRIATE

➤ You are sitting in a restaurant and the waiter or waitress asks “is everything all right?” Even if things aren't all right, many of us will say that they are, and then turn to our dining companion to explain what it is that we're not happy about – be it the food or the service. Why do we do that? Why didn't we tell the truth to the waiter? Is it because we can't be bothered, we're avoiding confrontation or is it perhaps because we don't want to embarrass ourselves or our companion?

In my workshops with senior teams I find many individuals are people pleasers. It's as if we are wired to always say yes. We may have been conditioned from an early age that saying no is rude, unfriendly or unhelpful. Yet our ability to say no is a critical part of being assertive, as well as essential to effective negotiating and simply leading an assertive life and career. Many of us feel guilty saying no. We need to bear in mind that saying no doesn't make us a bad person. Sometimes we need to prioritise our needs over others. It's not that we are being selfish.

Of course, there are some people who will use tactics

to make it really hard for us to say no so that we end up saying yes to them. Examples of such tactics include whining, bullying, guilt and compliments. History is littered with the results of these tactics. However, as financier Warren Buffett said: “What we learn from history is that people don't learn from history.”

What's the problem with always answering yes? The danger is it will set a precedent. If it's something we don't want to do, because we've said yes, it's likely we end up doing it begrudgingly. Saying yes to everything tends to reduce other people's respect for us. Once they think you're a pushover, the very real danger is that they will always think of you that way. When you do say no, often there is a power shift towards you. How much is your 'yes' costing you?

We shouldn't underestimate the importance of this skill. There are times when we

need to say no to ensure our businesses adhere to ethical or professional guidelines. The ability to say no to something that looks like a business opportunity, but in fact leaves us exposed from a corporate governance perspective, could hardly be more important.

## Mindset and confidence

Dove, the toiletries brand, produced a film on YouTube where it labelled two adjacent doors into a department store. One sign said 'Average', the other said 'Beautiful'. In the film, some people are very clear about which to use, others pause and can't decide. I wonder if this is about our how we see ourselves, or perhaps our concerns about how others see us. How we see ourselves is a fundamental part of our mindset and confidence. The right mindset in business is vital. Confidence is vital in business. Which door would you go through?

Surely we all have the power to say no? If a customer

is trying to drive your price down, do you hold your price, do you drop your price or do you propose another solution? No ifs, no buts: if the customer doesn't have the budget, then offer a lower priced alternative, or take out some value. As if by magic, the customer often finds the extra money.

Sometimes, a client will walk away. There's always that risk. That's business and we need to be prepared to lose on occasion. Not all clients will be able to afford our price and we shouldn't try to appeal to everyone or go for the lowest common denominator. Marks & Spencer shouldn't try to appeal to Lidl or Aldi customers. Which are you in your marketplace? There is no right or wrong – it's about knowing who your customers are. Your price needs to reflect your worth or your value.

Here are seven tips to help you become more comfortable saying no:

1. If no is the appropriate answer, say it assertively in a clear and direct voice. Stay calm. Be assertive with the right body language and say it without apology, please. Explain why if it's appropriate. Give alternatives if relevant.

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- the reputation of what you're brilliant at.
5. Providing different options can be a great strategy. Giving gold, silver, bronze options are psychologically powerful. The person you're dealing with then ends up weighing up 'which' rather than 'whether'. If two bottles of wine are offered, typically around two-thirds of us choose the cheapest one. If another, higher-priced, bottle is introduced into the mix, roughly two-thirds will choose the middle-priced option. That's not about the wine, but the context.
  6. Next time colleagues or clients ask you to do something you aren't happy about, give them a positive no: "I can't do that, but I can do this." A positive no is collaborative and cooperative, while you also avoid doing something you don't want to do. For example, "I can't do it for tomorrow due to a heavy workload, but I can do it for next week."
  7. Qualify opportunities hard and fast. Beware of being sucked into (or should that be 'suckered into?') opportunities. After the first, or at worst, second meeting with a new prospect, explain to the client or prospect there is now a development fee going forward. Do not give away too much free consultancy, product or service. A taster only.

In short, don't assume that once you say yes to something, all will be well. The business of business is business. Commercial realism needs to be second nature – as does your professionalism. So next time you find yourself about to say yes when you really want to say no, be brave, be courageous and be prepared for what may happen next. 🍀

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Anticipate what the other party might say and plan your response in advance. You could also pre-empt their response and head it off beforehand.

2. Ensure you have the right relationship with the people you deal with, including clients and customers. You need a peer-to-peer relationship based on respect, not a buyer-supplier relationship, which is transactional.

Saying no can be very hard in emotional or personal relationships, such as in the case of a parent saying no to their child. Sometimes, however, we need to exercise 'tough love'. We say no, because doing so is the right thing to do long term – as opposed to saying yes in the interests of securing a quiet life.

3. Follow your instincts if you believe saying yes to a request might compromise

you or your business from an ethical, legal or professional standpoint.

4. Have the right mindset based on confidence and knowing what you provide is excellent. Be clear what's in your sweet spot and what isn't. Concentrate on what you'll be brilliant at, not what you'll be average at. One danger of taking on work or saying yes outside our sweet spot is that you may even compromise

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