

**From:** Andy from Eisenhower andy@eisenhower.me  
**Subject:** Jack of all trades, master of "No"?  
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**To:** Heather heather.decker0707@gmail.com



Dear Heather,

We tend to say: What's urgent, but less important, delegate (back) to others. And, first and foremost: What's neither urgent nor important, don't do at all.

That's why today's newsletter is about one of the most important productivity skills there is: how to master the art of saying "No" at work.

But how are you supposed to say No, or defend tasks delegated to you in real life when we are expected to be kind and social all the time? Good question!

### **Situations We've All Been in at Work**

*Delegate*, the third quadrant, is for those tasks you could delegate because they are less important to you but still pretty urgent to others. Needless to say, this quadrant is my second favorite right after *Don't Do ...* ;)

But these tasks don't always start on your to-do list. A popular example of a task to be delegated could also be a colleague calling you to ask for urgent help on finishing a report. Instead of giving in right there, you could quickly share all necessary information (like templates or links) with the caller so that they can deal with the matter on their own—this delegates the task "back to the sender."

As I said, my personal favorite is the fourth and last quadrant – *Don't Do* – because it is there to help you sort out things you should not be doing at all.

Sometimes these take the form of individual tasks, but other times they might be habits you've created. Discovering and stopping bad habits is especially tough—like a routine you might have of neglecting your family for another after-work beer or two with your coworkers. This is a habit you should sometimes say no to (even though it might not be easy) so that you can get home quickly to invest your time in helping your kids grow up.

### **Saying No is Tough, but You Have to Do It from Time to Time**

I'll admit it, most of us don't like to say No. We want to be nice, and we don't want to jeopardize our relationships. While saying Yes seems like an easier answer, it's rarely the best one to live with all the time.

And saying No is okay, sometimes even totally fine with the other person. Don't think you are rude, evil or that the other person will have bad feelings. Often such fears are irrational or unfounded. Besides, if the person doesn't understand a reasonable No, maybe they are not a person you want to spend much of your life with anyway.

Still uneasy? Let me assure you, most of the times I said No, nothing bad happened. People around the world experience this every day. In my case, the other person was sometimes even happy that I was so upfront. Many times the relationship became stronger from it, and I gained respect for being able to set a clear boundary.

### **Tactics to Try When Being Approached by Others**

When contacted by others with their priorities, start by showing some empathy: "I totally feel you. I would love to help you, but ..." Then try picking out of the responses below and just keep the following rules in mind:

1. Don't rush into responding, but first, consider the consequences of giving in versus the benefits of refusal - both professionally and personally.
2. Don't let the other person wait too long for a No or the social obligation will grow too quickly while the other person is relying on you to give in and might run into serious problems without alternatives if you eventually don't.
3. Don't let the other person talk or charm you into something, it's best to make a No decision before sharing it with the other person and stick to it no matter what. Sometimes remembering your alternative task or scenario that is in danger of being pushed aside and putting the newly offered task in relation to your vision and Why might make you stronger.
4. Keep your response brief, to the point, and avoid too many details that the other side could question.
5. Don't ever start arguing when the other person questions your reasons, but rather stay with your initial decision—repeat your reasons and decision if you need to, then end the conversation.
6. In some instances where no explanation is absolutely required, it may be better not to share one.

### **How I Gained Back Control of My Yes and No**

Let me give you a list of things to try when your boss or (more often) a colleague approaches you to dump another task:

### ***Defensive strategies (the usual No)***

- Unavailable to talk: I am in the middle of something right now. Can we talk some other time? (With this you are taking a bet that somebody else will step forward in the meantime.)
- Unavailable for the task: I am definitely unavailable for this due to another important task I need to finish by the end of tomorrow.
- Schedule conflict: It's very kind that you thought of me, but my schedule is completely booked today.
- Professional conflict: I wish I could, but Martin told me not to start anything else before I finish this.
- Personal conflict: I am flattered that you approached me, but I am unable to take this on because I have agreed to pick up the kids today.
- Value conflict: I am very sorry, but I have chosen not to work on any client opportunity in this industry.
- Decision already made: I know I am disappointing you, but I've already decided not to volunteer this time because I feel I'll end up with too little time for my personal priorities.
- Done that already: I really enjoyed helping you in the past, but I can't make it this time. This week is already too packed.
- No response at all: Sometimes, no response, especially with e-mails, is also interpreted as a No (even if that might not always be feasible and is definitely not a long-term strategy).

### ***Offensive strategies (the unexpected No)***

- Redirect to sender: Have you seen this information over here? I recommend you try it yourself, it is really easy!
- Redirect to others: I think Sue did something very similar in the past. Have you asked her already?
- Change the game: I really don't want to do that, but thank you so much. Why don't we work together on that other project instead?
- Change the playing field: I haven't yet thought about that yet, but now that you're approaching me with this, it's given me the chance to try an entirely different approach I've had in mind, independent from your idea, on my own instead. Thank you for triggering this thought in me!
- Diving station: Temporarily or permanently make yourself less visible or accessible by reducing the number of channels people can reach you through (e.g. a muted phone without mailbox vs. always answering the phone; a longer contact form with mandatory fields vs. an e-mail shared publicly).

### ***Conditional yes (a qualified Yes if nothing else works)***

- Postpone to think through: Can you give me the chance to think this through and get back to you on my final decision?
- Postpone to date: If you are able to give me until the day after tomorrow instead, I'll surely be able to help. (This could also be a rather unrealistic deadline that will unlikely work.)
- Reprioritization: That is really interesting, but I am currently working on this other 1st priority assignment. Do you want me to drop that project and re-prioritize right now?
- Threshold: If you get the commitment from Amy, Jim and Tony, I will be happy to help as well.
- Postpone to next time: Not this time, but next time you ask me I will definitely consider helping if there is any chance to support you! (Be careful about locking in commitments for your future self, though. Sometimes a "Maybe next time" is enough.)

Tip: Be respectful. Often it is more how you say it rather than the act of saying No. Also, try saying No either in person or over the phone. The empathy and potential willingness that you express through your tone of voice and gestures cannot be read and can potentially even be misinterpreted in an e-mail.

### ***It's Only Your Life as Long as You Are Living by Your Own Priorities***

The well-known entrepreneur, Derek Sivers once said: "It's either a Hell Yeah, or it's a No." Say Yes to less, train yourself to say No more often and start simplifying and streamlining your life today.

On the other side of the spectrum, by saying No, you're actually saying Yes to other things that are of vital importance to you, that you cherish or that really bring you forward in life. As the late Steve Jobs once said: "Focus is about saying no." Keep that in mind on your way to becoming a focused, productive as well as happy person.

Good luck in training and all the best,  
Andy from Eisenhower

PS: If you are more looking for more ways to say No in your personal life and are into reading, I can recommend taking a look at the book [Boundaries by Henry Cloud and John Townsend](#).

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