

HOW TO SAY “NO”

At the end of the day, it's about how you say “no”, rather than the fact you're saying no, that affects the outcome. After all, you have your own priorities and needs, just like everyone has his/her own needs. Saying no is about respecting and valuing your time and space. Say no is your prerogative. Learn to say no to requests that don't meet your needs, and once you do that you'll find how easy it actually is. You'll get more time for yourself, your work and things that are most important to you.

Be mindful of persuasion techniques that people often use when making a request. Common ones include:

Reciprocity. People often give you something before making a request. This is because they know about the psychological tendency to want to reciprocate.

Making two requests. When people request for something and you say no, they increase the odds that when they ask for something else (usually something smaller), you'll say yes. “Well, if you come with me today, could you at least come tomorrow?”

Reasons why people find it hard to say no:

You want to help. You are a kind soul at heart. You don't want to turn the person away and you want to help where possible, even if it may eat into your time.

Afraid of being rude. I was brought up under the notion that saying “No”, especially to people who are more senior, is rude. This thinking is common in Asia culture, where face-saving is important. Face-saving means not making others look bad.

Wanting to be agreeable or be accepted. You don't want to alienate yourself from the group because you're not in agreement. So you confirm to others' requests.

Fear of conflict. You are afraid the person might be angry if you reject him/her. This might lead to an ugly confrontation. Even if there isn't, there might be dissent created which might lead to negative consequences in the future.

Fear of lost opportunities. Perhaps you are worried saying no means closing doors. For example, one of my clients' wife was asked to transfer to another department in her company. Since she liked her team, she didn't want to shift. However, she didn't want to say no as she felt it would affect her promotion opportunities in the future.

Not burning bridges. Some people take “no” as a sign of rejection. It might lead to bridges being burned and relationships severed.

QUESTIONS YO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE SAYING NO

Does this thing need doing at all? Y /N

Am I actually the best person suited to do this? Y / N

Do I have the time to do this? Y /N

Does this add value to me? Y / N

What do I risk? and is this worth the risk? Y / N

How will I feel after doing this? Sad / Happy

How to say no. Use the method that best meets your needs in the situation.

1. “I can’t commit to this as I have other priorities at the moment.”

If you are too busy to engage in the request/offer, this will be applicable. This lets the person know your plate is full at the moment, so he/she should hold off on this as well as future requests. If it makes it easier, you can also share what you’re working on so the person can understand better.

2. “Now’s not a good time as I’m in the middle of something. How about we reconnect at X time?” OR That won’t work for me right now — but I’ll get back to you if anything changes.”

It’s common to get sudden requests for help when you are in the middle of something. You may get phone calls from friends or associates when you are in a meeting or doing important work. This method is a great way to (temporarily) hold off the request. First, you let the person know it’s not a good time as you are doing something. Secondly, you make known your desire to help by suggesting another time (at your convenience). This way, the person doesn’t feel blown off.

3. “I’d love to do this, but ...”

Use this as a gentle way of breaking no to the other party. It’s encouraging as it lets the person know you like the idea (of course, only say this if you do like it) and there’s nothing wrong about it. Their ideas are absolutely great, but you can’t take part due to other reasons such as prior commitments (#1) or different needs (#5).

4. “Let me think about it first and I’ll get back to you.”

This is more like a “Maybe” than a straight out “No”. If you are interested but you don’t want to say ‘yes’ just yet, use this. There are times when new considerations pop in and you want to be certain of the decision before committing yourself. If the person is sincere about the request, he/she will be more than happy to wait a short while. Specify a date / time-range (say, in 1-2 weeks) where the person can expect a reply. If you’re not interested in what the person has to offer at all, don’t lead him/her on. Use methods #5, #6 or #7 which are definitive.

5. I really appreciate you thinking of me, but I’ve just got too much on my plate right now or This doesn’t meet my needs now but I’ll be sure to keep you in mind.

If someone is pitching a deal/opportunity which isn’t what you are looking for, let him/her know straight-out that it doesn’t meet your needs. Otherwise, the discussion can drag on longer than it should. It helps as the person know it’s nothing wrong about what he/she is offering, but that you are looking for something else. At the same time, by saying you’ll keep him/her in mind, it signals you are open to future opportunities.

6. “I’m not the best person to help on this. Why don’t you try X?”

If you are being asked for help in something which you (i) can’t contribute much to (ii) don’t have resources to help, let it be known they are looking at the wrong person. If possible, refer them to a lead they can follow-up on – whether it’s someone you know, someone who might know someone else, or even a department. You can offer an alternate contact so the person doesn’t end up in a dead end. This way you help steer the person in the right place.

7. “No, I can’t.”

The simplest and most direct way to say no. We build up too many barriers in our mind to saying no, these barriers are self-created and they are not true at all. Don’t think so much about saying no and just say it outright. You’ll be surprised when the reception isn’t half as bad as what you imagined it to be.