

Saying “No” at workplace: Is it a strategic skill or art?

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Abstract

The capacity to say “No” in the right time is challenging aspect of professional life but definitely a survival skill. This skill helps to uphold consistent focus, define boundaries and overburden. The implied expectation to be agreeable and accommodative for all official work, would adversely impact the work life balance. To balance the onerous work pressure, it is important to acquire the skill of saying “No” without hampering the professional growth and relationships. This article analysis the nuances of “No” and its impact in workplace as well as better approach to state the same. The multifaceted features of saying “No” at workplace will be explored in this article.

Keywords

Communication, Assertive Communication, Art of Saying “No”, Soft Skills, Communication skills

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1. Introduction

The ability to say “NO” without burning bridges is a skill. Though it is often overlooked but it is very important to refuse without being rude, disrespectful and putting the counterpart down. This issue is not just limited to the leadership roles but also the common employees. Declining requests, rejecting offers as well as setting boundaries requires emotional intelligence and strategic approach.

It is a vital skill and art that an individuals should possess both at international and national level. The individuals should be able say NO assertively without feeling guilty and building negative image. The individual should overcome from the cocoon of people pleasing and fear of rejection that is associated with saying NO. If they fail to do so, then it would be difficult to establish boundaries and maintain balance in life.

Saying “No” should be a strategic move and before saying this the request or expectation should be assessed if its within the bandwidth, explore alternative, maintain transparency and frame sentence in a positive tone. Communicating “No” is uncomfortable irrespective nature of the person, hence to make up the mind the communicator should reframe perspective. The person should understand that setting boundaries is important to enhance quality, uphold self-respect and set boundaries. It is to be considered as a part of professional development.

2. Communicating “NO” at Leadership level

At leadership level, NO is an unavoidable word. Leaders are often mandated to say “NO” either to their employees, stakeholders, team members, vendors or clients. This is required as it protects them from over commitment and setting unrealistic expectations. “No” is not all about rejection but it is also about establishing priorities.

It is important for a leader to say No, as it protects their time, resources and also set boundaries. This ability enables the leaders to take strategic decisions without making any false commitments or assurances. Leaders are to be cautious while saying No. they should be assertive while doing so.

The key points to be considered by individuals at leadership level while saying NO at leadership level, no should be masked as redirection rather than that of rejection. It should be showcased as an opportunity to focus and clarity. Showcase empathy but no guilt. This marks boundary, parallelly acknowledging the efforts. Leverage the communication as a strategic discussion for future course of action. This ensure that the leader and team member are aligned in the same page.

At leadership, there is a constant pressure to accommodate all requests hence the ability to say no is significant. Declining requests should be done effectively which should quick freeze organizational efficiency and set priorities. Some tact ways of communicating “No” by leaders are:

- 2.1. “While this idea has merit, it doesn’t align with our current strategic focus.”
- 2.2. “Let’s revisit it later.”
- 2.3. “I appreciate your enthusiasm, but we need to relocate resources differently for now.”

3. Communicating “NO” at Employee level

Employees are always hesitant to NO. It would not be wrong to state that it is the last word in the vocabulary that they would like to use. This is because an employee doesn’t want to lower or disturb the expectation of leadership and colleagues. The employee constantly strives to leave a good impression. In addition to these psychological factors, employee is associated with a fear of being appearing or labeled as incompetent. An employee who is comparable of saying NO will have a balanced work plate.

The key points to be considered by individuals who are at employee level while saying NO are focusing on sentence framing. Showcasing that rejection is personal but it is prioritization of capacity. It is to be considered that the key is not to No to anything but knowing when and how to say No.

While framing sentence, focus on your current professional commitments and emphasize on the fact that you are in favor of employer. For example, convey that you are not refusing the task or evading responding but the rejection is for the schedule. Draw clear boundaries and

understand what is inclusive in the scope of work. Suggest alternatives instead of doing fake promises.

Some examples of conveying “No” is:

- 3.1. “I believe that this decision should flow through the leadership level as it is outside my scope. Could you please connect with my reporting authority for the same?”
- 3.2. “I am concerned that I may not meet your expectations, if I take up this assignment along with my current deliverable. Would you be comfortable if we revisit the schedule?”
- 3.3. “I would love to take up this but I am currently at full capacity with other priority deliverables and I want to ensure to give positive outcome. Hence in the interest of final output is it feasible to de-prioritize or delegate this?”

4. Communicating “NO” to Clients

NO is not about shutting the doors but Definity is about the opening the right ones. Communicate NO, as a gentle pushback. Working for a YES under pressure or hesitance of saying No will break trust and credibility. If communicated in correct tone and promptly, it will highlight integrity and dedication. The client will have a long-lasting impression that the service provider upholds those values and does right thing in right way.

The key points to be considered by individuals while saying NO to clients are to be prompt, respectful and clear. This will aid to define a border, Justify the rejection. Explain it is in the best interest of the project and lay the focus on goals and objectives and say that it is a realignment.

Employees are placed to respond to unreasonable client demands, out of scope works, overburden, high expectations, last minute changes or requests or deliverables and other critical situations.

The sentences that could be framed are:

- 4.1. “While we are not having bandwidth to implement this feature now, we can consider it in next phase.”

4.2. “Due to existing commitments, can we propose an alternate schedule.”

4.3. “We apologize for the inconvenience caused, as this is against our compliance.”

5. Communicating “NO” to Vendors/Service Providers

Communicating NO to vendors/service providers is an important professional competency. The communication here requires diplomacy and the capacity to handle the pushbacks for the vendors/service providers.

The key points to be considered by individuals while saying NO to clients is to communicate timely and respectfully. It ensures that the vendor/service provider from unnecessarily investing in the project, provide feedback or strategic context so that vendor/service provider feels valued. It also builds transparency between parties and defines boundaries so that professional relationship remains unhampered. The communicate “No” without hampering relationship requires awareness of negotiation techniques, empathy and clarity.

Sample phrases that can used to communicate “No” to vendor are:

- 5.1. “After careful review, due to budget constraints we will not be able to avail your services this quarter.”
- 5.2. “Thank you for sharing the proposal. As of now, this doesn’t align with our current needs but will be prioritized for upcoming projects.”
- 5.3. “We understand market challenges, but due to internal cost controls, we will not be able to approve the change.”

6. The art of saying NO

Communicating NO is an art. A straight forward or blunt rejection would burn bridges. A well phrased sentence can protect the relationship and protect the damage they could be caused. While saying, NO the speaker should focus on the vocabulary and tone. The sentence should be imbued with empathy. It should convey acknowledgment and willingness parallelly stating limitations. The sentence should be ended with BATNA (Best Alternatives Available).

While saying NO, the speaker should be mindful of the tone and pitch. At times though, the speaker is not rude the tone and pitch give an impression that he is being rude. Hence irrespective of fact if it is written or verbal rejection, be mindful about the tone and the vocabulary that is used. This will ensure that the receiver would take this NO in a positive spirit and the relationship will not be hampered.

Facial expression is a challenging task. In this remote world everything is happening over the calls and even if is video call there are chances that camera may be switched off. This would put both the speaker and receiver in a difficult situation as they will not be express as well as receive emotions clearly. Hence it is always advised to communicate “NO” in person or if its online with Camera on. This helps emotions to flow with ease and negates the chances of misunderstanding.

Fear associated with conveying “No” has different contributors, it could be societal pressure, expectations, people pleasing mindset, conflict avoidance and others.

7. The Skill of saying NO

When the answer is a NO, it has to be communicated clearly either from the leader or employee or team member or for that fact from anyone.

7.1. Clarity

“Let me try”, “Let me think”, “Lets address this later” and other ambiguous statements should be avoided. This creates a situation of dilemma and uncertainty both for the speaker and receiver. Sentences like this are often said so that the speaker is in the good books of the listener but however it sets unrealistic expectations and increases a complexity of the situation. Hence a clear No is better than unclear statements.

7.2. Timings

A stich in time saves nine. A No at a wrong timing would create a lot of chaos. Hence it is important to say No well advance in time so that the backup actions can be initiated. When is equally important as to how. A polite refusal well in time/advance would reduce the damage that could be caused.

7.3. Guilty Feeling

It is human tendency to feel guilty after saying No. waves of thoughts flow in mind after saying NO.

What if he thinks I am rude?

What if they seek revenge against me and tomorrow when I need, they say no?

What if my promotion is halted or pushed back because of this?

What if they give a bad review?

I should have said No but I should have pushed myself harder and do it and many more.

There are no reasons to feel guilty about saying no, if the intentions were honest and prompt. It better to leave things or delegate tasks so that they achieve their objective without creating any mess.

7.4. Emotional Intelligence

Either personal life or professional life, emotional intelligence is very important. Irrespective of the role played or position held, an individual should under his/her strength and limitations. At times, humans get carried away by emotions. To quote an example, parents would never NO to the demand of the children, they opine that its their responsibility to fulfil wishes of their children similarly employees never want to say No to their leaders as they feel that it is not the right things to do.

7.5. Decision Making

Decision making plays a crucial role especially when you in the process of aligning your priorities. It helps individual to communicate “No” with clarity and confidence. Decision making helps to align with the deadlines and/or milestones. Value based judgment has a great significance in workplace as actions cannot be undone. The skill of decision making would help in the same.

7.6. Self-awareness

It allows individual to understand their limits, priorities, strength and weakness. Self-Awareness helps to identify the conflict with that of time, work ethics, professionalism, health limitations and other factors. This helps alignment with long term goals and

values. Self-awareness has the power to color “No” as an empowering act and effective communication.

8. Psychological theories

The behavioral phenomenon of discomfort and inability to communicate No, has been studied by analyzing various psychological theories. It is been derived from Solomon Asch’s experiments that personal judgement of internal disagreement will be suppressed by people and out of fear of social rejection they end up saying yes². Milgram in his research showcased that people hesitate to say no due to social pressure³.

Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis in Cognitive Behavioral Theory stated that people pleasing tendencies result in blaming oneself and failing to acknowledge one’s own need.⁴ Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in their theory Self-determination Theory stated that the constant pressure to say yes impacts the mental health and overall well-being of individual⁵. Daniel Goleman opines that saying no requires emotional maturity and it helps to build healthy boundaries in relationships⁶.

9. Conclusion

“NO” is the most powerful and dangerous word in the history of mankind. There are many people who doesn’t prefer a NO in an answer. It is tricky to deal with people like them. There the speaker should apply the ART and SKILL of telling NO.

To sum up the following factors should be considered when communicating NO:

9.1. Time and Approach

Decision should be communicated proactively. When the answer is NO, do not keep silence and expect the other person to understand the same. It is important to

² Solomon E. Asch, Opinions and Social Pressure, 193(5) Sci. Am. 31 (1955)

³ Stanley Milgram, Behavioral Study of Obedience, 67(4) J. Abnorm. Psychol. 371 (1963)

⁴ Judith S. Beck, Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Basics and Beyond 78–85 (3d ed. 2020)

⁵ Edward L. Deci & Richard M. Ryan, Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior 31–39 (1985)

⁶ Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence 254–263 (1995)

communicate NO, as ghosting is not an advisable approach at workplace. It closes the door for future opportunities. It is important to communicate NO at right time and at right approach.

9.2. Sandwich Method

The sandwich method of communicating “No” is a strategic move wherein the refusal is placed between two positive or affirmative sentences. It showcases the willingness to take up task but also inability to do so. Acknowledge the request with a appreciation note, followed by communicate No with a brief reason and suggest alternative solution.

9.3. Focus on vocabulary

Ensure you use the correct words and focus on framing sentences so that the interpretation is clear and concise.

9.4. Clarity

Be precise and clear. The statement made should not be ambiguous but be specific and straight forward.

9.5. Justification

Justify the reason of “NO”. This will leave an impression that the statement was not just merely made but is done after due analysis and consideration. Providing a justification helps the receiver to stand with you in your decision and also provides an opportunity for him to stand in your shoes or perspective.

9.6. Suggest plans/alternatives

Always don't end the sentence with a NO, but rather suggest alternatives that you deem fit. These facilitates the receiver to take future decisions and also leaves an impression that you care about them or work. This helps in protecting the relationship from being tampered or existence of cold war.

9.7. Emotional intelligence

Understand your speaker and also the situation he is in. this way you can communicate better. It would help you to frame sentence in the way the other person would like to hear it and hence will aid in relationship building.

To conclude, saying “NO” is a daunting task at workplace. Setting limits and boundaries is very crucial as it avoids the burnout that is caused due to over burden, stress and exhaustion. It is the duty of the both communicator and receiver to consider refusal as not as denial and accept it with a positive spirit as a gateway to the well-balanced professional relationship.

