

The Gentle Art of Saying “No” At Work

Your supervisor just assigned a new project to you and you can't imagine how you'll get it done. Your Chair has asked you to teach another course, but you're already loaded with commitments. A colleague wants you to finish a project while they're on vacation, but the work is out of your area of expertise. Your friend has asked to borrow your car, but you're afraid of it being damaged. Is it permissible to say “no” at Cornell, at home, to family, to friends? Yes.

It can be difficult to say “no,” but it's a critical skill if you are to protect your own priorities, time, and even your mental wellbeing. Saying “no” does **not** mean you're rejecting the other person; it means that you're turning down a specific request that the person is making of your time and energy.

Before saying “no” to a supervisor or colleague at work, ask yourself some practical questions:

- Am I already working on several important assignments that leave no time for this one?
- Can I delegate some of my other work to make room for this assignment?
- Can I put some of my other assignments on the back burner while I work on this one?
- Will taking on this assignment cause harm to my other work?
- Do I lack the skills or information necessary to complete this assignment?
- Am I the best person to successfully complete this assignment?

If it seems that you may not be the right person for the job, or if the timing is just not right, then consider proceeding with a conversation in which you will communicate a gentle “no,” along with a persuasive, non-threatening rationale for your position.

The inappropriate “no”

It's important to distinguish appropriate vs. inappropriate times of saying “no.” Saying “no” for the sake and principle is probably not a good idea. Impulsively saying “no” when you're in a bad mood is also not the best move. When you're new on the job you should wait until you build relationships and learn the ropes before deciding to say “no.”

Here are inappropriate (or troublesome) “no” statements:

- “The project looks too difficult.”
- “I'm in the middle of planning my wedding and can't focus on anything right now.”
- “I can't be bothered.”



- “I’ve done enough for you already.”
- “No one else on the team is asked to do as much as I’m asked to do.”

As you consider saying “no,” honor and know yourself

- Value your time. Know your commitments, and how valuable your time is. Then, when someone asks you to dedicate some of your time to a new commitment, you’ll have a better sense of whether or not you can do it. Consider saying, “I just can’t right now ... my plate is overloaded.”
- Know your priorities. Even if you do have some extra time (which for many of us is rare), is this new commitment really the way you want to spend that time?
- Limits to “working” smarter. For many of us, the demands on our time are ever increasing. Working “smarter” and more efficiently will help, but may not totally solve the problem. You may need to accept the fact that you cannot do it all anymore. Thus, learning to say “no” becomes even more crucial.

The gentle art of saying “no”

There are many ways you can say “no” in a gentle, respectful, and courteous manner. Remember that being respectful does not mean that you need to explain in detail why you are saying “no”. Keeping your “no” brief, polite, and fairly general usually works best. Personal and social situations may require different approaches than work situations; here are some suggestions on how to do well at saying “no:”

- Practice saying “no.” Practice makes repetition. Also, repeating your “no” may be necessary to get a message through to extremely persistent people.
- Don’t apologize. A common way to start out is “I’m sorry but ...” as people think it sounds more polite. While politeness is important, apologizing just makes it sound like you are at fault. You don’t need to be apologetic about guarding your time.
- Be nice to yourself. Being nice by saying yes all the time only hurts you. When you make it easy for people to grab your time, they will likely continue to do so. But if you set limits, they will learn. Show them your time is well-guarded.
- Pre-empting. It’s often much easier to pre-empt requests than to say “no” to them after the request has been made. If you can forecast requests, like a friend asks you to watch pets every summer while he/she is on vacation, consider mentioning your unavailability (your “no”), in the spring.
- Get back to you. Instead of providing an immediate answer, say you’ll give their request some thought and get back to them. This will allow you time to evaluate and to check your commitments and priorities. If you can’t take on the request, simply tell them: “After giving this some thought, and checking my commitments, I won’t be able to accommodate the request at this time.”
- Maybe later. If this is an option that you’d like to keep open, instead of just shutting the door on the conversation, it’s often better to just say, “This sounds like an interesting opportunity, but I just don’t have the time at the moment. Please check back with me in [give a time frame].” Next time, when they check back with you, you might have some free time on your hands.



Here are some stand-alone statements you can use:

- ✓ The pleasant “no:” “Sue, I really appreciate your offer to help me out, but I’m going to have to say ‘no.’ Thanks - I appreciate your offer.”
- ✓ The let-me-get-back-to-you “no:” “Josh, let me check my schedule and I’ll get back to you. How about if I let you know by tomorrow afternoon?”
- ✓ The reflecting “no:” “I know you were hoping we’d be able to work on this together on the weekend. That isn’t going to work for me though, so I need to say “no.”
- ✓ The reasoned “no:” “I can’t stay late Thursday because I have family obligations that evening.” (This gives a **brief** reason why you can’t accept)
- ✓ The direct “no:” “No thank you.”
- ✓ The broken record “no:” “No, I’m sorry I won’t be able to travel out of town that week.” (Calmly and firmly keep repeating yourself in the face of repeated requests)
- ✓ The alternative-idea “no:” “I’m sorry I’m not free to meet in an hour, but I am free later today; can we meet?”

Seeking help

Being unable to say “no” and, therefore, not establishing clear boundaries at work, and home, can leave you overburdened, fatigued, and feeling as though you’re being taken advantage of. No one wants to burn out. If you identify a need for help in this area then take advantage of FSAP’s experience and professional expertise in teaching others how to best set limits and safeguard their time and energy. FSAP can be reached at 255-2673, 8:30-5:00, Monday through Friday.

Hours:

In-person consultation	
Monday-Friday	8:30 am-5:00 pm
24/7 phone consultation	607-255-2673

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