

A better way to say 'no' involves saying 'yes'

It's a monosyllabic sentence packing power like few others. For romance language speakers, it's nearly universal, from Paris to Paraguay. Maybe it was the first thing you ever said.

All hail the power, the glory, of "no."

The thing about no is, the older we get, the more loaded the word becomes and the more complicated its use. "No" from a 2-year-old is pure and clear. It means what it says, and rarely gets any further explanation. Whether it stands as final is, of course, up to those with more mileage on the odometer.

Fast forward 25 or so years and layer in the complexity of business relationships. Eager-to-please career climbers can fast fall into the habit of never saying "no," virtually exorcizing the word from their vocabulary, seeking to accommodate at all costs. Those in client-focused, service-oriented businesses are among guiltiest parties. I know, because I'm a serial offender.

On the other side are the Corporate Captains of No. Think of that colleague, that department, vendor or so-called partner always good for a "no" before you even finish asking, no matter what you're asking. Regardless of reason — razor-thin resources, philosophical differences, plain old sloth — legitimate or not, real or imagined, no one wins when "no" becomes the default.

Knowing when to say "no" takes something else first: knowing what you are for. Gain certainty and clarity of your affirmative position, and articulating the reasons against something becomes easier and more persuasive.

If posed with a yes-or-no question for which you don't have a clear position, or need more facts to properly evaluate, "let me think that over" is a refreshingly candid, entirely appropriate rejoinder in situations not requiring an immediate response.

Too often, "no" is our pre-programmed response to the unknown or discomfiting. Taking a self-prescribed time out can be good medicine.

If step one is about knowing when, the second step is knowing how to say it.

This is situation-dependent territory.

Sometimes, for maximum power, "no" simply must stand alone, without further explanation. Picture the parent who turns down their recently licensed son's request to drive late at night alone. Mom and Dad give a stern "no" after having clearly, patiently and lovingly explained why the answer was "no" the

first 15 times, and the milestones to meet before a "yes" is given. The long-running "no-means-no" date rape awareness and prevention campaign also comes to mind, arming generations of women with means to stem action though a crystal clear verbal command.



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The flat "no" can be appropriate in business situations, too, either stemming from pure authority, and/or when privileged or otherwise sensitive information is involved. In such situations, mistakes are too easily made trying to finesse an explanation, just to make someone feel OK. The net effect can be to sow confusion or spread disinformation.

But I think the majority of situations do require engaging beyond "no" — and the best way is by not saying the word at all. Rather, say "yes" to something different, in a way that doesn't sound like denial. "That's an interesting idea, and I'm so glad you brought it up. Let's look at it this way for a second," and similar bridges, can be all it takes to master the technique.

Rather than "no, because," try moving to a "yes, and" posture, where the "and" may be something quite different. The "yes" affirms the validity of the other party's opinion or request; the "and" presents your way of thinking about or accommodating it. Having a valid, well-reasoned affirmative position comes into play here.

And try hard not to personalize things. Say "no" to the request, not to the person, nor to the opinions or feelings they hold.

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