

Trending...

How To Say “No” At Work Without Hurting Your Career



By Cynthia Jaggi

You know that feeling you get after someone asks you to add just one more thing to your already-full plate? It can be difficult to say “no” when you’re passionate about your work and want to be a team player. You see each project’s potential to achieve your organization’s mission, as well as how the ask in question may benefit your own career trajectory.

But the reality is that we can only do so much. So, how do you say “no” in a way that doesn’t hurt your career or make you feel guilty? How do you know for sure which requests to say “no” to in the first place? Here are some tips to help you navigate those tough decisions.

Don’t respond immediately

The first thing to ask yourself when a new request comes in is, “Am I in the best state right now to respond?”

The worst time to make a decision is when you are tired, stressed, in the middle of something else, or perhaps just really excited about the topic—and that’s usually when you’ll be asked!

Even if you are new to an organization or early on in your career, you can gently let the requestor know that you want to think about the best approach and will respond soon; your thoughtfulness will be appreciated. People often think they want an instant “yes,” but if it means rushed or substandard results, they soon realize they’d have preferred a more thoughtful response.

Think through the request

It’s always worth taking 10-15 minutes to figure out if you should be spending weeks, months, or even just a couple of hours on a new request. To help you gain some clarity, go through the following criteria:

Priority fit. What are my top priorities, and how does this request relate to them? If you don’t know what your priorities are, you are not going to know if the new request fits in. Take the time to revisit the most valuable work you do.

Capabilities fit. How does this fit with your skills and expertise? Take into account both your current capabilities and skills you would like to develop.

Long-term benefit. Where will this work lead, both for the organization and for you, in the long term? What impact could it create? What opportunities could it open up?

Scope. It may be that you can help the requester focus on the most important elements and get the benefits by just doing a small part. Ask yourself, “What 20% of the work in this request will produce 80% of the value?”

Resources. This can be a sticky one, as it can be easy to feel like there are no available resources to accomplish a particular task. However, even when there aren’t extra dollars, there often are newer team members—co-workers, interns, or volunteers—who might get a valuable learning experience from taking this task off your hands. Also, try to think through past work as well as available tools, organizations, and online resources that could be used to complete the request more efficiently.

Timing. When does this work need to get done? If it’s really valuable and needs to be completed soon, you may want to say “yes” and highlight the need to take something else off your plate to make room.

Saying “No,” gently

If after going through these criteria you realize that you can’t commit to a new project, don’t send an email. Instead, have a conversation with the requestor, and think of it as a negotiation as well as a discussion of options. To guide you through, keep these points in mind:

Start with your “why.” For example: “I want to do a really good job on [PRE-EXISTING PRIORITY], so I’m thinking that it would be better if I supervised [VOLUNTEER, INTERN, or CO-WORKER] with this new request. It will also allow them to learn the process and offer beneficial experience.” If you are early in your career you could say, “I am focused right now on learning to do [CURRENT TASK] really well, and want to make sure anything I take on doesn’t prevent me from achieving that goal.”

Be a resource to the requestor. Give them new ideas and/or resources as there’s a chance they may not have fully thought through all of the options available. Offer your ideas about the most valuable part of the request, when is the right time for the work to happen, and what resources might make it easier. For example, say something like, “I know you want to get good feedback from staff on [CURRENT TOPIC]. Instead of doing individual interviews, what if we used an online tool to do an initial survey?”

Be clear on what’s not negotiable. If it’s valuable work you’d most likely be happy to be involved, perhaps just in a limited or different way. An offer of partial or joint involvement can help to soften the “no.” Be clear about how you can be involved, and always try to offer alternatives. For example, “Even though I don’t have the capacity to [LEAD THE PROPOSED PROJECT] right now, I’d be happy to review it.” Or, “Let’s have a brainstorming session with [KEY STAKEHOLDERS] and see if we can get this finished together in a shorter time frame.”

It’s important to make the effort to turn down a job or task that isn’t a fit for you, but to still try to be helpful on every request. If you internalize these habits, an amazing thing happens: you not only help others while also ensuring your career is still moving forward.

Read the original article on [Idealist](#)

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