

7 Ways to say “No!” (nicely)

Respecting our schedule is vital but refusing requests can be the hardest soft skill there is.

Without a doubt, truly valuing our time will lead to having to say “no” on certain occasions and while some people are really good at that (possibly to the extreme of needing to learn to say “yes” a little more) the majority of us feel we should stop saying yes quite so easily.



Why We Find It Hard To Say “No”

If we are going to decline some requests, it's worthwhile understanding why we find it hard in the first place. Here are some common reasons:

- 1) We like to be helpful. Because we're a nice person, we don't want to turn the requestor away, even if it's going to cause a drain on our time and pull us away from what we need to do.
- 2) We want to be liked. We don't want to be ostracised by the group we're in because we aren't in agreement so we meekly conform to others' requests.
- 3) We don't like to burn bridges. It is true that some may take “no” as being a sign of rejection but we may exaggerate that fear, feeling it may lead to damaged or severed relationships.
- 4) We don't like conflict. Many times we feel the other person may be angry if we reject them possibly leading to a confrontation. Or even if not, we might be worried that it could have negative effects sometime in the future.
- 5) We don't want to be rude. Many of us were raised with the idea that saying “No”, especially to seniors, is impolite.

If any of these reasons resonate with you, then don't worry ... you're in good company. However, saying no doesn't have to mean that you are being disagreeable or impertinent. It doesn't have to lead to conflict or burning bridges. And it doesn't mean you have to lose future opportunities.

Why We Should Learn To Say “No”

The first key in learning to say “no” is not how, but why. Being conscious of how busy we truly are and aware that we can't do everything that shows up, helps us to see the need to protect our time and only take on the things that will make a difference to our lives. (This links to the goals and values of the Focus Framework). However, assuming we are aware of this, then the key is how to say “no”, rather than the fact that we are saying no.

Learning to say no to propositions or requests that don't meet our requirements is a key skill and less problematic than you'd expect. The benefits of engaging with “No” are more time for the things that matter to us and therefore potentially quite dramatic.

Rather than avoiding conflict, the key is finding the right way to say no, and it's not as hard as you might think.

How to say “No”

Here are a few simple ways. You can't use these every time; saying “no” may simply not be appropriate or even an option. But, when appropriate, vary which one you use to fit your style or the situation.

1. **“I’m in the middle of something so now isn’t a good time. Could we get together at **** (date/time)?”**

Interruptions are part and parcel of life and for many they are steadily increasing. This one is useful when you do want/need to help but the timing is wrong (possibly you are working on something else at the time). It means the person still feels your interest in helping, and allows you to suggest a timescale that is more suitable to you, be that a few hours or even months later.

2. **“I’m unable to commit to this right now as I have other priorities at the moment.”**

If you are busy, this can also let the person know that other requests should also be held off until later. You could let them know what you're working on so that they understand your situation better.

3. **“That sounds like a really good idea, however ...”**

This is a useful approach if you want to let the person feel encouraged that their idea isn't the problem (although only do this if you're being honest). It may be that their proposition isn't fundamentally bad, but it's not in line with our plans, direction and so forth. A variation on this can be really useful when dealing with your manager, where we could say: "I'd be keen to do that, can you help me look at what I can pass to someone else or close so I can make space for it?"

4. **“Let me mull it over and I’ll get back to you by ***** (date/time).”**

Okay, this is not quite a “no”; it's more of a “maybe”. People come to us with great ideas, propositions or requests that we might want to engage with, but rather than feeling rushed into making an on the spot decision, we need time to evaluate it with the larger context of our other plans and commitments. By giving them a timescale (that we stick to) for replying, we are still demonstrating responsibility. Be warned however, if you really aren't interested, don't use this one as you are merely delaying the inevitable and being unfair to the other person. In this case, use one of the following options.

5. **“This doesn’t fit my needs right now, but I’ll keep it in mind.”**

Like option 3, this response helps the person to realise that while their proposition isn't inherently flawed, it doesn't meet your requirements or you are looking for something else. This can save long and unnecessary conversations while keeping the way open to future offers if they are appropriate.

6. **“I’m not the best person to help you with this. Have you tried ***** (person, department or organisation)?”**

It might be that you are being asked to help with something that you either don't have the right expertise or resources needed to provide the appropriate help. Rather than leaving them helpless, help them by giving alternatives. However, if using this approach, make sure the alternative you suggest is valid, not just creating false leads, noise for others or shifting the buck.

7. **“No.”**

We often fear using this option but it's simple and direct. Fear is usually exaggerated in our mind and instead of worrying about it too much, just saying it often works. You'll likely find the response isn't anywhere near as bad as you thought it might be.