



Saying “No” with Finesse

“Will you go out with me?”

“Can you take on your colleague’s year-long project in addition to your work load?”

“Would you lend me \$500?”

“May we move in with you for six months?”

In most work situations, it can be a little hard to say “no” to a supervisor. In personal lives, it can be a little hard to say “no” to family members, spouses, and friends. However, sometimes, it’s fully necessary and reasonable to decline. There are some strategies to make this work of “getting to no” somewhat easier.

A Yes Not Possible?

Before going straight to a refusal, it may help to thoroughly consider the ideas to see if any sort of a “yes” is possible. Can the work be done over time? Is the favor doable in part? If there is any degree of a yes that is possible, it may be good to explore that first. If a partial yes is not

possible, then one has to look at refusing with finesse.

It is possible that a deferral of the decision may ease the current situation. When one comes back to reconsider the question, the situation may have changed to a degree—which may allow a yes. Or, the situation may still indicate the need for a refusal. Or, the request will sometimes have disappeared. The requester may have found another solution.

That said, in many cases, at some point, the question or request does have to be answered directly.

When to Say No

In a work situation, people say “no” when they are unable to actually do the work requested within the limitations of the time or resourcing or staffing. Other commitments may have to take precedence. A “no” may be conditional on some other changes that may enable the work to be done. A “no” may be a political response to a difficult interpersonal situation. A “no” may be absolute as in the fact that the respondent does not see any chance of getting to a workable “yes.”

In personal lives, people say “no” to certain requests because those requests may not be a wise course of action. Or the proposals may go against people’s senses of values. It may be that they are unable to fulfill the request because it is simply not possible.

Nixing Ideas Politely

People often ask for certain work or favors because they consider their ideas promising or beneficial. To be refused, they may feel

offended or hurt. They may feel like their ideas or positions are being disrespected or unacknowledged.

The key to saying “no” with finesse is to do it in a way so that the respondent doesn’t feel disrespected (or feel like he or she has “lost face”). This may mean giving the refusal in private, not in public. This may mean using the appropriate hedging language to qualify the “no.” This may mean offering a counter-proposal that may be more doable than the first proposal. This is a kind of “I can’t, but...” Sometimes, a mitigation like a counter-offer may help soften the veto.

Making the Time and Effort to Explain

It is also important that the person making the request understand the circumstances of the “no,” because with some deeper understanding, it may be easier to accept the refusal. It helps to be candid with the information and not to create false reasons why something cannot be done.

In the refusal, it is important not to mislead the requestor into thinking that there is promise down-the-line if there isn’t. Otherwise, one would be letting others define the parameters of their own work lives.

Some suggest that a light apology may lighten the “no” with a kind of graciousness, but others suggest that an apology is not called for and may lead to future requests that are not able to be fulfilled.

A Life Skill

Saying “no” is an important aspect of the assertiveness needed in daily life—for

personal safety, for healthy social interactions, for satisfying work lives, and for a sense of personal dignity. It is important as a way to manage work load and relationships—to head off unnecessary stressors.



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