

## **THE POSITIVE 'NO!'**

by Carolann Philips

We often find ourselves in situations where we want to refuse someone and yet are unable to do so without fear of offending the other person or risking the relationship. We over commit ourselves and then feel resentment because we are overextended, or we feel regret for not helping others out when they ask. We say 'yes' to others because of our desire to please them. But when we eventually can't fulfill our commitment, we let them down and feel guilty. Saying 'Yes' when we actually want to say 'No' can not only harm our health but also reflect poorly on our work, image and relationships. Saying 'yes' to an unprofitable sale or an overly demanding customer just so that we are perceived as 'nice' is also poor business etiquette.

Etiquette is in essence about building relationships and revolves around two things. Firstly, thoughtful consideration of the interests and feelings of others and secondly, minimizing misunderstandings. Both are dependent upon self conduct. Here are a few suggestions that could help you to say 'no' whilst still keeping your communication with others and your relationships in good shape.

If someone has asked you to do something and you honestly cannot, it is best to say so. Depending on whose offer you are declining, different situations often require a different 'no' but whatever the scenario politely saying 'no' implies not making the other person feel offended, un-welcomed, taken for granted, uncomfortable or even hurt. Refusing

politely without offending anyone can take many forms. Often a terse and abrupt 'No' is considered a personal rejection rather than an answer to a request or a response to a circumstance and so, in most situations adding a simple 'thank you' adds an element of politeness. Be polite, clear and brief. Lengthy explanations or excuses allow scope for debate and may be used to squeeze in a "yes" from you. Avoid sarcasm or humor when declining as it can cause misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Your facial expressions should be calm and pleasant. It is not always necessary to apologize for not being able to do something. However, it is courteous to acknowledge any feelings the other may have about your refusal, perhaps by saying "I know this will be disappointing for you but I won't be able to attend this time." Your tone should be well modulated, sincere, respectful, and conversational.

Saying "no" in the workplace may need more tact and diplomacy. But again, your reasons to refuse should be fully justified. If it is something to do with unreasonable timelines perhaps then you could say, "I don't know how to do this within the constraints we have now. Could you please help me to adjust some priorities?", or, "I could do this. It would require me to delay the reports I'm working on by 3 days, but I could do this." Another polite way is to determine whether there is room for negotiation. For instance, "I can't do this task today. But I could deal with this on Wednesday if that's acceptable." Avoid feeling guilty. There is nothing wrong with standing up for yourself as long as it is genuine and not at the expense of others.

Sometimes however saying 'no' is simply unavoidable. In such cases, tell the person that you agree to their request this time but would like the opportunity to plan better for the next time. If you are often given tasks outside of your job role and it is affecting your performance in key result areas, find a time to discuss it. Try saying, "I'm really keen to complete the design of the customer service program however the inventory reports and mail dispatch takes up a large chunk of my time. I know you are busy too, but is there another way to work this out?"

Saying 'no' honestly and politely and feeling good about it starts from within you. It is also instrumental in building strong working relationships by encouraging compromise and win-win situations. However, don't be a person who never says 'yes' and who is considered argumentative or negative by others. Now that is a topic for another column.

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