

Setting Limits: How to Say “No” Tactfully

By Kathleen Barton, MBA

Do you find yourself doing for others at the expense of yourself? Are you always the one people come to for help? Do you find yourself taking on extra work, helping out at your child’s school, and doing favors for friends? If so, you may be a “people pleaser”. People pleasers are so concerned about pleasing others that they end up constantly doing for others and not taking care of their own needs.

Most of us were taught as children that it was “bad” or “rude” to say “no”. Therefore, as adults we still find it difficult to say “no”, even when asked to take on an impossible workload. Beware of the “Kiss of Yes” – that is, saying “yes, I can do it”, “Yes, I’ll take that on”, “Yes, yes, yes!” By trying to do it all you’ll become overwhelmed. As a result you may not be able to follow through, and then end up disappointing others and feeling resentful.

How can you avoid the “Kiss of Yes”? Realize that you cannot do it all. By always being agreeable, you are agreeing to live with overload and anxiety, and giving up personal or family time. Saying “yes” to somebody else can mean saying “no” to your own needs, goals and priorities. Therefore, you need to know what’s most important to you. You may have a more compelling “yes” that allows you to say “no” to others.

So how can you say “no” tactfully? Here are a couple of approaches for getting to “no” and leaving both sides happy.

The Sandwich Approach – Start out with a positive, decline, and then end on a positive note. For example, when asked to participate on a task force, you might say, “I’m very interested in the project and I’d like to help, but ‘my plate’ is full. Keep me in mind when another opportunity comes up.” This approach sounds more positive than simply saying “no”, and helps maintain the relationship.

Negotiated “No” – Negotiate with the other person to find a solution that meets his or her needs, but doesn’t overload you. You might negotiate the deadline or the scope of the project. For example, you might say, “I can take on this project if you can provide some help” or “I won’t be able to do it until tomorrow, but I could provide you with resources if you need to do it today”. You could even suggest another person who might be better suited for the task. By negotiating, this tells the other person that you’re willing to help, but want to be realistic at the same time.

What if your boss is making the request? You can still negotiate with your boss. Let’s say your boss gives you an assignment that he needs completed by the end of the week. Given your current workload, you know it will require 12-hour work days. Share with your boss what you’re already working on. He may not even be aware of your current workload. Ask for help in deciding where the new task is on the list of priorities, or ask what your boss would allow you to give up in order to complete the new task.

By saying “no” or negotiating with the other person, you’re able to protect yourself from becoming overloaded and overwhelmed. By saying “no” to the less important things, you’re saying “yes” to your most important priorities.

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