

THE ART OF SAYING NO

SAYING 'YES' IS AS IMPORTANT AS KNOWING WHEN TO SAY 'NO'

HOW TO



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WHEN we think of successful people like Steve Jobs or Oprah Winfrey, we imagine an extremely active person who sleeps four hours a day to accomplish 100 things per week.

I lived like this for years. I was that guy who can't say 'no' to every task.

I said "Yes, I will attend" to every meeting at work. I even said 'yes' when a colleague invited me to try out Office Zumba (that didn't work out for me, by the way).

I also said 'yes' to every friend who asked me to review their four-page resume (seriously folks, limit it to two pages please).

Saying 'no' felt like I was passing up an opportunity knocking on my door, and so I always nodded my head. I was your "Yes, man!"

NO, MAN!

The downside was that I was also exhausted and unhappy. Crossing out 10 tasks a day didn't mean I achieved something that I really wanted, or needed.

As I climbed the corporate ladder, I realised that feeling productive is different from being productive. This was the time in my life when I knew that I had to start saying "I'm sorry, but no."

Business icons like Richard Branson and Bill Gates attest to one powerful philosophy behind their success: focus on one big thing, be good at it, and say 'no' to other unnecessary opportunities.

For every mountain they climbed, stood a dozen of opportunities they also declined.

When Steve Jobs commented on what was his one proud achievement in Apple, he said, "I am as proud of what we don't do, as I am with what we do. Deciding what not to do is as important as deciding what to do."

But how do you say 'no' to meetings that you don't think are important? How do you turn down a friend who has been inviting you to run some laps at 4am?

Here are some insights on the power of saying 'no', and some tips on how to graciously decline.

1 DO WHAT DOCTORS DO: TRIAGE

I spend a decent time of my childhood in hospitals because my mom is a nurse. Every New Year's eve, my mom got assigned in the emergency room and left me at the waiting area until her shift ended.

Past dinner time, I would see many blood-stained people rushing for medical help. Some had lost a finger, others a limb. What struck me was that not every patient received care immediately.

"Triage", my mom answered. "We practise triage when doctors and medical equipment cannot manage too many patients."

You may have seen triage showcased in movies about wars, accidents, and calamities. Those severely wounded, but can survive if treated are given first priority, while those who have no chance of surviving at all will unfortunately be attended to later.

I apply triage in life, because life is a battlefield. Every day, we are bombarded with hundreds of stimuli that fight for our attention: a favour asked by a friend, a

funny video on Facebook, a new deadline set by your boss, or that new cute office-mate of yours.

They individually take a few minutes of our day, but can total to hours of consumed time.

While my initial reaction was to respond to everything, I now only choose the ones that will significantly impact my life: what will develop me as a person, what will make me sleep better at night, and what will make more people happy.

Similarly, leaders don't do all the tasks; they delegate these to their team. The rest will be thrown in the bin with no regrets. Just like triage, letting go is painful but necessary so you can move on.

2 REMEMBER THAT EVERY 'NO' EARNS YOU A 'YES' FOR SOMETHING ELSE

In 1993, an employee of Delta Airlines thought that passengers didn't really mind (nor did they eat) the lettuce on their entree that served as base for salad. He suggested taking it out, which of course irritated the guys in the kitchen ("But we've been doing it like this for years!").

The management followed his suggestion. To their surprise, not only did some passengers think that the entree looked cleaner; some didn't even notice the removal at all. Voila! Weeding out the lettuce saved them a whopping USD1.4mil in one year.

In life, I always ask myself what are the pieces of 'lettuce' that I continue to keep – but have to let go – so that I can gain something else.

Before I decline a colleague's meeting, I first ask for his/her agenda and use it to justify why my marketing role may be more crucial for something else.

yes
no
maybe



3 THE JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES IS DEAD IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Whenever my boss assigns me with an extra workload, I manage his expectations about my performance because lesser focus means weaker performance.

"Boss, it is possible to accomplish all these 10 tasks, but I am concerned that this will slow down my pace, or affect my output on this other project."

You are not a washing machine that can clean with the same power even if you add just a few more shirts or towels. So, it is alright to say 'no'.

I remember the award-winning Japanese documentary, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* which demonstrates how the master always defeats the jack-of-all-trades.

Jiro is an 85-year-old sushi maker who owns the most expensive sushi restaurant in the world. When asked by his customers to also serve okonomiyaki or tempura, he politely declines.

His strength is making sushi, and trying to be good at another dish will only weaken the expertise of his cooks and waiters. It will also only increase his costs of operation.

So, don't try to be everything in people's minds. Similarly, don't try to please everyone at work. Ignore the rest, and focus your energy on things that will impact your development.

HERE'S YOUR NEXT CHALLENGE

Saying no is a conscious, rational strategy in life. There is no right or wrong prioritisation, but your decision will determine your success.

You have the right to say 'no', when you think you can't or should not do it.

But don't just say no; be gracious to give

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your reason as well. Most of the time, people will understand it as it is.

Now, I challenge you with one thing: look at your to-do list today and focus on only one or two things that really matter. As for the rest, try singing with me – "Let it go... let it go..."

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