



The Power of No

Skills and Professional Development



“People think focus means saying yes to the thing you’ve got to focus on. But that’s not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully. I’m actually as proud of the things we haven’t done as the things I have done. Innovation is saying no to 1,000 things.”

— Steve Jobs

Here is an extremely simple fact of life: Every time we say yes to something, that means we say no to something else. The question becomes: If we continue to say yes to requests day after day, when are we making time for the people, activities, and decisions that matter to us?

I always find it curious when people feel bad or a sense of guilt about saying no, particularly when they feel overworked or overwhelmed. What is there to feel bad about? We have limited time, energy, and resources, and the best thing we can do is to prioritize those commodities in a way that allows us to capitalize on achieving our highest priorities. So why not do the right thing, the best thing, which is to take back control from those things that demand our time, energy, and resources.

We do this by asking what are the things that are most important in our lives? Do your activities reflect the values you espouse? Are you OK with what your true priorities say about how you use your time, talent, resources, and energy? Are you even aware of whether they are in alignment?

If you take the time to truly contemplate Jobs' words, it becomes clear how important it is to make choices about how we expend our resources. He didn't say, and I'm not saying, there is anything wrong with saying yes. There are absolutely times when yes is appropriate. Taking action is necessary to work toward our goals.

However, in order to be able to say yes to what we want, we have to be willing to say no to those requests we don't want or don't have the bandwidth to manage. Sometimes, taking a few minutes to assess what is most important at the time and to say no to that which is not the higher priority. Instead of making a "to-do list," make a "to-stop list."

For example, if you are interested in pursuing a promotion, you have to decide which activities are worth spending your time on because you cannot say yes to every assignment that comes across your desk. Of course, it starts with performing your assigned job duties, and when it comes to the extras, you have to make calculated choices about what commands your time and attention. This is not about manipulation, but it is about being clear what your values and priorities are, and how saying no will make it possible for you to spend your time only on those things.

The benefit is that you are able to specialize and perfect skills and abilities that will serve you in the long run. If you say yes to activities that are not beneficial to developing the skills and abilities you'll need for the promotion, then you are in effect wasting your time.

So when is it appropriate to say no? Ideally, you'd say no any time you have to choose between activities that move you away from, rather than toward, your goals. It is also appropriate to say no when the activity neither feeds your soul nor gives you peace (again, as long as the requested task isn't part of your job responsibilities).

It is not necessarily the case that the things you say yes to are only things you like and the things you say no to are those things you don't enjoy or want to do. On the contrary, you may need to do things you don't enjoy because they are on the path to achieving your goal. If health is a top priority and something you value, but you don't enjoy exercise, it is unlikely that you'll be able to achieve your goals without finding some sort of exercise or physical activity that promotes the healthy lifestyle you want. It doesn't have to be running half marathons or joining a CrossFit gym, but you will have to find something that keeps your heart rate up and works your muscles.

In order to do this, making time for introspection and goal planning is crucial and has to become one of your top priorities. You won't do it because you like it, but because you value the life that will result from accomplishing your goals. If spending the afternoon binge watching Game of Thrones doesn't get you there, then you'll just have to say no.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



Former ACC Docket Columnist

Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the Lead the Way column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.