

# Assertive Time Management : Saying No To Unreasonable Requests

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- **Why do we need to learn how to say 'no' in the workplace?**

For over twenty years as a trainer, coach, management consultant and psychologist, I have been working to support business people in improving their personal effectiveness and well-being. My experience is that there are many, many people who are feeling increasingly pressured from a workplace in which they perceive that unreasonable demands are often being placed upon them

Our colleagues, our managers, and our customers all seem to be seeking more from us. If we are going to remain productive - and just as importantly retain both our health and sense of inner well-being - then it becomes imperative that we learn how to say "No" to requests and demands that we cannot reasonably meet.

The inability to say no carries the very real risk that our credibility and reputation may be irreparably damaged, if we end up failing to deliver on something to which we have agreed (regardless of whether it may have been a reluctant agreement on our part!) .

Alternatively, an inability to say "No" can lead us to feeling fatigued, resentful or stressed if we end up regularly working through lunch breaks, and working long hours, in a feverish attempt to "get it all done".

- **Why do so many of us struggle with the word?**

There are many people in the workplace who find it difficult to say NO when asked to do something that may be unreasonable, in the light of their existing commitments or workload.

Somewhere along the line, these people have become conditioned to do what others ask of them for any number of reasons..... It may be because of an excessive desire to please and appease others; it may be because of a fear of conflict; a fear of giving offence or a mistaken belief that they may be seen as incapable unless they agree to the request

Of course, most of us have a need to be accepted and liked by others - but this should not be at the expense of our own self-esteem and well-being.

Someone who is assertive, who is aware of both their capabilities and limitations, is able to calmly evaluate requests made of them ..... judge whether to agree or not ..... and communicate their decision in a confident and clear manner.

- **How do we go about saying 'no' without risking our jobs?**

We are not talking here about being un-cooperative and unhelpful with people. Our jobs exist to provide some type of service or product to clients - and most of us gain satisfaction from working within a team environment, one in which we exchange help and support with our work-mates.

What we are discussing is the ability to say no to demands that either are unfair and unreasonable, or requests that are simply more than what we can do - given our current commitments.

We must try and remember that sometimes, the other person simply has no idea of what our existing workload might be, or perhaps they do not fully appreciate the time involved for us to perform their request. In circumstances such as these, a key is patience and communication.

A blunt refusal to help will simply burn bridges and damage goodwill. Instead, we need to clearly explain our existing commitments - and perhaps propose another way or another time that we could offer assistance.

However, there are some people in the workplace who will take advantage of those who cannot establish limits and set boundaries. When dealing with these sorts of people, we need to be firm, yet polite.

Some of the steps you might find useful when saying "No" - particularly if this is not something that comes comfortably to you, are.....

### **Saying NO : Graciously, But Assertively**

1. Clarify and scope out the other person's request - so you are quite clear about what exactly is being asked of you - and the extent to which it is likely to impact upon your existing work-plan
2. Pause, and take some time to think, rather than reacting immediately - this will enable you to exercise some self-control, rather than react impulsively (for example, allowing you to short-circuit any conditioned desire you may have to please and appease)
3. Consider the request against your other existing commitments Calmly assess it's relative priority for you
4. Explain your other commitments, politely but firmly saying "No" without feeling guilty - yet still showing some empathy for their difficulty
5. You might offer them an alternative, or perhaps indicate the part of their request that you would be willing to accommodate

Finally, there is the particularly sensitive matter of what do you say to your boss, if he or she is asking you to complete something in a timeline that you believe is unreasonable and unachievable.

Naturally, your boss has the right to determine priorities - s/he can say "I want this done by the end of the day" .....You can't just say No to this - well, that is unless you feel like looking for another job.

But what you can reasonably say is .... "As much as I would like to, as things stand at present, I wouldn't be able to get this task completed by the end of the day - but if you're prepared to wait until next week for that sales report, then I would be able to get this thing done today" .....or perhaps, "If someone else could do the client presentation tomorrow - then I'd be able to get this done today"

In other words, project a desire to be helpful; after all, most relationships endure through some healthy "give and take" - but don't let yourself become anyone's door-mat!

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