7 Simple Ways To Say “No”

Editor’s note: This is a guest post from Celestine Chua of The Personal Excellence Blog.

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Do you have difficulty saying “no”? Are you always trying to be nice to others at the expense of yourself?

Well, you’re not alone. In the past, I was not good at saying “no”, because I didn’t want to hurt the other person’s feelings.

For example, whenever I get requests for help, I would attend to them even though I had important work to do. Sometimes the requests would drag to 2-3 hours or even beyond. At the end of the day, I would forgo sleep to catch up on my work. This problem of not knowing how to say “no” also extended to my clients, business associates and even sales people.

After a while, I realized all these times of not saying “no” (when I should) were not helping me at all. I was spending a lot of time and energy for other people and not spending nearly as much time for myself. It was frustrating especially since I brought it upon myself. I slowly realized if I wanted personal time, I needed to learn to say “no”.

Why We Find It Hard To Say “No”

To learn to say “No”, we have to first understand what’s resisting us about it. Below are common reasons why people find it hard to say no:

1. You want to help. You are a kind soul at heart. You don’t want to turn the person away and you want to help where possible, even if it may eat into your time.

2. Afraid of being rude. I was brought up under the notion that saying “No”, especially to people who are more senior, is rude. This thinking is common in Asia culture, where face-saving is important. Face-saving means not making others look bad (a.k.a losing face).

3. Wanting to be agreeable. You don’t want to alienate yourself from the group because you’re not in agreement. So you confirm to others’ requests.

4. Fear of conflict. You are afraid the person might be angry if you reject him/her. This might lead to an ugly confrontation. Even if there isn’t, there might be dissent created which might lead to negative consequences in the future.

5. Fear of lost opportunities. Perhaps you are worried saying no means closing doors. For example, one of my clients’ wife was asked to transfer to another department in her company. Since she liked her team, she didn’t want to shift. However, she didn’t want to say no as she felt it would affect her promotion opportunities in the future.
6. Not burning bridges. Some people take “no” as a sign of rejection. It might lead to bridges being burned and relationships severed.

If you nodded to any of the reasons, I’m with you. They applied to me at one point or another. However, in my experience dealing with people at work and in life, I realized these reasons are more misconceptions than anything. Saying “No” doesn’t mean you are being rude; neither does it mean you are being disagreeable. Saying “No” doesn’t mean there will be conflict nor that you’ll lose opportunities in the future. And saying no most definitely doesn’t mean you’re burning bridges. These are all false beliefs in our mind.

At the end of the day, it’s about how you say “no”, rather than the fact you’re saying no, that affects the outcome. After all, you have your own priorities and needs, just like everyone has his/her own needs. Saying no is about respecting and valuing your time and space. Say no is your prerogative.

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Rather than avoid it altogether, it’s all about learning the right way to say no. After I began to say no to others, I realized it’s really not as bad as I thought. The other people were very understanding and didn’t put up any resistance. Really, the fears of saying no are just in our mind.

If you are not sure how to do so, here are 7 simple ways for you to say no. Use the method that best meets your needs in the situation.

1. “I can’t commit to this as I have other priorities at the moment.”

If you are too busy to engage in the request/offer, this will be applicable. This lets the person know your plate is full at the moment, so he/she should hold off on this as well as future requests. If it makes it easier, you can also share what you’re working on so the person can understand better. I use this when I have too many commitments to attend to.

2. “Now’s not a good time as I’m in the middle of something. How about we reconnect at X time?”

It’s common to get sudden requests for help when you are in the middle of something. Sometimes I get phone calls from friends or associates when I’m in a meeting or doing important work. This method is a great way to (temporarily) hold off the request. First, you let the person know it’s not a good time as you are doing something. Secondly, you make known your desire to help by suggesting another time (at your convenience). This way, the person doesn’t feel blown off.

3. “I’d love to do this, but ...”

I often use this as it’s a gentle way of breaking no to the other party. It’s encouraging as it lets the person know you like the idea (of course, only say this if you do like it) and there’s nothing wrong about it. I often get collaboration proposals from fellow bloggers and business associates which I can’t participate in and I use this method to gently say no. Their ideas are absolutely great, but I can’t take part due to other reasons such as prior commitments (#1) or different needs (#5).
4. “Let me think about it first and I’ll get back to you.”

This is more like a “Maybe” than a straight out “No”. If you are interested but you don’t want to say ‘yes’ just yet, use this. Sometimes I’m pitched a great idea which meets my needs, but I want to hold off on committing as I want some time to think first. There are times when new considerations pop in and I want to be certain of the decision before committing myself. If the person is sincere about the request, he/she will be more than happy to wait a short while. Specify a date / time-range (say, in 1-2 weeks) where the person can expect a reply.

If you’re not interested in what the person has to offer at all, don’t lead him/her on. Use methods #5, #6 or #7 which are definitive.

5. “This doesn’t meet my needs now but I’ll be sure to keep you in mind.”

If someone is pitching a deal/opportunity which isn’t what you are looking for, let him/her know straight-out that it doesn’t meet your needs. Otherwise, the discussion can drag on longer than it should. It helps as the person know it’s nothing wrong about what he/she is offering, but that you are looking for something else. At the same time, by saying you’ll keep him/her in mind, it signals you are open to future opportunities.

6. “I’m not the best person to help on this. Why don’t you try X?”

If you are being asked for help in something which you (i) can’t contribute much to (ii) don’t have resources to help, let it be known they are looking at the wrong person. If possible, refer them to a lead they can follow-up on – whether it’s someone you know, someone who might know someone else, or even a department. I always make it a point to offer an alternate contact so the person doesn’t end up in a dead end. This way you help steer the person in the right place.

7. “No, I can’t.”

The simplest and most direct way to say no. We build up too many barriers in our mind to saying no. As I shared earlier in this article, these barriers are self-created and they are not true at all. Don’t think so much about saying no and just say it outright. You’ll be surprised when the reception isn’t half as bad as what you imagined it to be.

Learn to say no to requests that don’t meet your needs, and once you do that you’ll find how easy it actually is. You’ll get more time for yourself, your work and things that are most important to you. I know I do and I’m happy I started doing that.

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Burnout rates and physician dissatisfaction are at an all-time high. Work-life balance is the buzzword answer often cited to solve these problems, but incorporating "life" into a physician's career is easier said than done.

Is striving for work-life balance causing physicians additional anxiety?

The Cambridge dictionary defines work-life balance as "the amount of time you spend doing your job compared with the amount of time you spend with your family and doing things you enjoy."

For physicians, the concept of work-life balance is not so straightforward, as highlighted by Siva Raja, M.D., from Cleveland Clinic Foundation in Ohio, and Sharon Stein, M.D., from University Hospital Case Medical Center also in Cleveland, OH.

"In the three 'A's of physician excellence - able, affable, and available - available is often the easiest to perfect," Dr. Raja wrote.

Defining what work time means is complex in modern medicine. Typical physician duties include patient contact, administrative duties, charting, teaching, meetings, and community outreach activities. And with the addition of mobile technology, work time can easily creep into life time.

Even so, the life aspect of work-life balance is more straightforward. Time outside of work can include wellness needs such as sleep, nutrition, exercise, spiritual pursuits, and interactions with family and friends.

But, as Dr. Raja pointed out, it also includes daily living activities such as household needs, including groceries, laundry, cleaning, and paying bills.

With most physicians working 40 to 60 hours per week and nearly 20 percent reporting 61 to 80 hours each week, after sleep, how easy is it to fit in this elusive "time outside of medicine"? And should all physicians strive for work-life balance, or is a career in medicine incompatible with this concept?

Is work-life balance just hype?

Arun Saini, M.D. - an assistant professor in the Division of Critical Care Medicine at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis - described the reasons for physicians seeking work-life balance as varied and personal, in an opinion article published in *Frontiers in Pediatrics*.

"Dissatisfaction, depression, and burnout are common in physicians," Dr. Saini wrote. In fact, a recent article on physician burnout published by *Medical News Today* points to research showing an increase in job dissatisfaction despite a decrease in working hours.

"Most millennial physicians are paying more importance to work-life balance after seeing the first-hand effect of burnout in their colleagues and among their family members. There is also a shift in the family dynamics of [the] millennial as most families have both parents working and limited support from immediate family members. This has put additional pressure on their abilities to manage work-life balance," Dr. Saini told *MNT*.

An American Medical Association survey noted that 92 percent of physicians aged 35 or younger felt that work-life balance was important.
One respondent noted, "We are focused on maintaining our identities and relationships outside of work, and many older physicians sacrificed having a life to be good doctors."

Female physicians in particular report work-life balance as a significant concern, with the goal of achieving work-life balance often impacting their career choices.

Although statistics show the increase in the numbers of female physicians in the United States - where 47 percent of medical students and 46 percent of residents are female - research suggests that there has been little change for women in terms of domestic tasks and responsibilities.

Yet some take exception to the concept of work-life balance.

Andreas Schwingshackl, M.D. - an assistant professor in pediatrics at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Mattel Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, CA - suggested in an opinion article published in Frontiers in Pediatrics that the pursuit of work-life balance that can actually worsen a physician's quality of life by "adding additional, often unrealistic, expectations to [their] already stressful lives."

**Dr. Schwingshackl suggested that seeking work-life balance implies that "life only occurs whenever we are not at work" and assumes that "life is good and work is bad."

To him, this separation means that there is always a conflict. He suggests a different approach instead.

"Once I was able to integrate rather than separate all my daily activities, [and] harmonize rather than divide my time not only between work and life but also between clinical care and research, the pursuit of balance shifted from work-life to life-nature-universe. The result was an overwhelming daily feeling of balance," Dr. Schwingshackl explained.

Whatever the definition, what practical advice can physicians follow to avoid dissatisfaction and burnout by achieving the balance that is important to them personally?

**Four tips for finding your work-life balance**

"In the hustle and bustle of busy work schedules and chores of daily life, young physicians often let themselves operate in autopilot," Dr. Saini pointed out in his paper.

Below are the four elements that he sees as being central to finding work-life balance.

1. **Purpose**

Young physicians may lose passion or satisfaction with their work because they no longer find meaning in their work or have lost sight of its purpose.

Finding meaning in one's work should also take into account family needs and aligning your own needs with those of your organization.

Lori Bryant, M.D. - a pediatrician at Hyde Park Pediatrics Cincinnati, OH - told MNT, "I intentionally do more of the things that remind me why I went into medicine, call patients/parents at home a few days after visit to check up on them, send cards to kids at home to encourage them or praise them on their school accomplishments, treat my staff like friends so we have fun at work."

2. **Time management**

Balancing work and life roles requires good time-management skills. Effective time-management involves setting both long- and short-term goals, planning and organizing, and not engaging in time-wasting activities.
Dr. Bryant's time-management skills include having a "huddle" about patients before clinic, preparing electronic health record templates, making clinic checklists, outsourcing housework, batch-cooking meals, staying on top of laundry every day, and treating herself and her family to takeout on long days.

3. Prioritization

Among your various responsibilities, it is important to identify what is important to you. Dr. Bryant, who has a dual physician family, said that she puts family first. As a result, she works 3 days per week to stay on top of her family life.

4. Reassessing and resetting

During life transitions such as completion of training, marriage, childbirth, and the death of family members, taking time to reassess and reset both work and life goals can be helpful in creating balance.

"Don't feel like you always have to say yes. It's better to say no and succeed at what's already on your plate, than to say yes and perform poorly or worse," Dr. Bryant suggested.

In his article, Dr. Saini explains that for him, "it is about finding your purpose in life both at work and at home - and striving to fulfill it. The balance is in the motion, so keep the cycle moving."

This sentiment is echoed by Drs. Raja and Stein in their article.

"In researching and writing this article, it has become evident that there is no single standard for work-life balance. Therefore, success is only possible when one seeks his/her own personal work-life balance."

Siva Raja, M.D.
Combining personal and professional life is increasingly common in today’s world

The New Norm for Management Jobs: Work-Life Integration, Not Balance


The changing shape of the working day
For professionals in management jobs, focusing on work-life integration has a number of implications:

1. We can stop feeling guilty about scheduling calls during our vacations or checking our emails at night.

2. Going by the same logic, we can stop feeling guilty about talking with our friends and family members during work time.

3. We can be more flexible about when and how we accomplish both work and personal goals.

The change is certainly an optimistic one. It means that professionals in senior positions and management jobs can now approach the workday differently. It’s no longer about completing work in a certain allotment of time (i.e. the stereotypical 9-5 workday). Instead, it’s about getting work done when it needs to get done. This is empowering for executives as it allows them to juggle their work and personal lives according to their own schedules. So in a sense, it’s senior professionals managing their own activities rather than the company.

The modern workplace
Gone are the days when employees stay late in the office just to show their boss how hard they are working. The Millennial employee prefers to work the expected time and leave office on time. Organizations too are supporting this trend – offering their employees incentives and benefits. Flexi hours, telecommuting, virtual working, and working from home are all increasingly becoming part of this work-life integration. These different working methods allow employees to feel more comfortable in their work environment, resulting in higher productivity levels.

Companies now also place more emphasis on their employees’ health by trying to keep stress levels low and energy levels high. Gyms, yoga sessions, and crèches are more commonly seen in offices today than they were before.

Another recent finding is that encashment of annual leave can result in overworked employees and impacts output levels. As a result, employees are encouraged to take the total number of days off they get during a year. This time away from work allows employees to recharge their batteries and keeps them motivated.

In addition, more and more people are maximizing their time “outside of work”. Pursuing a hobby or a passion – whether it’s a dance class or tennis match – is enriching their lives. Organizations can also join in by organizing events and activity workshops to keep employees inspired, and ultimately improve performance.
Beyond Work-Life “Balance”

Sarina Schrager, MD, MS

**Balance isn’t sustainable, but perhaps we can achieve dynamic equilibrium.**

The desire for better work-life balance is a common concern among physicians and a key reason for choosing employed practice. But the term work-life balance has always struck me as problematic.

In my experience, achieving a true balance between work and non-work activities is incredibly challenging and, when achieved, is fleeting. My moment of balance is quickly upended by a sick child, a partner’s vacation, a new project at work, a patient in labor, etc. True balance is unsustainable.

Additionally, the term work-life balance suggests that work equals bad and life equals good. This does not ring true for me because there are many aspects of my work that I love (and some aspects of my life that I don’t always love).

Because of this, I’ve started thinking about work and life as a dynamic equilibrium. A dynamic equilibrium is a steady state where inputs equal outputs even though they are continuously changing. There can be chemical reactions going on in the middle, but the outcome is no net change. Using this metaphor as a work-life model makes a lot of sense to me. For my outputs (e.g., work, hobbies, or relationships) to be at their highest potential, I need inputs (e.g., sleep, exercise, and time for myself) to maintain the system. There will be times when outputs increase, like when my partner is on vacation or I am working on a special project. But to reach my potential as a physician, teacher, mentor, mother, partner, and friend, I need continuous inputs as well. Inputs do not have to equal outputs every day or even every week, but they should match up over time. A mismatch over months can be problematic.

Here are some tips to maintain a dynamic equilibrium:

1. **Evaluate your steady state at regular intervals.** This could be as simple as a Sunday night “check in” or a once-a-month appointment with yourself. Are your outputs consistently over-reaching your inputs? If so, that can lead to burnout and is not sustainable.

2. **Pay attention to the inputs.** Although our work involves taking care of others, doctors are notorious for not taking care of themselves. Getting enough sleep and exercising can boost the amount of energy you have for your work and leisure activities.

3. **Limit your outputs.** Can you say “no” to a request for your time? Learning to say “no” is an important skill to have while trying to achieve equilibrium. Without it, you will overcommit.

4. **Be deliberate when planning your time.** If you have just spent a couple of weeks on the inpatient service or with increased clinical responsibilities (outputs), you may need to take some time off or schedule activities that bring you joy (inputs). Look at your schedule and make sure you have time set aside on a regular basis for non-work activities. Maybe you can end clinic early one day a week to pick up your kids after school or come home and cook a great meal. Maybe you can block off time for a lunchtime yoga class once a week. These inputs are small, but if consistent, they will help maintain your equilibrium.

5. **Be patient and flexible with yourself.** Equilibrium is individual and always changing. You may not feel that you are in a steady state each day or each week, but if you have planned well, you will reach your goal over a month or two. If you get out of equilibrium from time to time, don’t sweat it. Periods of imbalance can help you define what you need to maintain equipoise for the long term.

Equilibrium may look different for each of us. Some of us work more than others. Some have more family responsibilities. Some have time-consuming hobbies. All of these things can change as we progress through different stages of life. Our equilibrium may look very different today than it looked 10 years ago or than it will look 10 years in the future. The key is to find your steady state and manage your inputs and outputs accordingly.

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