



## Facilitator — Aug./Sept. 2012



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### Sharpen Your Tools

Marilyn Sherman

Do you often find yourself doing extra work because you have difficulty saying “no”? You’re not alone. Most people are overwhelmed with projects, assignments, tasks, deadlines and responsibilities.

It may appear easy to say “no” to extra work, such as small favors or little requests from others, but many of us don’t know how to decline work without feeling guilty. Sometimes, these favors, tasks and special projects have nothing to do with your job and will not move you closer to your mission or your vision statement. They only take up valuable time and increase your stress. So, before you say “yes” to one more request, consider the following steps.

#### Ask Clarifying Questions

Before answering, practice saying “it depends.” This way, you can gather more facts to see if this is something you really want to commit to. Try using one of these questions to get more clarity before answering:

- “It depends; what’s the scope of this project?”
- “It depends; what exactly do you need me to do?”
- “It depends; when does it need to be done?”

Once you have a clear sense of what is being asked of you in terms of size and scope of the job, including project timelines, let them know you can’t give them an answer yet; you have to check your schedule.

You can say, “Before I give you an answer, let me consult my calendar or to-do list, my staff, assistant or partner.” Or you can try, “You caught me off-guard. Let me get back to you. When do you need an answer?” Once you have bought yourself some time, move on to the next step.

#### Consult Your Other Priorities

Over-commitment at any level of an organization can be disastrous, not only for the people relying on you, but also for yourself. When you say “yes” before considering what else is on your plate, you are asking for unneeded stress. The stress carries over to your other responsibilities and may even creep into your personal life. Soon you will feel overwhelmed and won’t perform your regular duties as effectively. Therefore, consult your priority list by considering your existing commitments, timelines and daily, weekly or monthly plans. Once you see what you have already committed to, you can weigh your options.

Ask yourself, “If I said ‘yes,’ would it interfere with what I have going on?” “If I took on this task, would it cause undue stress and overwhelm me?” “Do I really want to take on this task at this time?”

If after answering these questions honestly, you realize that you don’t want to do it, don’t hesitate another minute. Give them an answer. If needed, call a supportive friend and practice saying “no” to them to get your confidence up. Then, gather your courage and move on to step three.

#### Tell Them Thanks But

Maintaining harmonious work relationships is important. So, you don’t want to flat-out say “no.” This may cause people to see you as being too independent and earn you the reputation of not being a team player. However, you can say “no” and gain respect as someone who knows his or her boundaries. This is very helpful in weeding out all those people who pegged you as the go-to person for things they don’t feel like doing themselves.

Depending on the size of the favor, you may turn them down by thanking them first. Let them know you

appreciate their confidence in you and thank them for thinking of you. You can even mention that you are flattered they thought you could take on such a task. However—and this is the hard part for most people—be sure to tell them “no.” Using non-threatening body language and an even tone of voice, simply turn them down. Here are some examples:

- “Thanks. I wish I could, but I can’t.”
- “I’m flattered you asked me. However, I have a commitment that is typing up all my extra time until next month”
- “I am all tied up with another project. I can’t take on anything else now.”
- “I would love to help, but I am in the middle of a deadline and can’t do it.”

#### Learn Through Practice

Don’t over-apologize for not being able to do someone a favor or for being able to prioritize your other work. Granted, this is not going to be easy, because it requires you to get out of your comfort zone. But, when you honor your boundaries, it will alleviate the stress that comes later.

It is uncomfortable to say “no” to people who have come to you for your time, energy or expertise. However, it is time to get honest with them. If you really do not want to do something, do not take it on now and regret it later. Do not say “yes” because you are afraid they will judge you for saying “no.” In fact, you may actually come across as more organized, efficient and responsible than if you had said “yes” and turned in work that did not receive your full focus.

I recently had a chance to practice these steps myself. I was asked to chair a committee that was in charge of hosting an event after the chairperson dropped out. Before I answered, I asked clarifying questions: “What exactly does this entail?” and “What would I need to do by when?” My questions were specific, but the answers were vague: “Most of the work has been done. There is really not much left for you to do. So, let me know by the end of the day.”

After contemplating for an hour, I simply called back and said, “Thank you for the opportunity. However, I am not able to commit. I will, however, be available on-site during the event, but cannot take on the chair position now.” The person appreciated my quick response so they could find someone else to do the job.

It’s difficult saying “no,” but it gets easier with practice. People will start to appreciate and respect your boundaries. You will no longer feel roped into doing something you didn’t have your heart in. With practice, you’ll soon be reaping the benefits of knowing your boundaries and practicing the art of saying “yes” to less stress.

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