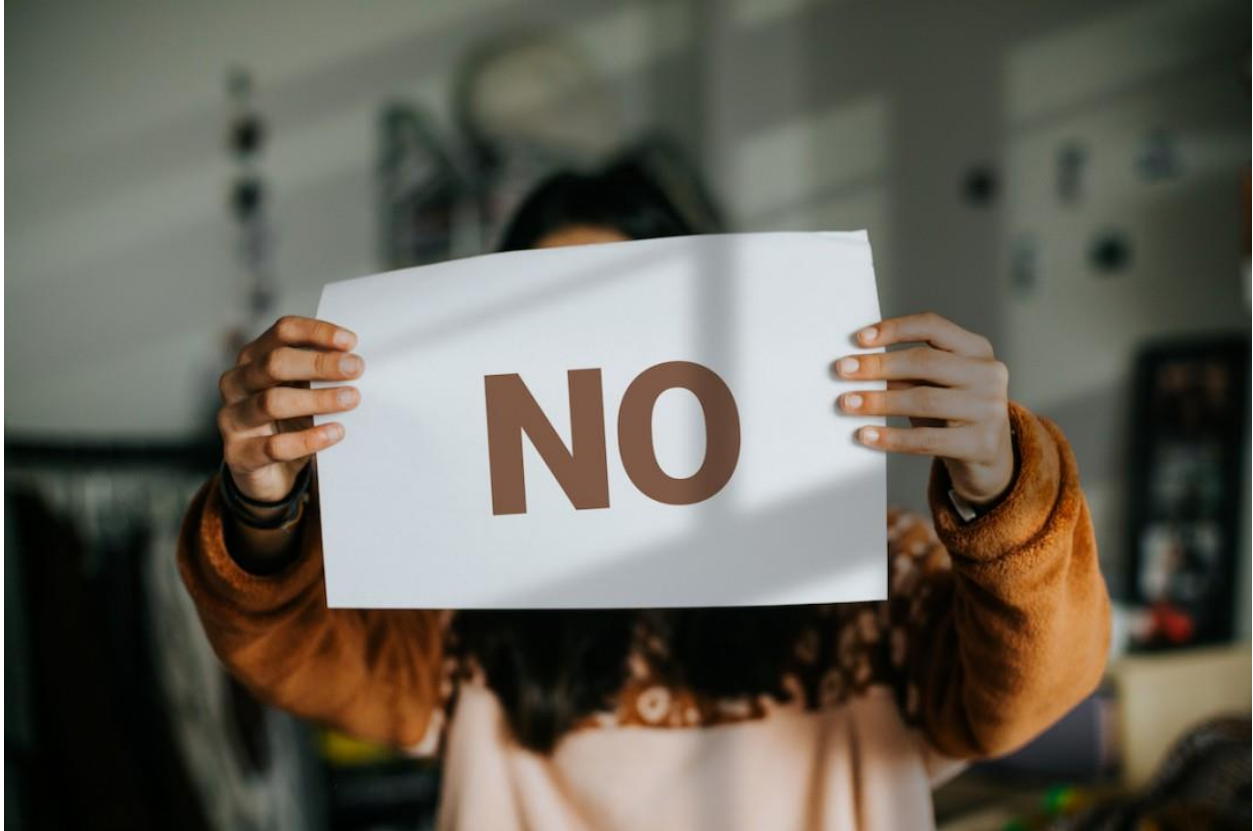


The Importance of Saying No At Work

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Saying yes to every request at work is a quick path to burnout. But it can be difficult to find the confidence to say no when you are worried about disappointing people. Here, we examine the importance of saying no and the best ways to do so.

It is human nature to try our best to help someone when they ask for assistance. But sometimes our workload is too high and it only takes one more task to topple everything.

Saying no to extra assignments – particularly in leadership and other high-stress roles – is necessary to avoid overwork and burnout.

But it can be difficult to say no without feeling like a disappointment to your team members. More than a quarter of employees surveyed by [SimplyHired](#) reported saying, “Yes, I can take more work” when they couldn’t.

So what is the most effective way to say no?

I spoke with business psychologists [Dannielle Haig](#) and [Nitha Fiona Nagubadi, Psy.D.](#), plus career and leadership coach [Stacey Staaterman](#), to discuss the importance of saying no and how to best reject a request at work.

The Drawbacks of Saying Yes to Everything

Haig says people like to say yes to more work than they can handle because of people-pleasing tendencies and ambition.

“It’s part of a culture, gender, or even the person’s personality to be helpful,” Nagubadi said. “But sometimes, always saying yes comes to our detriment because it doesn’t value our time. The funny thing is for those who are not as available, their time is often valued more.”

Staaterman added that while many have learned to always say yes to opportunities, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified this urge.

“For a lot of people, the trigger to **wind down** the day was closing the door to the office and going home,” Staaterman said. “But the minute we didn’t have to go to offices as regularly, [that went away.] And we have sick colleagues and people caring for their children at the same time they’re trying to do their job. I think out of a place of altruism... we took on more things. But there’s still the reality which is we all need time away to renew.”

You run the risk of overworking yourself when you say yes too often. Haig says too much work can lead people to **disengage** and feel incapable of doing their work. This leads to a lack of confidence in the workplace and feelings of burnout.

“[Burnout] is one of those topics we talk about all the time, but most people don’t even know what it is or they wouldn’t know that they were burnt out,” Haig said. “It means being exhausted mentally, emotionally and physically from your work. There is depersonalization and disengagement with your work, so you feel no desire to do it.”

Staaterman said burnout also hurts the company.

“Companies don’t benefit because usually the [employee’s] performance lags,” Staaterman said. “If somebody is doing the work of two people, it’s important for the company to know that so they can take a reasonable look at the resource needs of a particular department or team. And I think that’s a hard thing for companies to embrace.”

Deciding When to Say No

Staaterman said you will notice if you are overworked because it will permeate other aspects of your life. For example, Staaterman used to work 10- to 11-hour days and

worked every other weekend. During this period, she noticed she was not eating well, she was not well rested, and she did not have time to complete tasks in her personal life.

“Being really clear with how taking on too much is showing up in personal life and relationships in the communication that you bring to your colleagues, co-workers and clients is the first step to self-awareness,” Staaterman said.

It can be difficult to determine which tasks to prioritize. But Haig said that choice is necessary if you often stay late at work to finish a mountain of tasks. Nagubadi said each person has different priorities based on their goals and instincts.

“Personally, professionally, what is important and **what resonates**?” Nagubadi said. “Which [activities] align with what we want to accomplish or align with our work or goal? And for ones that are not that exciting, important or something we're naturally good at, see if that can be delegated or if you can collaborate with somebody else on that.”

Haig added that humans tend to have a time bias, which means they believe tasks will take a shorter time than they do. Other times we think something will take longer and have too much free time. So have a realistic idea of how much time you have when deciding whether to say no to additional work.

“I think it's just really about you understanding your own personal workload and understanding how you're managing it,” Haig said.

Staaterman said she often tells clients, “If everything is first, everything is also last.” This means if everything has the same priority level, the true priorities lag.

Haig also said we have to look past our perfectionism to decide what **to take on** and what to say no to.

“Lots of us are perfectionists at work,” Haig said. “And that leads to burnout and to us taking on too much work. So realize that excellence is good enough, perfect doesn't exist. And sometimes you just have to have a cutoff point when it comes to your work so you can move on to the next project.”



How to Say No

The key to saying no to a request for help is to be polite, yet direct.

Nagubadi says to **determine** whether the answer is an outright “no” or just a “not at this time.” For the first option, you can say, “That’s not my expertise,” or “That’s not something I’m currently focusing on.”

For the second option, you can say, “I don’t have the **bandwidth** for this right now.” After you say no, refer them to someone who might be able to help instead. Nagubadi said you don’t need to give a long explanation for why you can’t fulfill the task unless you already committed.

No matter which option, Haig suggests starting by telling the person, “I would love to help you now, but...” and adding at the end, “I would like to help you in the future with other work.” This way you are being clear about the no, but not making the other person feel bad for asking.

Staaterman said how you say no could also depend on the person you are rejecting. For example, **tread** carefully if the person you are saying no to is in leadership.

“You're going to want to put context to the assignment,” Staaterman said. “[For example, say] ‘I know you really wanted to get this done by Friday. You may not be aware, but we have three other deadlines at the moment. What do you think is most important for us to focus on?’ That way, you're showing the authority figure that you want them to stand next to you, look at the landscape together and make a decision that works for everyone.”

Also, Haig suggests talking with management if taking on too much work is becoming a pattern. Have a list of priorities ready to discuss with them.

“Simply say, ‘I have all of these priorities. I'm more than happy to take something else on, but can you help me prioritize my list for all the work that I already have?’” Haig said. “Then one of two things will happen: your manager will either say, ‘Actually, scrap that and you can do this project instead,’ or they might say, ‘I can see you've got a lot of work on you at the moment. Maybe it's better for us to park that project or delegate it elsewhere.’”

Staaterman added that you always have a choice when dealing with a large workload.

“A lot of people forget that every day you show up to a job, you're voting with your presence that this is an important thing in your life. But the truth is you have a choice – you can not show up,” Staaterman said. “But sometimes people lose sight of the fact that if it really becomes too overwhelming or the burnout is so profound, there is a choice and the choice may be to exit ... The companies and the people you work with will only treat you as well as you treat yourself.”

Top Takeaways

The importance of saying no in the workplace

- Overworking yourself leads to burnout, which affects the individual and the company.
- If you have a constant pile of work that permeates your personal life, it is time to consider saying no more often.
- Decide which tasks to prioritize by considering your goals, expertise and time constraints.
- Make the rejection polite, but direct and don't explain much unless you made a commitment to the person or they are an authority figure.
- Ask management to help you decide which tasks to prioritize and which to delegate.

<https://youtu.be/rW2XThUG82A>

