

excerpt from *Double Time!*
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The Magic Word: No

Many of us are “yes” people. We want to be nice; we don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. Oh but the time that is lost for the lack of a simple word. Why is it so hard to say no?

Understand that when you say no, you are not saying no to the whole person. You are not putting someone down or dismissing his or her legitimate needs or desires. You are simply saying yes to your own needs, your own limits, your own agenda, your own priorities.

Get in the habit of saying no and making it stick. Give a reason if you feel you have to. Say, “I’m sorry but I can’t. I’ve just got way too much on my own plate right now.” “Sorry, but I have a meeting tonight I need to prepare for.” “Sorry, but really, can’t you just you do it yourself?”

Nothing will throw you off track more than reflexively saying yes to every request. But don’t be discouraged if saying no takes a little practice. You’ve probably been saying yes for a long time, and it may take a while to retrain yourself.

Social Interruptions and Long Talkers

You may have noticed that some people seem to need an audience wherever they go. They’ll use the flimsiest excuses to draw you into conversation and regale you with stories. Don’t blame these people. Who knows why they need audiences? They may not have received enough attention as children. However, it is not your job to psychoanalyze them (unless you’re a psychotherapist). Your job is to stick to your agenda.

Try this. If someone is needlessly prolonging a conversation (and you need the conversation to conclude), paraphrase what the person has said, like this: “I hear you saying _____. I understand, but we should really have this conversation another time because I need to get back to work right now.” Or, try an end of conversation cue phrase like, “Well, the last thing I want to say is...” or “Well, before we finish, I’d just like to say...”

Nonverbal cues can also be effective. If you’re standing in the hall, take a half step away from the speaker and glance toward your destination, or if you’re in your office, break eye contact and clear your throat quietly. Pick up a pen or a calculator, or reach toward the phone, looking a little distracted. These gestures may work to break the spell.

Shirley says, “There’s a lot in your body language that can tell people to get to the point—or not. If I lean back and just look at them, that says I have time to listen. But if I’m hunched forward over my computer or over something on my desk that I’m in the

midst of writing or reading, that sends a different message. If I invite someone to sit down, they'll be here longer. But if, in conversation, I give short answers like, 'Mm. Okay,' then they can tell I'm busy."

Barry points out, "You can be very direct without being offensive. When someone asks, 'Do you have a minute?' you can answer, '*Just* a minute.' If someone wants to pass on a little business and a little personal information, sometimes I just have to say that I'll take the business information but the personal will have to wait. I can be nice but forceful about that."

A Manager Is Not A Counselor

Some people may come to you with problems all the time, because you're the manager. When this happens, don't automatically put your own work aside to deal with people's difficulties, unless you're truly the one who should be responsible for handling them. If you are not directly responsible, suggest that they ask their coworkers for assistance, or refer them to someone else or to useful reference materials. If you find you're always "bailing out" the same person, chances are that this person needs to learn to face his own challenges.

"If someone says it's an emergency, you have an obligation to let yourself be interrupted," acknowledges Milt. "However, you should let that person know, if it's a frivolous interruption, that they should be a little more sensitive to your time just as you want to be sensitive to theirs. It's a two-way street."

More Tips for Reducing Interruptions

Rearrange the furniture in your office so that you are facing *away* from the door, or at least so that you can avoid eye contact with passersby; Or just close the door! Barry says, "I try to have an open door policy with all the people that report to me, but there's times when you just have to say no. When that occurs, my door's closed, there's a note on the door, and somebody has to basically be bleeding for me to let them in. The only people who have access to me at those times are my direct boss and my family."

Make a secret arrangement with a secretary or coworker such that, if someone is visiting in your office for too long, your co-conspirator will interrupt you with something "urgent" so that you can tell your visitor, "Excuse me, we'll have to talk later."

Let people know what the best times are to come and talk to you, with the implicit message that other times are not so good.

Buck offers this idea: "Sometimes I just get out of the office. I think that probably most managers do at some point or another. Sometimes, to get the work done, you need to get away. The thing that's being weighed here is how is your time best used? And what is that you are trying to accomplish?"

There is no question about it: Interruptions and distractions by coworkers can wreck your focus and compromise your ability to get things done. However, if you're like most

people, you probably interrupt and distract yourself far more than your coworkers do. When you have a tough project on your desk, how often do you find yourself stepping out of your office to go to the drinking fountain? Or heading to the restroom? Or having a snack? Or checking and rechecking your email? Or surfing the internet? Or engaging in frivolous conversation?

The limitation of all of the time-saving techniques described above is that none of them will work on *you*.

The Procrastination Monkey

We all do it. We all put off doing what we have to do when the task might be unpleasant or challenging. And the longer we put it off—the more creative we are about finding ways to dawdle and procrastinate—the heavier the monkey grows on our backs.

Procrastination is no fun. Think about it: have you ever actually *enjoyed* yourself while you were procrastinating? Of course not. Even if you procrastinate by engaging in some activity that would otherwise be delightful, you can't enjoy it even one-tenth as much as you would *after* you've faced the music and delved into your task.

If procrastination is painful, then why do we do it? The main reason we procrastinate is because we're afraid that we just can't do the thing we have to do, or we are afraid that we won't do it well. This is nonsense. How often have we had this feeling and then proved ourselves wrong? In any event, no task is more daunting or agonizing while you're actually doing it than it is while you're avoiding it. How often have you procrastinated and procrastinated, and then, once you finally started the job, realized, "Hey, this isn't so bad!"?

There are also a multitude of other reasons why we may procrastinate. Some of us simply have too much going on, too many agenda items which make it difficult for us to focus on a major task. Some people may actually be afraid of success. Some of us are afraid that people may expect more of us (or we may expect more of ourselves) if we accomplish a big job. Or perhaps, we're afraid that once we accomplish the big task, there will be little or nothing left for us to do. Sometimes we simply fear the unknown—the monkey isn't exactly comfortable, but at least he's familiar.

For many of us, our personal procrastination patterns are recurring and habitual. For example, when you have a report to write, do you feel an overwhelming urge to compose a shopping list instead? Or do you suddenly become fascinated by the groupings of people you can see from your window, or by different ways of combing your hair in the mirror, or by the solitaire game on your computer? "So many things can steal you away from your intended project," observes Barry. "Things will happen like, suddenly I notice the blinds aren't straight, so I need to get up and close them."

What are some of your own procrastination routines? What activities (such as eating) or objects (such as the phone) do you often employ for procrastination purposes?

Outwitting the Monkey

Here is a sampling of tried-and-true techniques for getting the procrastination monkey off your back. Try one, try a few, or combine several. Find a recipe that works for you.

- Break your work down into tiny steps. Ask yourself, “What can I do in five minutes that will move this project along? What’s my next fifteen-second task?”
- Do fifteen to twenty minutes of vigorous physical exercise, such as brisk walking, before you start your work. This can settle your mind and clear out your resistance to the task at hand.
- Set up a formal appointment with yourself to begin working on your task or project. Honor this appointment just as you would honor an appointment with a major client, or your boss, or the President of the United States.
- If a wave of preoccupations and competing obligations rushes to mind, make a list of them, and then set the list aside. That way you know they won’t disappear and you won’t forget them; you can deal with them after your work is finished.
- Establish a ritual warm-up routine before doing big chunks of challenging work. For example, meditate for ten minutes, clear your desk, say a prayer, and turn off your phone’s ringer.
- Make a list of everything you’re afraid can go wrong with your project, and then next to each listed item, write down how you can prevent these problems.
- Get rid of distractions. Turn your ringer off, hang a “Do Not Disturb” sign on your door, place books and magazines out of your sight, throw away the desk radio, disable your modem, close the shade, etc.
- Start with the easiest, most bearable aspect of the job.
- Think of the benefits you will reap by completing your task. Consider the consequences of further delay. Connect your task to the “big picture” of your goals.
- Commit yourself to completing your task (or some clearly defined portion of it) before you get up from your chair again.
- When you’re truly bogged down and tired, let your project go for a while. Go away for a designated amount of time and refresh yourself. Schedule regular breaks.
- Try reverse psychology on yourself. See how long you can go doing nothing at all. When you get tired of that, start your work.
- Set up rewards for finishing your work. Think how much you’ll savor those rewards, once you’ve climbed your mountain of work.