

Is the Only “No” in your Vocabulary “No Problem”?

By Colette Carlson, MA

Glancing at the clock Jill notices that she has less than a half hour to finish her presentation for tomorrow morning’s meeting before racing home to begin her second shift of carpooling, cooking, and cleaning. Co-worker Gary suddenly peeks into her office and asks for help with his piece of the presentation. Jill immediately finds herself blurting out, “No problem” instead of speaking her truth and saying “No.” Why do we say “yes” when we really want to say “no”?

According to Dr. Judith Tingley, author of *Say What You Mean, Get What You Want: A Businessperson’s Guide to Direct Communication*, the biggest barrier to communicating assertively is fear. We fear being judged, criticized or intimidated. We fear losing power, status or a good friend if we turn down a request. Some of us fear making our personal needs a priority because that makes us selfish, a label we tend to avoid at all costs. Yet the personal costs associated with the inability to say what we feel include lack of time and energy to pursue our own desires; anger, bitterness and resentment toward the individual we agree to help; health issues; and low self-esteem. I can relate to all the above.

Like most women I possessed goals and dreams. However, no matter how much lip service I paid to my desires, I always found myself filling my time meeting other people’s needs and expectations. This lifestyle came with a payoff. Staying busy helping others provided me with an incredible self-image of the “perfect” employee, mother, wife, friend or daughter, and it also provided me with the best excuse in the world why I couldn’t pursue my own dreams. After all, “I simply don’t have the time.”

When I decided to get honest with myself about my inability to say no, I had to acknowledge that I craved acceptance from others because I had not yet learned how to love and accept myself, imperfections and all. I was sacrificing my self-respect for the approval of others. I had to admit that I was scared to death to go after what I said I wanted. As Oprah would say, that was my “a-ha” moment. That was the moment when everything began to change.

After learning how to speak my truth with grace, I no longer was the default setting in everyone else’s time of crisis. My fears left one by one as I noticed the new found respect of others. I was amazed at how co-workers, friends and family had the capacity to hear the truth when it was communicated from my heart.

How did I do this? I learned different habits. To help me remember, I anchor these new behaviors with the same words children learn when crossing the street.

Stop, Look, and Listen before crossing (Go).

Stop: *Instead of rushing to make a decision, simply stop and take a deep breath.* Depending on the immediacy of the situation, you may say something like, “Gee, that sounds interesting, let me get back to you” or “Please give me a minute to gather my thoughts and take a look at my schedule.” (This is also a great parenting tip so you don’t have to go back on your word.) In other words, remove the pressure of feeling like you have to reply immediately.

Look: *Take a long, hard look at your current commitments and calendar.* If you say your health is the most important thing in your life, have you put your calendar where your mouth is? Put your focus on what you want and schedule it in to make sure it happens. No one is going to give you what you need to get for yourself. When you’re clear on your internal goals and schedule your time to reflect your desires, it’s easier to find the confidence necessary to say no to others in order to say yes to you.

Listen: *Listen to and acknowledge your feelings.* When you first hear the request, what is your immediate reaction? Are you excited and enthusiastic about the opportunity or do you wish the person would just magically disappear? Do you truly want to do what is asked or is it something you think you “should” do? “Shoulds” come loaded with guilt. Guilt is simply anger turned inward because you can’t do what you really want to. Honor your true feelings for long-term personal sanity and happiness.

Go: *Go across with integrity.* Let go of your fears and simply speak your truth. Don’t give excuses – just a simple, “No, I won’t be able to participate, but I hope you have a wonderful time” or “No, my calendar is full but thank you for thinking of me.” Or in Jill’s case she could say, “Gary, I won’t be able to help. I have just enough time left to finish my own commitments.” Then, zip it. No need to elaborate or apologize. If you still feel guilty ask yourself a simple question. What is my intent? If your intention in saying no is purely to respect your own priorities and needs, then release all fears and go forward in faith. If anyone gets upset, it’s about them, not you.

My own personal experience with learning to say “No” over the last decade has been an incredible journey. I carved out time to get my masters degree, lose 50 lbs. (eating properly and exercising takes time!), start my own professional-speaking business and spend valuable time with my two precious daughters. After all, if I’m going to teach them to say “no” to their peers, I best practice what I preach.