

Coaching

Learning to Say “No” Is Part of Success

by Ed Batista

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Success* is often built on a reflexive habit of saying “yes” to opportunities that come our way. We’re hungry for any chance to prove ourselves, and when we’re presented with one, we take it, even—or especially—if it seems daunting. (A lesson I learned years ago was to say yes to opportunities that made me feel nervous because the anxiety was a sign that I’d learn something useful.) We may also tend to say “yes” out of a fear that turning down an opportunity even once sends a message that we’re not interested, and we’ll stop getting additional chances in the future.

But success tends to attract bigger and better opportunities. As we succeed, a key challenge becomes prioritizing the many opportunities that present themselves. We often try to do this without saying “no” definitively—we still want to keep our options open. Inevitably, though, this results in a lack of clarity and overcommitment, and we wind up disappointing people, exhausting ourselves, or simply failing. To prevent this we need to learn to say “no” gracefully but firmly, maintaining the relationship while making it clear that this is one opportunity we’re choosing not to pursue. And success in this effort is founded on the ability to manage the emotions that come up when we close a door or extinguish an option.

These emotions can be subtle: a twinge of regret, a trace of anxiety, a faint voice that whispers, “*Are you sure you want to turn this down?*” We often respond reflexively to such emotions, driven to eliminate the discomfort they evoke. So we say “yes” and feel some relief—until later, when we realize the costs of the commitment we’ve now made. A critical step in managing these emotions is training ourselves to resist that initial reflexive response; I often describe this to clients and students as “becoming more comfortable with discomfort.” We *notice* the discomfort provoked by the possibility of saying “no,” and yet we can *tolerate* it. We’re not compelled to take action to eliminate it.

There’s no magic formula for saying “no” more effectively, but here are three steps that can help:

1. **Slow down.** Feelings of anxiety generated by the possibility of saying “no” can escalate into a full-blown threat response, an emotional state in which we have diminished capacity to process information and consider options. Slowing down the pace of an interaction or a decision-making process can allow us to catch up and make the choice that’s right for us, not merely the choice that alleviates our anxiety in the moment.
2. **Recognize our emotional cues.** We experience many emotions before we recognize them in conscious awareness, but feelings often have physiological markers that can help us identify and name the emotion sooner. Once we’re aware of an emotion, we can take action to influence how we respond. What do we feel—physically—when we consider saying “no”?
3. **Practice.** Saying “no” is like any other interpersonal skill—it feels clumsy and awkward at first, and we improve only with repeated effort.

** Many of my executive coaching clients and MBA students at Stanford are going through a transition that involves a step up to the next level in some way. They’re on the cusp of a big promotion, or they’ve launched a startup, or their company just hit some major milestone. Very few, if any, of these people would say that they’ve “made it”; they’re still overcoming challenges in pursuit of ambitious goals. And yet their current success has created a meaningful inflection point in their careers; things are going to be different from now on. The nature of this*

difference varies greatly from one person to another, but I see a set of common themes that I think of as “the problems of success.” I’ll be writing about these issues in a series of posts, of which this is the first.

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