



Weekly Wisdom

May 3, 2017

The Art of “No”

In the April 14, 2017 of the printed *Chronicle of Higher Education*, there was an advice piece called “The Art of No” (available at <http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Art-of-No-/239508>). In a nutshell, here is what Robin Bernstein suggests:

1. *Volunteer someone, strategically.* Often when people ask you to do something, they don’t actually need *you* to do it. They just need the task done – and they need to complete the task of obtaining a commitment from someone to do it. *We’ve all been here, haven’t we? No one else steps up; there’s that long silence.* Bernstein suggests, “...politely decline, while nominating a substitute...Be sure to suggest only someone you respect and trust to complete the task reasonably well.”

- *Don’t say:* “Um, OK, sure,” and then kick yourself later!

2. *Don’t explain.* Maybe you have a good reason for saying no. Maybe you don’t. Either way if you try to justify your answer, you open yourself to judgment and bargaining, or you risk oversharing. You don’t have to defend your decision.

- *Don’t say:* “I wish I could attend this event, but I need to drive my aunt to the doctor that day.” The event could shift to a different day – and now you’re on record stating that you want to attend!

3. *Do explain.* When you have an unassailable reason, one that would stop the conversation in its tracks, you may choose to volunteer it. If you want a person never to contact you again, you may say so. And again, don’t apologize or bargain.

- *Don’t say:* “I’m so sorry, but I just can’t do what you’re asking of me. I promise I’ll do more to pull my weight next month.” *Uh oh. Next month will come! Instead, say,* “I teach from 9am to 3pm on Mondays and Fridays so I’m never available during those times.”

4. *Set your own policies.* Create guidelines to help you decide when to say no. *Examples: I only serve on three committees at a time. I’m at my limit. Or, I only write recommendations with two weeks’ notice.*

5. *Just hit “delete.”* Some requests are unreasonable or inappropriate, and they issue from people who have no power over you. Example: Attached please find my paper titled, “Subject Only Tenuously Connected to Your Line of Work.” I look forward to your comments on my paper.”

- *Don’t say:* Here is a long explanation of why your request is inappropriate.
- *Instead, say:* (silence).

My thanks to Steve Sarchet for finding time to write *Weekly Wisdom* for the past four months. I appreciate his “yes” to my call! Have a great week everyone. **Say “yes” often but learn to say “no” effectively!**