The Art of Saying No

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

John Galbraith’s housekeeper was a whiz when it came to saying no. One day in 1965 the noted economist was taking a nap when President Lyndon Johnson called his home. “He’s taking a nap and has left strict orders not to be disturbed,” his housekeeper told the President. Johnson replied, “Well, I’m the President. Wake him up.” Her response? A simple: “I’m sorry, Mr. President, but I work for Mr. Galbraith, not for you.” Then she hung up.

It’s Hard to Say “No” to Uncle Rico

1) Find your yes

Before you can become good at saying no, you have to know what you’re saying yes to when you’re saying no. You see every opportunity that you pass with a no is really saying yes to something else — something that you’d prefer to do or something more important to you in the long run. You can’t hope to say no when the pressure is on until you know for sure what you really want. When you’re feeling pressure to say yes and acquiescence feels easier than taking a stand, just think of your yes. If joining the PTA fundraising committee means spending even less time with your children, focusing your attention on this fact will embolden you to say no and keep your priorities straight.

2) Sleep on it

Even if you feel like saying yes (and certainly if you’re having doubts), ask for a day to think about it before providing an answer. It’s going to be much easier to say no once you’ve had time to consider all of your commitments and whether the item in question is a realistic addition to your schedule. This will also give you a chance to come up with the best way to say no.

3) Sandwich the no between two yeses

Sandwiching a no between two yeses ensures that your no will be more palatable. It’s also a great way to explain that to which you are already committed. For example, if your boss asks you to work on the weekend, but you have family commitments you cannot break, explain these commitments to your boss (the first yes), how that prevents you from coming in on the weekend (the no), and finish by confirming your commitment to the company and your work (the final yes) by asking if there are other ways you can contribute that don’t require you to come in that weekend.
3) Make sure you’re actually saying “no”
When you are tired, your brain cells’ ability to absorb glucose is highly diminished. As I explained in Secret #1, your brain’s ability to control impulses is nil without glucose. What’s worse, without enough sleep you are more likely to crave sugary snacks to compensate for low glucose levels. So, if you’re trying to exert self-control over your eating, getting a good night’s sleep—every night—is one of the best moves you can make.

4) Be prepared to repeat yourself
If you say no and the other party pushes back, the best thing you can do is repeat yourself. This is much easier to do when you recognize beforehand that it is often necessary. In some cases, you may have to repeat yourself more than once. If you offered any explanation with your original response, you can repeat this explanation or just say no again. Don’t back yourself into a corner by trying to explain yourself further. It is your right to say no to any request, and you’ll often need to be firm in order to have your intentions understood.

Self-Control Secret #6 – Forgive Yourself
A vicious cycle of failing to control oneself followed by feeling intense self-hatred and disgust is common in attempts at self-control. These emotions typically lead to over-indulging in the offending behavior. When you slip up, it is critical that you forgive yourself and move on. Don’t ignore how the mistake makes you feel; just don’t wallow in it. Instead, shift your attention to what you’re going to do to improve yourself in the future.

Putting These Strategies to Work
Saying no to a new commitment honors your existing commitments and gives you the opportunity to successfully fulfill these commitments. Saying no can certainly open doors; for example, when John Galbraith woke up from his nap, the first thing President Johnson wanted to know was the identity of the woman who told him no. After he found out Johnson said, “I want her working for me.”

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