

Say no at work

Level: Intermediate

Time: 90 minutes +

Summary: This lesson is about why we should learn to say no at work and how it can be expressed tactfully and clearly. In this lesson, students:

1. read tips on how to say no appropriately in a work context;
2. consider whether they would agree to take on extra responsibilities in various work-related contexts;
3. practise saying no to their boss or colleague in role-plays;
4. explore appropriate ways of turning someone down in their own jobs.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student

Group size: Any

Note: This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 5/2018.

Warmer

Students read the situation, decide how they would deal with it and then briefly discuss why they chose answer a, b, c or d. Find out if anyone has an alternative suggestion as to how they would deal with the situation.

Key words

Students match the key words with the definitions and then find the words in the article before reading through the article to see how they are used in context.

Key:

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. <i>burnout</i> | 6. <i>opportunity</i> |
| 2. <i>assignment</i> | 7. <i>excuse</i> |
| 3. <i>tactful</i> | 8. <i>redistributing</i> |
| 4. <i>flattered</i> | 9. <i>defuse</i> |
| 5. <i>supervisor</i> | 10. <i>spouse</i> |

Understanding the article

Students answer the questions with information from the article. Then ask them to compare their answers.

Key (possible answers):

1. *You might suffer from burnout. Your work may suffer as you rush to complete your tasks.*
2. *Be polite and tell the truth.*
3. *Your boss or colleague may not understand that you are joking.*

Expressions

Students find expressions in the article that match the meanings given. Note that the expressions can be found in the article in the order they are given. Then, students should work in pairs and come up with sentences that include the expressions or variations of the expressions.

Key:

1. *hold something against someone*
2. *be found out*
3. *leave it at that*
4. *take (everything you say) literally*

Situations

a. Students start by reading the situations and deciding which they would say no to and which they would agree to do. Next to the ones they would say no to, and thinking about the advice given in the article, they should make notes as to how exactly they would say no.

b. Working in groups of three (A, B and C) students role-play their No situations (= the ones they would not agree to).

A plays him or herself, B plays the role of the boss or colleague and asks A to do what is described in the situation and C plays the role of observer and gives feedback afterwards on how polite, tactful, clear and firm A's performance was. After role-playing all of A's No situations, B can also give feedback and say how they felt when their request was refused.

Then, students swap roles in their groups so that each has

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the chance to play each role. They perform three rounds of questions in total.

You could follow this task up with a group feedback session. How difficult or easy was the task? How did the students feel when they said no? How did the bosses and colleagues feel when their request was turned down? And so on.

Discussion

Students discuss instances in the past where they said yes to a request at work when they really wanted to have said no.

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1 Warmer

It's 4pm and you are looking forward to finishing work for the day. Your boss has just asked you to stay behind for an extra two hours after work to help him finish his presentation for tomorrow morning. You had planned to meet a friend immediately after work and you don't want to cancel that appointment. What do you do?

- a. agree to stay behind and hope that your friend will understand
- b. tell your boss that you're sorry but you already have an appointment after work that you cannot change at such short notice
- c. suggest that your boss asks your colleague to stay behind instead
- d. say that you can't stay longer this evening but that you would be willing to come in earlier tomorrow morning to finish the presentation then

2 Key words

Match the key words to the definitions below. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

assignment	burnout	defuse	excuse	flattered
opportunity	redistributing	spouse	supervisor	tactful

1. the mental and physical condition of having no energy left or becoming ill after a period of very hard work _____
2. work that you must do as part of your job _____
3. carefully expressed so it does not upset other people _____
4. feeling pleased that someone notices and admires you _____
5. someone who is in charge of a group of people such as workers _____
6. a chance to do something _____
7. a reason that you give to explain why you cannot do what someone wants you to do _____
8. changing the way that something is shared between people _____
9. make a situation more relaxed by making people feel less angry or less worried _____
10. a husband or a wife _____

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by Margaret Davis



Sometimes the only sensible answer to a request that you take on extra work is a clear: 'No'. But how do you express that? Margaret Davis has some tips.

think a colleague might want to have the assignment, you could tell your supervisor that this other person "would probably love that opportunity".

Don't lie

Iconomopoulos says lying is not worth the risk. If you are found out (and you probably will be), it makes you seem untrustworthy. It's better to be unspecific than to invent a complicated excuse – just say you can't stay late at work, for example, and leave it at that.

Turn a problem into a solution

Your boss may well be able to help you deal with the situation. Give her a few reasons why you are unable to accept the extra work and ask for suggestions. She may be able to give you tips that will make you more efficient or find a way of redistributing some of your tasks among your colleagues.

Try humour

Iconomopoulos says that a lighter approach may defuse a difficult situation. For example, if you can't work late because you have to go to your child's birthday party, you could say, "My spouse will divorce me if I miss one more family event!" But don't try this if you know your boss doesn't have a good sense of humour – or if she takes everything you say literally!

MARGARET DAVIS is an editor at *Business Spotlight*.

1 Is it ever OK to say no to your boss or colleagues? Most of us find it hard to do so but if you want to avoid burnout, sometimes you need to say no to an extra assignment or to a colleague's request for help. Consultant Fotini Iconomopoulos has some tips.

2 Consider the consequences

Before you accept more work, think about what might happen if you were to say no to it instead, Iconomopoulos advises. Will accepting extra work make you rush to complete your current tasks? Could that lead to careless or inaccurate work? If so, a tactful 'no' – discussed with your manager – could be the correct choice.

3 Deal with guilt

"Remember: you have a reason for saying no," Iconomopoulos told *CBC News*. "You wouldn't hold it against someone else if roles were reversed, so keep that in the back of your mind. If you burn yourself out, you won't be able to serve anyone very well."

4 Suggest an alternative

Start by being polite, Iconomopoulos advises. You can say something like, "Thanks for thinking of me" or "I'm flattered that you think I'm the right person for the job". Then, if you

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3 Understanding the article

Answer the questions with information from the article.

1. How would you, and the quality of your work, potentially be affected if you never say no?
2. How should you act and speak when you say no?
3. Why is answering humorously or ironically not always a good idea?

4 Expressions

a. Find expressions in the article that have the same meaning as the expressions below.

1. feel angry with someone because of something that they have done
2. be discovered doing something dishonest
3. not do anything more about something
4. understand only the most basic, obvious meanings of the words that are used

b. Work in pairs to come up with sentences that include these expressions or the expressions you found in the article.

5 Situations

a. Read the situations. Decide whether you would say yes or no to each request. Make notes about how you would say no.

b. Role-play your No situations with a partner. Get feedback from your partner and an observer: were you clear, polite, tactful, firm ...?

Situation	Yes or no?	What information or suggestions to include when you say no
Your boss asks you to ...		
... take some Japanese clients to a fish restaurant for lunch. The table is already booked. You really hate fish.		
... write down and report back every time one of your colleagues takes a cigarette break.		
... look after a work placement student for the next two weeks. You are in the middle of a very difficult project that already takes up every minute of your working day.		
... accompany him to a conference in Mexico. You are afraid of flying but don't want to admit this to anyone.		

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Situation	Yes or no?	What information or suggestions to include when you say no
Your colleague asks you to ...		
... cover for her, answer her phone, etc, while she gets her nails done, once again, during work time.		
... swap holiday weeks with him so he can visit his sick mother. Your partner has already booked that week off so that you can go on holiday together.		
... drive her to work and back home again every day next week while her car is at the workshop. It will add at least half an hour to your journey every morning and evening.		
... read through his 100-page report, give him feedback and correct any mistakes you find. You still haven't finished your own report.		

6 Discussion

Think about a situation where you wanted to say no to your boss or colleague but said yes instead.

- What was the situation?
- Why did you want to say no?
- Why didn't you say no?
- What would you do if you were in the same situation again?