

Learning to say no

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

1. When was the last time you said no at work? Why did you decline?
2. What criteria do you use to decide if you should agree to take on more work?
3. What is the best way to turn down a request?

2 Reading for gist

a. Skim the article and choose the main idea.

1. Four women are trying harder to be polite when saying no to professional invitations.
2. Four professionals track their journeys as they learn to say yes to tasks that might get them a promotion or not.
3. Four female scientists are learning to say no and have published their research about it.

3 Key words

a. Write the words from the box next to the definitions below. Check your answers and your understanding of the words by using the same word to complete the example sentence after each definition. Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

decline hone invariably proposal rejection systematic

1. according to an organised plan or agreed set of methods _____ We are doing a(n) _____ review of our marketing strategy.
2. make something like an ability more effective _____ HR has hired a new coach to help the sales department _____ their customer-service skills.
3. refuse something _____ She suddenly doubted herself after _____ their job offer. Would she find the job of her dreams?

4. a suggestion or plan, often a written one _____
I think it's a good _____, but I think we can showcase our expertise better.
5. the act of refusing to accept something or a letter that tells you that you have not been successful in something _____
You cannot let your fear of _____ stop you from trying.
6. always _____
He is such a people-pleaser; he _____ agrees to help even when he already has his plate full.

cap
disarray

instructive
non-promotable

routinely
substantial

7. happening usually or often _____
We _____ inspect our machinery to prevent accidents.
8. large in importance, value or size _____
They were not prepared for the _____ changes the new CEO had in mind.
9. put a limit on the amount of something _____
The company has announced that it will no longer _____ bonuses.
10. the state of being messy or confused _____
The industry has been in _____ ever since the crisis.
11. giving useful or interesting information _____
The guest speaker reminded them that while failure can be painful, it can also be very _____.
12. not leading to raising someone to a higher or more important position _____
It is challenging to assign _____ tasks fairly.

Four Scientists Take on the 'Art of Saying No'

RESEARCHERS WHO PUT THEMSELVES UNDER THE MICROSCOPE MADE SOME IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES

PILITA CLARK

- 1 There were once four scientists who decided to take a systematic approach to honing one of working life's great skills: the art of saying no.
- 2 With workloads heading to burnout levels of busyness, they agreed that in the space of one year, they would collectively turn down 100 work-related requests and track what happened as a result.
- 3 Having drawn up a spreadsheet to record what each passed up and why, and how they felt about it, they set about declining a raft of requests to review journal articles, write grant proposals or run more things at work. Together, they also turned down 31 speaking invitations – fewer than the 43 talks and guest lectures they still gave.
- 4 It took them 10 months to rack up their 100th “no”, or roughly 25 rejections each, by which time they had learnt several things. First, the act of tracking your work itself makes it easier to say no, partly because you get a better idea of everything you're doing.
- 5 Also, a firm rejection is better than a “soft no” because agreeing to, say, give a talk in a few months' time, or review a paper instead of co-writing it, invariably leads to bigger asks later. And there are useful rules to adopt, such as “does this fit with my work?”, “does it spark joy?” and “can I do it without messing up existing commitments?”
- 6 The four academics – all environmental social scientists and all female – wrote about their year in a 2022 *Nature science* journal article, which I recommend. But one of their discoveries has stuck with me since: they had no regrets about saying no.
- 7 They did routinely feel guilty and they worried about letting others down – despite visible evidence of the substantial commitments each had made. Yet they also felt their fears of missing out, or suffering reprisals for saying no, were unfounded.
- 8 I was curious to know if this was still the case two years on. When I contacted one of the four last week to ask, I found that not only did they still have zero regrets, they were doubling down on saying no. Or rather, quadrupling.
- 9 “One of our big takeaways was that 100 declines collectively is great but it's not enough,” said AR Siders, an associate professor at the University of Delaware's disaster research centre, who researches climate adaptation. “So now we're trying for 100 each in the year ending December 2024, so together we should say no to 400 things.”
- 10 Siders had so far managed 34 declines, putting her behind the other three who had recorded 37, 51 and 54.
- 11 But she was pleased to have beaten the 25-odd “nos” she achieved the last time. She put this down to strategies she adopted to make rejections easier, such as limiting the number of peer reviews she writes to two for each journal article she takes part in submitting.
- 12 She is also trying to cap the number of speaking invitations she accepts. And crucially, she is trying to whittle down big commitments that affect how well she can work, such as research projects, not just smaller things like talks.
- 13 “So even though I might say no less often, I'm saying no to bigger things and it's making a difference,” she says. When she fell ill recently she had enough slack in her schedule that getting sick didn't throw everything into disarray.
- 14 I find all this instructive, especially for women, who often find it hard to say no to far more thankless requests than giving a talk. Female employees are statistically more likely than men to be asked to take on mentoring, training and other time-eating “non-promotable tasks”. They are also more likely to do them, according to four different female academics who wrote a 2022 book about the problem, *The No Club*.

Continued on next page

15 Prof Siders had not heard of the book until after she and her colleagues published their *Nature* article. But the coincidence doesn't strike me as that odd, considering the expectation on so many women to say yes to extra work. Either way, as a recovering yes-person, I intend to keep one idea in mind from

a member of Siders' group. Work opportunities always seem lovely in the beginning. But just as cute babies grow up to be teenagers, and puppies become big dogs, you have to remember they will ultimately end up needing a lot of hard work.

FT

Pilita Clark, 24 August, 2024

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4 Understanding the article

a. Choose the best way to complete each statement about the article.

1. Together, the four academics tracked how they declined 100 _____ requests.
a. speaking *b. work-related*
2. Their rejections included declining requests to write grant proposals, speaking and lecture invitations, as well as requests to _____ journal articles.
a. review *b. write*
3. A(n) _____ is better than a soft no because it doesn't lead to bigger asks later.
a. acceptance *b. firm rejection*
4. It is a useful rule to ask yourself if agreeing to the request will affect _____ and how it fits in with your work
a. prior commitments *b. your colleagues' motivation*
5. The four scientists _____ feel guilty about saying no.
a. did *b. did not*
6. They felt there _____ for being afraid of others' reactions when they declined a request.
a. was no real reason *b. were good reasons*
7. Two years after their initial research, the scientists were saying no _____ than before.
a. even more *b. much less*
8. One scientist is using the strategy of _____ the number of peer reviews she writes or speaking invitation she accepts.
a. capping *b. not counting*
9. Statistically, more _____ accept training and mentoring tasks that might not lead to promotion.
a. men *b. women*

5 Business language – verb + noun collocations

- a. Use the nouns in the box to complete the collocations from the article. Then find and circle each collocation in the article to check your answers

adopt cap decline draw up hone make take on

- _____ a commitment / discovery
- _____ a skill
- _____ / turn down a request / invitation
- _____ a spreadsheet
- _____ rules / strategies
- _____ the number of (invitations)
- _____ new tasks

- b. Complete the sentences with collocations from task a.

- Unfortunately, I have to _____ your _____. I've already committed to another conference that week.
- Their latest book is about ten _____ you can _____ to become more productive.
- I would like to learn to be more selective about the _____ I _____.
- I'm going to follow their example and _____ to track all the tasks I accept and turn down.
- She decided to _____ speaking gigs at four lectures or talks per month.
- I'd love to, but I've already _____ another _____.

6 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Apart from the three rules mentioned in the article, what other questions could you ask yourself before deciding to take on a new task?
- Do you think it's important to say no more often or to bigger things? Why?
- What does a firm rejection look and sound like?
- Why do you think more women are likely to be asked to do non-promotable tasks? Why do they agree to do them?
- What should you be saying no to more?

7 Wider business theme – saying no at work

Task 1

Role-play the situations below. Take turns making the invitations / requests.

You are currently extremely busy. Consider the invitation / request and follow the three rules mentioned in the article to decide if you want to accept it or turn it down.

Possible strategies to use when declining:

- ask for time to think
- lead with positivity
- be honest
- don't say sorry unless you have a reason to apologise
- don't give more information than necessary
- offer a different solution if appropriate
- decide if it is a 'no for now' or a 'definite no'

Situation 1

(Boss to employee)

Task: manage a large project that was initially your boss's responsibility. This will mean a lot more work and you're already busy, but it will help you develop leadership skills and will look good on your CV.

Situation 2

(Conference organiser to potential speaker)

Invitation: speak at an international conference in New York two months from now to share your professional experience with others in the field.

Situation 3

(HR to employee)

Task: mentor a newly hired employee in an area that you have experience in. HR offers to pay for a coaching and mentoring course.

Situation 4

(Boss to employee)

Request: accompany and entertain a colleague visiting from Japan. They have a high position in the company, and it might be good for your career, but it means entertaining them the whole weekend and cancelling your personal plans.

Your own situation:

Useful language

I really appreciate ...

That sounds like ... (an interesting project / a great offer / a wonderful opportunity / etc.)

At the moment, I'm focused on ...

I'm afraid this doesn't align with ... (my goals)

After taking a closer look at my calendar, I realise ... (I can't take on any other work right now).

With my current workload, I won't be able to ...

Now isn't a good time for me. I would love to be involved at a later date.

I'd be happy to ... (connect you with / ask ...)

Task 2

Choose two of the situations. Write a rejection email for each situation. Aim for a polite but neutral / firm no.