



How to say 'No' when you should

TN84 Training Notes series: Leadership

These notes were first published on the website in December 2014 and last updated in September 2024. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

I've been asked to write some notes on how to say 'No' – and it won't take you long to work out that I've said 'Yes'. So it sounds as though I'm the wrong person to do this.

But since all the right people will of course decline the request, let me have a go. Note the three extra words I have added to the title. I welcome your email comments and will update advice here from time to time in the light of these.

These notes are designed for church and other Christian leaders, church and mission employees, but also for all Christians. What I have in mind are occasions when you are:

- asked to take on an assignment at a future date; depending on who you are it might be a speaking or writing engagement, an organisational task, a meeting or event to attend or take part in, or helping someone in some way;
- expected to squeeze another task (a hospital visit, a workplace order from your boss, an unplanned need to be met) into your schedule, perhaps at short notice which means you will have to reschedule other work if your time is already full;
- invited to join a committee or group, take on a new responsibility, add to your portfolio or anything else that has medium- or long-term implications.

In each case this may happen in your workplace, in your church or area of Christian ministry (if that is not your workplace), or in your local community or wider family. So when should we say 'No' and how should we do it?

Clearly there are many things here for which the right answer is 'Yes'. We are not to duck challenges that may stretch us or to ensure we have an easy life at others' expense. But most of us tend to agree to some requests for subtle but dubious reasons. So these notes focus on when we really ought to decline.

Ten reasons why we love to say 'Yes'

Here are the reasons people give when I raise this issue at self-management training days. You will spot that several of them have something to do with pride. Most come about because of the expectations that we have allowed other people to have of us. Some tend towards being gender specific (work out which and which way!).

- 1 **We love to be important**
We want to be wanted. It feels good to be the answer to other people's problems.
- 2 **We want to be popular**
We want others to think and speak well of us. People like those who say 'Yes'.
- 3 **We need to be seen to be busy**
There is an inherent desire in Christian ministry to justify ourselves by our activity level. Many of us are driven in a way God can never have intended.
- 4 **We think we are paid to say 'Yes'**
If we are a pastor, our job is to serve others in need. If we are an administrator, we are there to sort things out. But this makes us the answer to all the world's needs.
- 5 **We are scared of the fall-out** (the flip-side of point 2)
If we decline a friendship may be put at risk, we may be seen as failing in some way, or the person we say 'No' to may then seek to get their own back by saying 'No' to us.
- 6 **We know we can do this better than others**
We may of course have a rather higher evaluation of our omni-competence than others have of us. But even if true this reasoning will often keep us from our priorities.
- 7 **We feel it's the easiest way out**
Saying 'No' may involve finding someone else and training them, or it may mean a delay that will ultimately give us more work or hassle.
- 8 **We have no criteria to assess priorities**
Without a clear statement of role or job description and without clear guidelines for what is important for us in faith and life as well as work, we are vulnerable.
- 9 **We are in awe of the person asking**
There may be a contractual obligation but, if it is anyone we look up or who is our senior, to we may want to please them by saying 'Yes'.
- 10 **We genuinely want to meet needs**
It's our nature that when we see something that needs action we just do it.

Which of these would those who know and love you most say are your weakest points (ask them!)? Is their list different from yours? The battle of saying 'No' is won first of all in the mind. We need to know our priorities and our vulnerabilities. We do not have to be available 24/7 with our mobile switched on all the time.

By saying 'Yes' we may find that:

- we become overwhelmed and turn in second-rate work or miss deadlines;
- we short-change the important stuff that should be our priority;

- we deny ourselves time for family, friends or ourselves or time with God;
- we deny someone else the opportunity to serve;
- we don't earn people's respect – but they know a soft touch when they see one.

Five group questions

- 1 Who said 'No' in the Bible and got it wrong? You can start with Jonah but list others, both real people and those in stories.
- 2 Have you ever said 'No' to something and later felt this was a mistake? Why do you now feel it was wrong?
- 3 When did Jesus say 'No' (and presumably got it right!)? Start with Mark 1:35-39 (and see what there is to learn from these verses).
- 4 What is there in Acts where people said 'No' and got it right?
- 5 When did you last say 'Yes' to something and later come to feel this was wrong? Why did you say 'Yes' in the first place?

We are not supposed to say 'No' all the time of course. But sometimes we say 'Yes' when we are not the right person, or we fail to stop something we are doing as we take on something new, or we simply try to cram more than is possible into our daily schedule. So:

Ten means to help you assess the request

Here are some principles that should stop you saying 'Yes' today and regretting it tomorrow.

- 1 **Listen carefully**
... to what you are being asked to do, so the person can see you are hearing them, not fobbing them off and so that you get the true picture.
- 2 **Ask questions**
Seek further information (eg. about deadline or who else the person has asked).
- 3 **Activate the pause button**
If appropriate ask for the request in writing, give yourself 48 hours to consider. If possible, pray about it away from the person asking.
- 4 **Give yourself time and space to pray and ponder**
Don't rush a decision if possible.
- 5 **Consult your 'team'**
Your team might be your spouse, close friends, work colleagues, boss.
- 6 **Beware agreeing to something in the distant future**
... which nearer the time you will come to regret. If possible, say you will consider again nearer the time.

- 7 **Block off activity time in your diary**
Otherwise it will have spaces you will feel you can fill. You need to fit in routine work, daily interruptions, preparation and unpacking times, as well as time for family, friends and God. Ensure your diary is up-to-date so you don't double-book.
- 8 **Check out alternatives**
They give a deadline, you suggest a more realistic one. They want you – but is there someone else who would do just as well?
- 9 **Check out the urgency**
Someone may ask you to visit them immediately, but tomorrow would really be fine.
- 10 **Make suggestions for next time**
Suggest they give you more notice, if that has been the issue this time.

Ten questions to ask yourself

First check out all the points under the heading 'Why we love to say 'Yes''. Then, as you ponder the request, consider the following.

- 1 **Priority**
Is this clearly within my priorities for life, faith or work and within my skill-set? Why exactly should I take this on?
- 2 **Promises**
What have I already promised to whom and by when? (And was this a mistake?)
- 3 **Time taken**
How long is this really likely to take? And for how long am I committing myself for?
- 4 **Completion date**
Will this be something I can achieve relatively quickly but at the expense of something more important that has a later deadline?
- 5 **Enjoyment**
Is it something I would like to do, at the expense of something I ought to be doing?
- 6 **Preventing others**
By saying 'Yes' am I simply letting someone else off the hook who really ought to be doing this themselves?
- 7 **Hurting others**
By saying 'Yes' to this, who will get hurt? (For example, agreeing to one more task in the church office may mean a child is left waiting at their school.)
- 8 **Pressure**
Am I being bullied (eg. continual repeats of the request)? Is someone putting spiritual pressure on me ("God has told me you are the person")? Are they being patronising ("you're the only person with the gifts to do this")?

9 Replacement

If I take this on, what should I stop doing to release the time or energy for it? (For example, joining a committee may mean coming off another – first.)

10 Developments

If this is a long-term commitment, what changes may occur in my availability and what extra pressures may there be on my time over the expected period?

Five ideas for how to say 'No'

So you have now decided to say 'No'. Try to do this in person if possible, or by phone if not, rather than by email.

1 Say something positive

... about the task or activity in question. "It sounds a great event", "This group is clearly doing important work for God".

2 Say the actual word 'No'

It is powerful and final. Stand if possible, don't fidget. Be definite. Avoid phrases such as 'I don't think I can' or "I really feel I ought to decline" which immediately beg a response from the other party to push their case.

3 Smile

Try to sound firm but be charming when you say your 'No'. This can be the point to suggest ideas for who else the other party might approach.

4 Never lie but do not give too much away

If you say you have that day down for planning, they will say this task is more important. You do not have to justify your time or activity level.

5 Don't over-apologise or feel guilty

A word of regret is in order, but don't go overboard on extending it.

I hope it goes without saying that it is best to avoid phrases such as "The Lord has told me...!"

So – next time you are faced with a request to do something, follow these guidelines. If the answer is 'Yes' you will be more sure about it. If 'No' you will have saved yourself over-commitment.

When our life is full, whenever we say 'Yes' to someone, it follows that we have to say 'No' to someone else. That might be to God – or it might be to yourself.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN84. See also Articles A27, *Reliability in ministry*, and A51, *The 'To Do Diary' guide*, plus Training Notes TN43, *Did Jesus use an iPhone?*, TN94, *Becoming self-aware*, TN106, *Talk about taking time off*, and TN112. *Set my leaders free!*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN84 under Leadership.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325

Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk

Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>