



What I've learned (and am still learning) about saying No

Goodness. What a powerful skill this is.

And, elusive.

Getting good at saying No really is something of a superpower. When you say No, you claim focus, set boundaries, build a strategic reputation, and make room for what matters most to you.

If you want to do something that matters—and no doubt, you do—then this is a skill to develop.

In *The Coaching Habit*, question #6 is the Strategic Question: “If you’re saying Yes to this, what are you saying No to?”

What’s tricky is that attached to every “what” is often a “who.”

WHO are you saying no to?

Gulp

So I’m writing this guide as much for me as I am for you. I’ve gotten better at this essential skill over the years ... and I still have a LONG way to go.

Here are some suggestions on how you might build your No muscle.

(I appreciate that the usefulness of these strategies depends somewhat on the type of request that’s coming in, and the degree of autonomy you have in making the call.

I appreciate sometimes it just has to be a Yes.

Just don’t get seduced into thinking that’s true every time. Not even, I suspect, most times.

Start by slowing down the rush to Yes

It can be hard to say No if you’ve already said Yes.

(It’s not impossible, but it’s harder.)

You almost never have to make a decision as quickly as you think you do.

Break the habit of a fast Yes.

Give yourself 24 hours if you can. Work through some of the other suggestions that follow.

Then see what’s the best answer to the offer at hand.

You may end up making a better decision.

Know what the criteria are for a Yes

Set three to five rules of thumb that you can use to qualify a request.

This can take some time. You'll have to wrestle with the question, "What do I want?"

But once you get clear on that, it gets sooo much easier to figure out what to do and what not to do.

For instance, when I get invited to give a keynote speech, I have five criteria: Is it a cool organization? Is it a cool location? Is it a friend who's asking? Is the audience more than 1,000 people? Can they pay my full fee?

If they tick two of those five boxes, it's a maybe... so long as it's a Yes to this sixth and final question: Would I do the gig if it was tomorrow?

Which is my next point.

But before I go there let me add: those criteria you've set? Keep raising the bar. You and your time are precious.

Bring Future You closer in time

"Would I do it if the gig was tomorrow?" I can't tell you how many times this has saved me.

We often commit to things that are out there in the near-but-not-that-near-future. In six or nine or eighteen months' time, your calendar's free, and you're certain you'll be up for whatever's offered.

But come that time, Future You is cursing Present You for making this commitment.

What were you thinking?

Asking, "Would I do it if the gig was tomorrow?" at a minimum, gives you a visceral reaction as to whether you're doing this because you want to or because you feel you have to.

Prepare a script

Part of the agony of saying No, is crafting the reply. How do you find that balance between respectful, generous, boundaried, clear, and so on?

So find your standard way of saying no, and make it easy.

I use TextExpander. Currently, I type in ";fully" and what pops up is this text:

That's very kind of you to invite me. I'm afraid I must say no, because I'm fully committed to writing my next book right now, and doing my best to try and resist temptations such as these!

I do appreciate the kind thoughts nonetheless.

You'll find your own words. But standardize the way you say No.

(I must confess, I do love E. B. White's standard: "I must decline, for secret reasons.")

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September 28, 1956

Dear Mr. Adams:

Thanks for your letter inviting me to join the committee of the Arts and Sciences for Eisenhower.

I must decline, for secret reasons.

*Sincerely,
E. B. White*

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Most people will prefer a clear, fast No to silence, ambiguity, and/or Fake Yesses

We suspect that people will be disappointed and let down and consider us a Bad Person if we say No to them.

And, that's not untrue. Some people will be disappointed.

But second to a genuine Yes, people typically want a clear No.

You're doing nobody any favors by sitting on the request because you're anxious about making a decision.

Stop keeping both of you in agony, and say what needs to be said.

Say No to you

Half the time, I'm my own worst enemy. I suffer from SOS ... Shiny Object Syndrome ... and am constantly tempted into a state of over-commitment.

The person I need to say No to ... is me. "Michael! Stop It!"

If you're taking on something important or daunting or thrilling—the criteria for a Worthy Goal from *How to Begin*—you'll find yourself resisting and avoiding the very thing you want to be doing.

My main strategy for this is to find people around me who can help me stay focused on something that matters. A coach, a mastermind group, a friend doing something similar, even a community like *The Conspiracy* (mbs.works/the-conspiracy) can help pull you away from those temptations.

Say Yes to doing something that matters

The power of you getting good at No, is that you claim agency in your life.

Agency is seeing you've got choices, and making the brave choice.

What I hope for you is that you do something that matters.

You'll best know what that is. (The starting point may well be, to spend time figuring that out!)

But we all win when you're giving space and attention to a goal that's worthy of your time, your resources, and your life.

I'm cheering you on.

You're awesome and you're doing great.



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