

How and When to Just Say No

by John West Hadley



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During your career, career search, home life, etc., you will often be faced with a plethora of possible actions and requests far beyond what you can, should or are currently willing to handle.

Those who are busiest or most in demand tend to be viewed as most capable or willing, or able to juggle the additional responsibilities, and therefore find themselves called on to do even more. When my son was in kindergarten, I volunteered to replace the retiring secretary of our Parent Teachers Organization. Little did I realize that would lead to over a decade as a PTO officer, and a real challenge finding anyone willing to take over for me as president!

How do you decide where to focus your energies? And how do you keep from getting distracted and sucked into bottomless pits of less productive activities?

First, keep your eye on the prize. Examine your goals, and make sure that the initiatives with which you are getting involved or the activities you are making a core of your strategy feed those. It's OK for some to be personal interests vs. professional goals, and it's OK for some to be not directly leading toward your short term goals if they feed your soul, just make sure they are truly doing that.

I'm reminded of a conversation I had a few months ago with an actuary who had been looking for a new job for over a year. He mentioned the variety of things he was doing, and when I suggested he might benefit from a more focused goal, he said that all of these things he was looking at were interesting.

He talked about things he was doing to keep current in the industry, and mentioned a highly specialized committee he had recently joined "*because it was interesting*". (The committee was in a totally new product area in which he had no prior expertise.) When I challenged him on how that particular committee would help him in his search, he said

that companies operating in that space might then consider him. When I asked how many companies that was, he admitted it was a very small pool.

I'm not suggesting that you not get involved in various initiatives—after all, that can both feed your soul and provide outstanding networking opportunities. Volunteering is a great option to move your career forward on many levels—for a discussion of how, read this article: Volunteer ... To Be Marketable at www.JHACareers.com/Volunteer.htm

What I am going to suggest is to manage your activities carefully. It is easy to have a modest commitment morph into a major drain on your limited time and energy, and particularly if you are in an active job search, this can be devastating.

Next examine the level to which you can afford the involvement or focus.

Finally, one of the most important strategies is learning the art of saying "No."

There are two extremes here. One is the sharp, brusque "NO!" that has others start to view you as being negative, unhelpful or only in it for yourself. This contributes to a poor professional image that can harm you just as much (or more) than having gone ahead and gotten involved.

The other extreme is the excuse-filled "No." This is where you provide all sorts of justifications for why you are saying "No", and they come across as overkill, just a series of excuses rather than valid reasons. And again, this damages your professional reputation.

So how do you navigate between this Scylla and Charybdis? Let me present three principles to help you.

1. Give yourself permission to say no.

This sounds obvious, but it's very powerful. I recall a board I had been sitting on since its inception



that was progressively getting less interesting and more demanding (since some of us were much more active than others). Something else came up in my professional life that made it difficult to continue that level of involvement, but I felt guilty about stepping back, particularly since I was one of the founding members.

My natural inclination would have been to simply step back a little bit, take on less, but stay involved to a substantial degree. I instead told the chair that I needed to step back, and offered the choice for me to contribute as I could (without attending meetings) over the next several months until my term expired, or to resign my seat immediately if they wanted it freed up for someone else to serve.

I can't tell you how liberated I felt leaving that meeting!

2. Listen to your inner voice.

In the instance above, I was progressively getting less excited about our mission (or at least whether we were making meaningful progress toward achieving it). When the outside event came up that prompted me to re-examine my commitment, rather

than simply looking at how I could manage the two activities together, I listened to my inner voice. I felt some guilt about stepping back, but that inner voice was warning me that this board no longer fed my soul in a meaningful way, so I gave myself permission to say no.

To tune your inner voice so you can even hear it, you need to give some serious thought to your goals. Carefully examine them, so that when these choices arise you are able to clearly establish for each initiative how central it is to what you are trying to achieve.

Some can be focused on personal interests and others on professional goals (such as getting that next job or promotion), though you will find the most fulfillment when even those are aligned.

3. Like Nancy Reagan admonished, "Just Say No."

What I mean by this is to **follow the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid) and avoid lengthy explanations.** The more you explain why you can't do something, the more you either:

- Start to look whiny (*"Oh, woe is me, I could help you if only I didn't have all of these other things going on."*), or
- Provide the requester ammunition for a continued discussion on how to change your mind. And going down this road makes it that much more difficult to stick with your "No" and still retain a positive, professional image.

I attended a seminar years ago where a similar principle was applied to apologies, and it was a very powerful concept. (For more on this, read "**Watch Your Butts!**" at www.JHACareers.com/WatchYourButts.htm.)

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For example, if someone in another department comes to you for help on a project, and you say *“I’m sorry, but I’ve got three other critical issues I’m working on right now, and I promised my family I wouldn’t work late this week because we have friends visiting from out of town, and ...”* you’ve crossed into the land of excuses.

What if instead, you simply said, *“I’m sorry, I have critical deadlines this week.”*?

Now how about a more subtle example of how you might “Just Say No” in a job search?

How many times have you had a discussion with a networking contact, and that person suggested that they send your résumé to HR? This tends to happen a lot, because it’s something easy for them to do. However, it generally isn’t very helpful to me as a job seeker, and it lets the contact off the hook, so they feel less pressure to do anything else. What I really want is to get a chance to talk to someone else, ideally someone who is in a position to hire me or to introduce me to the person who could.

So here’s how I might deal with that suggestion.

“Jim, I really appreciate that. You know what would be really helpful to me? I would love the chance to talk to someone in the finance area, so I could start to get a feel for their issues. Who do you know in that area to whom you could introduce me?”

What I’ve done is deflect the request a bit, without directly saying no. If Jim still wants to take my résumé to HR, that’s fine—it’s not going to do me any harm. But I’ve taken the question as an opportunity to lead Jim toward the referrals that will really move me forward.

You can apply this to almost any suggestion Jim might make that you don’t believe will be particularly helpful. Don’t tell him that it won’t

be helpful, as that is a criticism that can hurt the relationship and shut down further suggestions. Just deflect it a bit like I did above...

“Jim, thanks for the idea, and I’ve actually done something along that line already. You know what would really help me move forward...”

Just be sure to put some work into practicing these techniques so that they become natural for you. As one colleague advises regarding job interviews, *“You should have at least five hours of role play before your first interview. After all, you don’t want the interview for the job you want to be your practice interview!”*

I’d love to hear your own techniques for saying “No” professionally, to include in a future issue of *The Stepping Stone* (anonymously, of course, unless you specifically tell me you would like attribution). Just drop me a note with your suggestions at SteppingStone@JHACareers.com. ●