

THE ART OF SAYING NO

EXTRACT: CHAPTER 10

MASTER EXPERT

HOW TO USE **EXPERTSHIP** TO
ACHIEVE PEAK PERFORMANCE,
SENIORITY AND INFLUENCE IN
A TECHNICAL ROLE

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CHAPTER | 10 |

The Art of Saying No

How do we learn to say “no” without upsetting stakeholders?

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE WILL EXPLORE:

- How we typically think about refusing people, and how it impacts our overall effectiveness.
 - The excuses we make and now need to avoid.
 - Six simple techniques to say “no” without saying the word “no.”
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TIME THIEVES. EVERY ORGANIZATION has them. And the vast majority of experts we have worked with over the past few years are guilty, ourselves included, of giving them oxygen. For a variety of reasons, we have simply not learned how to say “no” diplomatically and effectively.

In our programs, the authors invite experts to list what gets in the way of them doing high-value work. The results of this question are very predictable, whether our program was staged in New York, London, Singapore or Sydney.

In no particular order, experts typically list most of these barriers:

- Too many meetings
- Meetings without outcomes
- Too many stakeholders with differing priorities
- Firefighting, spot fires (unplanned work)
- Interruptions
- Too many emails

- Excessive reporting
- Managers changing the goalposts
- Lack of necessary resources
- Unrealistic deadlines
- Insufficient training on new systems or processes
- Simply too much work (very high workload)

Do these sound familiar? Across literally hundreds of groups that the authors have facilitated, it's remarkable how similar these lists are.

“The art of saying ‘no’ is one skill that separates mere experts from Master Experts.”

Whether the experts are from IT, legal, engineering, science, finance or audit, it appears to be a standard condition of professional life for most experts. But it doesn't need to be. We work with expert groups to help them define solutions to these barriers. Setting priorities linked to strategy and purpose (see previous section) is a critical process they offer as a solution, along with managing meetings more effectively and not attending meetings that don't really require them (see the chapter on collaboration for a more detailed analysis of Master Expert behavior when it comes to meetings).

A third solution is even simpler: say “no.” But doing so, our experts tell us, is never simple.

When we ask experts to list their reasons for being unable to say “no,” the list is as predictable and consistent as the barriers to getting things done. They are, again, in no particular order:

- We believe saying “no” creates conflict.
- We want to please our colleagues and stakeholders.
- We want to look like we're doing a good job.
- We worry about the pressure saying “no” creates.
- We don't want it to seem like we don't know how to do the work.
- Saying “no” is career limiting.
- We find what they're asking us to do interesting or challenging, so we have FOMO (fear of missing out).
- We can't say “no” to our manager.
- We don't have license to say “no.”
- We don't know how to say “no” diplomatically.

Do these reasons for avoiding refusing specific tasks sound familiar? An interesting observation that groups make is that when we're actually saying these things to ourselves, in our minds, they sound sensible and plausible.

When we list them on a flip chart at a workshop, however, they sound less convincing. It's the avoidance of conflict and the hubris of "we can do anything" that drives many of these self-talk excuses.

In Figure 10.1, we break down the solutions and alternatives to these excuses. But let's focus for a moment on the art of saying "no," which is a critical Master Expert capability. It's a skill that separates mere experts from Master Experts. It's the ability to objectively look at our workload and say that task is important and must be done, and that task is less important and will have to be deferred or declined. It the ability to make this case and to influence people effectively. This is actually what this book is all about.

It's the ability to understand that, within large organizations, there will always be too many projects and crazy deadlines. The reason for this is there are thousands of different agendas and there are careers on the line.

As experts, it's our duty, and a key professional responsibility, to help the organization prioritize, because the way in which organizations are structured makes it very difficult for experts to do this in isolation. General Manager A wants to be promoted to Executive General Manager before General Manager B. This natural tension leads General Manager A to insist that his/her project is more important than any proposed by General Manager B.

For us, as experts, to believe that common sense or reason will break out in this career-driven, ego-driven, silo-driven madness is, in itself, madness. We have to be the calm, objective, reasoned, strategically aligned voice—not the shrill, victim-based, subjective, emotional, derailing, immature voice. It's our choice. As we say in the last box in Figure 10.1, we need to grow up. We need to say it like it is, but say it nicely. Say it *diplomatically*.

Another way to look at it is that those asking us to do non-important work against unrealistic deadlines, the *time thieves*, are, in effect, unreasonably stealing our time and energy. Inviting us to a meeting where our contribution is likely to be limited to one item for five minutes means, by definition, if the meeting is an hour long, they're stealing 55 minutes of our very valuable time. We have choices. We can let them or we can push back. We'd like to suggest a rule, a mantra, if you like, that should police our behavior in this respect.

We either learn to say "no" diplomatically or we stop moaning about the pressure and overload of work we have accepted. It's our fault. It's our responsibility. We either master the ability we have to manage stakeholder relationships, "win-win" rather than "they win and we always lose," or we accept that we don't have that skill and will quietly suffer as a consequence.

Capability: PERSONAL IMPACT

The Art of Saying “No”

	TYPICAL REASONING	REVISED REASONING	ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE
1	Saying no creates conflict	Saying yes now will also result in conflict later – usually worse	"If I take this on something else will have to be left undone"
2	We want to please our colleagues and/or stakeholders	Saying yes – overcommitting – will result in someone else's displeasure sooner or later	"My existing focus and commitments are (x)"
3	We want to look like we are doing a good job	Over-committing on lower priority work is doing a bad job	"My strategic mandate is (x) and this, unfortunately, doesn't fit"
4	We worry about the pressure saying no creates	Saying yes when we should say no is what creates pressure	"If I agree to this, we risk quality issues due to excessive overload"
5	We don't want to appear weak or that we don't know how to do the work	Actual brand damage results from being over-extended, missing deadlines, poor quality rush jobs or colluding in being engaged at a lower than optimal level	"Let me equip and train others to do this. It's not my optimal focus"
6	Saying no is career limiting	Constant under-delivery or being grumpy limits one's career	For managers, list work, show calendar – they need to decide what gives
7	Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)	Lack of sufficient knowledge transfer results in our not having capacity	Plan for future projects we wish to be part of by delegating now
8	We can't say no to our manager (or certain stakeholders)	Managers/stakeholders will expect and ask until we push back. They expect us to alert them when we reach our limits	List work, show calendar, negotiate trade-offs – involve them in deciding what gives
9	We don't have the license to say no	We may earnestly believe this but it's not true. It is our right and responsibility to prioritize	Change mindset – it is my professional responsibility and right to say no
10	We don't know how to say no diplomatically	We can start thinking and behaving differently – and practice	Get adult. Say it like it is. Nicely

FIGURE 10.1: The Art of Saying “No”

The Best Way to Say “No” is to Never Use the Word “No”

AS WE DEMONSTRATE IN the chart, there are many ways to say “no,” and all of the best techniques avoid using that word entirely. Once we get into the knack of using some of these techniques, there’s no stopping us. Not only are they effective, but they’re also a lot of fun.

Technique #1: “Yes, but ...”

- In your mind: “There is simply no way I am doing that...”
- Out loud: “Yes, I can see that it’s a very important task for you to have us complete, but... I have these other priorities to complete and I have been told not to take anything else on...”

Technique #2: Timeframing

- In your mind: “No way. That isn’t a key task and a priority for me...”
- Out loud: “Yes, I possibly could do it, but unfortunately, not until after the holidays...”

Technique #3: Independence building

- In your mind: “You have to be joking... I can’t believe you don’t know how to do that yourself...”
- Out loud: “Okay, I can see it’s very important to fix that problem. How about I get a colleague to show you how to do it, so you’ll never have to wait for me to be available if the problem occurs again...”

Technique #4: Remote negotiation

- In your mind: “If I say “yes” to this, stakeholder X will have to wait another week for their work...”
- Out loud: “Okay, I can do it for you. But first, you need to go and see Stakeholder X and get their agreement that your task should take precedence over hers/his. Okay? Let me know how it goes...”

Technique #5: Referent authority

- In your mind: “Please no, not this low-end task again...”
- Out loud: “Ah, I’d love to do that for you, but my manager has told me to stop doing that type of work. She/he has asked me to prioritize other activities...” (i.e., take it up with my manager)

Technique #6: Strategic professionalism

- In your mind: (your turn, choose a thought that you regularly have...)
- Out loud: “Yes, well, I could do that for you, but if I did, I would be failing to prioritize properly and failing to do tasks that I have been set that have strategic importance...”

All fun apart, the answers we provide should be authentic and properly thought through. Experts aren't encouraged to say "no" regardless of what they're being asked to do. Being truly collaborative means listening carefully to what our stakeholders want and considering whether or not what they want us to do is more important.

Similarly, on many occasions, experts tell us that the work proposed is part of their strategic remit, but the element that creates the pressure is the unreasonable deadlines or short notice that stakeholders insist upon. The ability to challenge the deadline rather than the task is another skill we can benefit from acquiring. The ability to agree with stakeholders that deadlines should be jointly agreed, taking all workloads into account, rather than unilaterally imposed, is an important stakeholder conversation to have. Remember, most stakeholders can't see the full remit of an expert's work. They can only see how long it takes an expert to do *their* work.

None of these conversations are easy, particularly in the first instance.

All of which means we need to master another art: that of conducting effective *courageous conversations* in which we deal with conflict effectively, fairly, and for the greater good of all.

TAKING ACTION

Growing Our Ability to Push Back When Appropriate

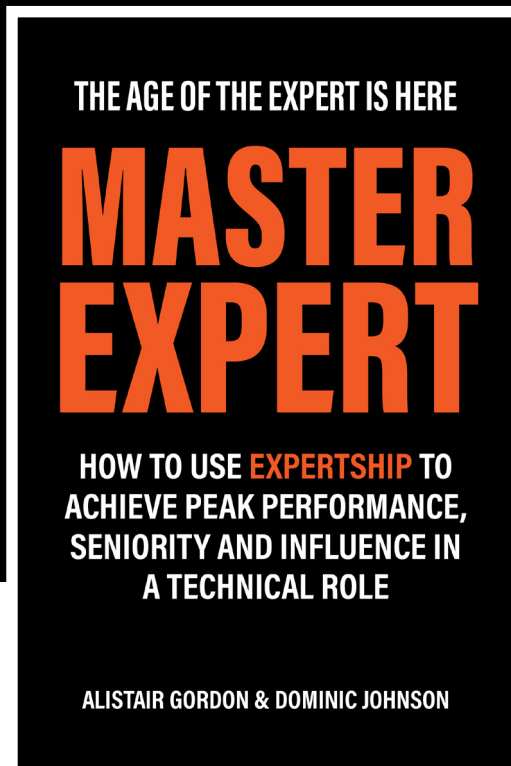
IF THIS IS AN expert skill that you believe could help you add greater value, here is a high-level suggestion for actions to take:

► EXPLORE YOUR INNER “NO” SETTINGS

- Using the chart in this chapter, ask yourself which mindset or beliefs mostly govern the decisions you make to say “yes” to stakeholders when you would much prefer (and believe it’s the right thing) to say “no.”
- Make a note of the *regretted yeses* that derail your workload and have the greatest impact. Start planning how you might effectively and authentically push back diplomatically on those requests. What support might you need ahead of time to do so?
- Run the movie: run a replay of a typical conversation and reimagine it using some of the techniques in this chapter. What might you say, and what might your stakeholder say in return? Prepare for likely responses and practice how you will sensibly answer their questions and deal with their concerns.
- Having made a list of tasks you really want to push back on, take action, and then review that list in a month’s time. How well did you do? Did the new tactics work? If not, why not? What tactics might you deploy instead?
- Don’t give up if it really is important for you to decline that work.

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