

Say 'no' without damaging your career

Setting boundaries at work can actually help you get ahead.

By Katherine Raz

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Joyce Marter is certainly familiar with the downside of taking on too much at work. As the founder of Urban Balance, a counselling practice with a team of more than 100 licensed therapists working from ten locations in Chicago, St. Louis, and Denver, she has helped hundreds of busy professionals find harmony between their work and personal lives.

However, despite being an outspoken advocate for work/life balance, Marter got an important lesson in workplace boundary setting a few years ago from an unexpected source: her student intern, Ellen. When Marter asked her to complete a task, Ellen gently pushed back, asking Marter to prioritise a number of duties that had already been assigned to her. It was only then that Marter realised how much work she had asked Ellen to do, more than could be completed within the defined internship hours. Even Marter, who has built a career around helping people avoid work overload, was unknowingly assigning more work than was reasonable.

This situation is familiar to most working people. A boss, even one who has your best interests at heart, asks too much of you. Yet as common as it is to be asked to take on work that overloads our capacity, many of us find it difficult to say “no” without feeling as if we are letting someone down, or worse, passing up an opportunity for advancement.

So how can you turn down work without worrying that it will harm your career? Here is some advice from the specialists.

DEFINE YOUR CAREER GOALS

Ondine Smulders, a coach/psychotherapist who deals with work/life balance issues at Vitalis Coaching in London, recommends taking a step back to define what it is you ultimately want from your job.

“Often when I work with clients, we do a lot of work on what it is that you want,” she says. “What are you trying to get out of a job? How can you get that?”

Saying “no” to a particular task will not feel as risky if you can fit it into the context of your career as a whole. This works especially well if you are asked to do something outside of your defined role, such as marketing or overseeing the redesign of a website. Ask yourself: Is this something I want to develop in professionally? If not, the task becomes easier to push back on.

Smulders recommends engaging with mentors or colleagues outside of your workplace who are a step ahead of you career-wise and who can help you frame work requests in a broader career context. “Someone who understands the industry,” she says, “and who can help guide you on how to get ahead: what to say no to, what to say yes to, what’s important.”

DOCUMENT YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Marter recommends setting goals, defining tasks, then communicating progress regularly with your boss.

“If you’re effective in your job, it’s easier to set boundaries, wrap up at the end of the day, and feel confident in your ability to push back,” she says.

When you have a track record of success, you can more easily justify saying “no” to work that falls outside of the things you are doing to achieve your predefined goals.

Marter says that tracking what you are working on can be as simple as keeping a bulleted list of goals and tasks. Alternatively, you can use project management software to improve transparency around productivity, workflow, and accountability.

SAY WHAT YOU WILL DO INSTEAD OF WHAT YOU WILL NOT DO

“People accept boundary statements more positively when you frame them in terms of what you will do versus what you won’t, because that comes off as negative, nonenthusiastic or noncompliant,” Marter says.

She uses the example of saying, “I will start this project on Monday morning”, which implies, but does not explicitly state, the negative: “I can’t get to it tomorrow”, or “I won’t work the weekend”.

If someone asks you to take on more work than you can handle, be clear with your higher-ups about how much work is on your plate; they may not be aware of everything that has been assigned to you. Start by affirming what you can do, for example, “I’m happy to run these reports this afternoon”. Then, like Ellen the intern, ask for help prioritising the things you will not be able to get to if you complete the newly assigned task. “If I run the reports, I’ll need to miss the sales meeting. Can we agree on that?”

DEVELOP THE RIGHT VOCABULARY

Knowing what to say, and how to say it, helps when pushing back on work that will put you over capacity. Smulders recommends starting a “no” response with “thank you for thinking of me for this work”.

“They may dump a lot of stuff on you,” she says, “but it’s flattering that someone is thinking ‘OK, this person is going to get this work done.’” Thanking people also gives you time, she says, to repeat back what you have been asked to do and formulate a response.

Both Smulders and Marter emphasise the importance of using “I” statements rather than “you”. This helps keep your response free of an accusatory tone. For example, “I have been tasked with several things this week and I am unclear on which is the most important” versus “you’ve given me too much to do this week”.

KEEP IT BRIEF

Marter notes that single people without children often bear the brunt of overwork in some offices and may feel unjustified in defining clear boundaries around leaving at the end of the day. While it is easy for a working parent to say, “I have to pick my son up from daycare,” a single person may find it hard to justify leaving work to meet friends or attend a yoga class.

“Maybe seeing your friends is part of your self-care and is necessary in order for you to stay balanced and feel well,” Marter says. In that case, she says, “you don’t have to justify it. All you need to say is that you can’t. You’ve got a commitment, an appointment, a meeting.”

Smulders warns against saying “sorry” in these situations, which can sneak out as a matter of habit.

“How you say things is very important,” she says. “It implies that you’re in control of yourself and you have a belief that you can say no, a belief that you do have some power in situations.”

Remember that, ultimately, pushing back can help you. While Ellen may have found it intimidating to resist the work she had been assigned, Marter had no negative feelings about the interaction. In fact, she says, she was happy that Ellen asserted herself.

“She was communicating in a clear and respectful way,” Marter says, “and that helped both of us collaborate and communicate around making it an achievable goal with realistic expectations, so it’s not a setup for failure.”

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