

# NO, NEIN, NON, NYET!

Productiveness is the efficient allocation of your resources. Being able to say “No” should be part of that allocation



## NOT BEING HAMLET

Stop procrastinating (Latin “cras”= tomorrow), start prohodinating (Latin “hodie”= today)

**P**rocrastination is like gravity, a strong force which prevents one from getting things done. This force is particularly evident in workplaces, where it can keep things not happening for hours if not days. It's that habit of constantly putting off work until tomorrow and then wasting time on manufacturing excuses such as you work best under pressure and so on.

Psychologist William Knaus, who has written several self-help books on fighting procrastination since his 1977 *Overcoming Procrastination* observes that “People who procrastinate tend to be less healthy, less wealthy and less happy.” So how can you fight procrastination?

Temptation is the biggest factor for procrastination, says Dr. Piers Steel in his recent analysis of procrastination research published in the *Psychological Bulletin*: “It's easier to procrastinate now than ever before. We have so many more temptations; it's never been harder to be self-disciplined in all of history than it is now.”

There are so many fun ways to kill time — laptops, televisions in every room, online radio, internet surfing, cell-phones, video games, iPods and Blackberries. At work especially, e-mail, the Internet and games are just a click away, making procrastination effortless. Check e-mail only when you have time to answer new messages. Similarly shut down your chat clients. This way you will actually get the task done instead of getting distracted. Effective workers batch their e-mails and if they can, set up phone hours (the specified time when they are available for phone calls).

Further inducements to procrastination are ill-defined tasks and deadlines. Break down tasks into work bites as necessary, and assign finish dates. Make sure your To-Do has well-defined work bites and deadlines. And make sure it contains only those tasks which you absolutely need to get done. Including tasks that you don't have to really do provides you an excuse for doing something other than what you really need to do. It also makes the list longer and potentially overwhelming.

Last and foremost, the first step is to just start! The most difficult part of many chores is getting started. Start the task, even in some arbitrary way. Just as it is better to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all, it is also better to have started haphazardly than not to have started at all. Once started, the task is often easier than you expect. And the best part is that when you actually finish it the feeling is terrific. So stop procrastinating and start “prohodinating!” ■

which of them are, in one hyphenated word, no-able. Saying “No” to no-able tasks should be your goal.

To do this, first analyse all requests/tasks on your plate. Everything must be inventoried - problems with clients, e-mails, phone calls, errands etc. The inventory must then be sorted. The first sort prioritises tasks on the basis of importance (to keep it simple, opt for important vs. less-important, or an ABC classification). Then, for each category classify the urgency. And remember urgency need not be co-terminous with importance.

Out of this are born three clusters of no-ability:

- Highly no-able tasks: because unimportant, whether urgent or not.
- Quite no-able tasks: at least temporarily, because classified as non-urgent though important
- Less no-able tasks: but you can think twice and say “No” to some tasks that are both important and urgent.

When confronted with a less no-able request, you can still say “No”, by marshalling two kinds of argument. You can argue that you are under-competent and/or that someone else has greater competence with regard to the task. The proposal to move the task upward must be framed in terms of serving the higher interest of the organisation. And if you are frequently asked to do tasks above your competence level, that might provide an opportunity to request professional training so as to acquire the competence and be able to answer yes in the future.

The case could also be that

you feel over-competent for the task. In that case, you can propose that it be delegated. This type of “No” amounts to arguing for the best allocation of the company's resources. You can frame this type of “No” in terms of an overall gain in company efficiency. In either case, over-competence or under-competence, your “No” transmogrifies into a “Yes” to the company's overall objectives.

### Backing up the “No”

“In my experience ‘No’ can really mean ‘yes,’” says Hari Nagabhairava, senior director finance for American Standard Inc. If that sound oracular, then hear him out: “I think most senior management appreciate candour and honesty when it comes to what is possible and what is not. Of course the ‘No’ must be firmly backed by data and facts. I think it is important to be candid upfront and thereby build a reputation of a ‘straight shooter’ in long term it pays, and pays well,”

Most people feel that they have to say yes to the boss. They figure that if they say “No” then they might look as if they are not capable of handling the work. But this, in fact, is counter-productive. It's a good idea to explain to your boss that by taking on too many commitments, you are diminishing your productivity and jeopardising the orderly handling of your existing commitments. Back up your “No” by pointing to bad consequences of a yes, as you foresee it. If your boss persists on the project, go over your project or task list and ask him or her to re-prioritise so as to arrive at a feasible agenda.

**T**aking on more than one can chew is a common workplace failing.

Yet workers, notably including executives, seem to keep falling into this trap, the one that is labelled “failure”. Even today the colonial “Yes sir” mentality sticks and employees, together with their bosses, keeping running in place, getting nowhere.

It's a simple fact that you can never be productive if you take on too many commitments — you simply spread yourself too thin and will not be able to get anything done, at least not well or on time. The only solution to this problem is working to the rule that when one's plate is full, decline all further fodder.

Here are some tips to master the art of saying “No”

### Overcoming the instinctive fear of saying “No”

Being fearful of saying “No” is a common trait. Most people are worried that if they say “No” to additional work they will be resented as non-cooperative or incompetent. They then conclude that if they say “No”, they will be passed over for promotion or other lucrative career opportunities.

“It's a syndrome that most suffer from, especially in the beginning of one's career,” says Rupa Naik, Executive Director of All India Association of Industries. “I went through the phase a long time ago. This was the time when I thought I could handle everything on my own. So I took on a project to organise single-handedly an International event with participation from

over 15 countries. All went well until my sponsor backed out of the project at the last minute. That made me learn that I had taken on something which I could not handle and that a ‘No’ right in the beginning would have been the right thing to do. Since then I always make it a point to have a second line of action or a fall-back plan.”

Rupa Naik's story would be

recognised as a parable, were it to go on and teach that you can fight the fear of saying “No” with the fear of the consequences of not saying “No”.

### Tasks one can say “No” to, or no-ability

To avoid the snare of taking on too much, it's important to be systematic and determine which tasks you can say “No” to,

#### SELF-ORGANISATION: A TEST

Proper organisation contributes to stress reduction, to productivity and to the ability to say no. Here is a short test you can take to assess your level of self-organisation. Add up the points for each question.

If you have:  
**35-40 points: you are thoroughly organised**  
**30-35 points: you are properly organised but there might be one or two areas for considerable improvement**  
**25-30 points: you are on the way to proper organisation, but you must choose a couple of areas for immediate improvement**  
**0-25 points: you are disorganised; there are at least 5 areas for major improvement. Tackle them in pairs.**

	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS	TOTAL
	0 pts	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	
Do you maintain daily to do lists?						
Do you prioritise tasks?						
Are you able to separate the important from the urgent?						
Do you try to envision problems before they might occur?						
Can you retrieve needed documents easily?						
Do you do the most important tasks during your most productive time of the day?						
Do you set designate time blocks for interactivities (e-mail, telephone...)?						
Each morning do you know with which 2-3 tasks you will begin the day?						
At the end of the day, have you accomplished the to-do tasks of the day?						
Do you finish your tasks on time?						
<b>Total points</b>						<b>/40</b>

Source: adapted from Fathi Thattli, *Gérer son temps efficacement*

# CASE STUDY MANAGEMENT

Hari Nagabhairava here again has something to say: "In the course of my career there were a number of occasions where I chose candour and risked saying "No". Each of them was a wonderful learning experience. They contained lessons that help me every day to be an efficient manager. But: always have your facts and data ready. Be sensitive to your corporate goals. Think through your response. The "Here is why I think..." is very important. And have confidence in the principle that, in the long term, people appreciate candour." Often, by using the "Here is why" you can get your interlocutor to say "Yes" to your "No"!

## The tone of "No"

Another key thing to keep in mind when saying "No" is that it's important to be dispassionate, impersonal. Remember that you are not really saying "No" to a person; you are saying "No" to a request that will not redound to either the boss's or the customer's benefit. Always consider inserting into your pitch larger goals like your department's or company's overall goals.

The concept of overall goals is here treated as interchangeable with company interest. Vijay Abhijit, Senior Test Lead at Microsoft Corp., talks about how he looks at company goals, "when a new request comes in that requires immediate involvement by my team, I try to weigh its business priority against what my team is already working on. If I see that I cannot fulfil the request, I try to have a frank chat (in person rather than by e-mail) with the requester, explaining why my team's current work is

more important to the company and how its performance would be adversely affected by taking on this new work item. This brings in objectivity and the requester does not feel confronted or diminished."

It's also a good idea to be honest and clear - only a genuine reason will fly with a person expecting you to do something. Otherwise it may be construed as shirking. Be neither obsequious nor domineering.

While saying "No" most people think a good way to start out is with "I'm sorry but..." since they feel this sounds more polite. But one should remember that while politeness is important, apologising just makes your case sound weaker. You should be firm, and unapologetic about protecting your time.

When saying 'No' make sure you have a calm and clear head. This is very important in maintaining a good relationship with your peers. A "No" should not burn any bridges. Saying "No" in a violent way might very well lead to a prejudice against your "No"s; your future ones could be discounted. Remember that the quality of your "No" can be as damaging as their quantity.

Giving humour a shot is also a good idea. One of GO's informants tells us, "I often say, If I take on anything else I will probably need to clone myself. Wouldn't that be a sight!" This response does not claim to rank as humour, but at least it is the kind of light gambit that helps dampen the fire in a confrontational situation. ■

**NEXT ISSUE:**  
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## GOOD STRESS, BAD STRESS

Seek the good stress, dodge the bad stress.

**S**timulation and challenge, good stress, are sources of satisfaction. When the stimulation and challenge near breaking points, you can use techniques to help maintain control and balance.

Somewhat like cholesterol, there is good stress and bad stress. An absence of stress might indicate a lack of stimulation. Good stress is a sign of satisfying and stimulating activity. Bad stress occurs when rather than growing with tasks you are being overwhelmed by them.

Being able to say no is probably the best way of avoiding bad stress. But here are some other stress management techniques.

Your work life is a reflection of your personal life. So it's a good idea to start paying attention to your physical and emotional health. When your own

needs are taken care of, you're stronger and more resilient to bad stress. The better you feel, the better equipped you will be to manage work stress without becoming overwhelmed by it.

Another good idea to avoid bad stress is to exercise. Aerobic exercise - perspiring - is an effective anti-anxiety treatment lifting mood, relaxing mind and body. How many hours per week do you set aside for such hearty activity?

Lack of sleep also leaves you vulnerable to bad stress. When you are sleep deprived, the pleasure of self-control is compromised. When you are well-rested (8 hours seems to be the reasonable average), it is much easier to keep your emotional balance, a key factor in coping with job and workplace stress.

Humor is a great idea to battle workplace stress too. There is no better stress buster than a hardy laugh and nothing reduces stress quicker in the workplace than mutually shared humor. However be careful not to overstep boundaries, because if the laugh is at someone else's expense, you may end up with more instead of less stress.

Stop trying to be perfect. No project, situation, or decision is ever perfect, and you put undue stress on yourself by trying to do everything perfectly. The word "stress" comes from the Latin "stringere" which also gives "stringent" - don't be too stringent on yourself. Do your best, and you will be better.

If you see the downside of every situation and interaction, you'll find yourself drained of energy and motivation. Try to think positively about your work, avoid negative-thinking co-workers, and pat yourself on the back about small accomplishments, even if no one else does.

Finally don't get stressed by stress. According to Robert Ostermann, professor of psychology at FDU's Teaneck-Hackensack Campus, "No one reaches peak performance without being stressed, whether an athlete, an office worker or a manager." Let the good stress roll. ■

