



## saying 'no' gracefully

How often do you come under pressure to say 'yes' when you know you are unlikely to be able to deliver? Tessa Simpson shows how you can say 'no' – gracefully.

■ **We all come under pressure to say 'yes' to requests which, even as we're saying it, we know that we're unlikely to deliver... or are really annoyed about having to agree to. The requests may come from your boss, your peers, your staff, your partner...or even your children.**

Trying to be efficient at work and having personal demands at home can result in you getting pulled in every direction. As a result of not saying 'no' you may become overworked, miss unrealistic deadlines, or become stressed, which could damage your reputation.

Why do we say 'yes' when we want to say 'no'? Sometimes it is because we fear appearing unable to cope with the workload. We may want to try to please others, or feel uncomfortable saying 'no'.

In today's marketplace greater demands and expectations are put upon us, budgets are cut and reductions in staff are common trends. So in this atmosphere how can we say 'no' without threatening our job security?

Let's imagine it's three in the afternoon and you're looking forward to the evening. You're going out to a special show and it all starts just after 5pm, when you meet your partner for drinks and pre-theatre dinner.

Your boss rushes in and says: "I've just had a call from the Director. They urgently need the end-of-month analysis by tomorrow lunchtime instead of the end of the week. Can you stay on this evening and put it together, so I can pass the figures on in the morning?"

This may or may not come as a request, depending on the management style of your boss.

The pressure to say 'yes' may be strong, due to your conscientiousness, fear of how you might appear not to be pulling your weight, or due to your boss's attitude if you do.

So how can you deflect unreasonable requests, and manage other people's expectations gracefully?

You don't say 'yes' and you don't say 'no'; instead you use a strategy called ADQ.

Start by **acknowledging** their request. So say something like: "You'd like me to stay on this evening and prepare the end-of-month analysis?"

This lets the other person know that you've heard what they've asked for.

Now you **disclose** something about your own situation which shows why it would be difficult for you to agree to their request. In this situation you could say: "tonight I'm going out for a special dinner and show and I have to be at the restaurant by 5.15..." As you're saying this your boss will realise why you haven't said 'yes', and he or she will begin to think of other options.

So they're in receptive mode when you offer the final part of the message, when you ask a **question** which offers an alternative. You could say something like: "Would it be OK for me to come in early tomorrow and have the analysis ready for, say, 9am?"

In most cases you will find that, if you have pitched your question realistically, the other person will agree with what you've suggested. If not, you go round the process again until you find a solution you're both happy with.

A delegate on one of my training programmes practised this technique on day one of a two day course. He arrived breathless a few minutes late on the second morning.

He shared with us the reason for being late. On the way to the course he was stopped by his manager who, without asking what his commitments were that day, asked him to run a two-hour health and safety session that morning for some new members of staff.

John related that his manager's style was fairly aggressive and if he tried to argue his corner he was usually shouted down and told to get on with it.

This time he remembered the ADQ technique. He said to his manager "so you want me to run a two hour health and safety session this morning?"

"Yes," his boss replied.

"I am actually on a course myself today."

He disclosed this information.

"Can I do it tomorrow morning?" he asked.

"No," said his boss, "it must be done today."

After a moment's thought he worked through the three steps again.

"The session must be run today?"

"Yes, no question" answered his boss.

"I am on this course today and it runs till three-thirty," John disclosed, then added "How would it be if I ran the session from three-thirty?"

"Well I suppose that will have to do!"

replied his boss.

John felt immensely empowered after that exchange as he had never before been able to put his point across and saying 'no' was not an option.

Another example relates to a woman I was coaching. She worked in an audit department which was under constant pressure to deliver timely results. She was two staff members down – both off with stress – and she had been told she couldn't employ anyone else.

One of the problems was that three partners in the firm all put work into her department, all said it was urgent and none of them consulted her on her workload. When Gillian tried to explain that things couldn't all get done on time she was told by the partner who was asking for something that their work took priority. There was also an overt criticism suggesting that she couldn't cope because she had been internally promoted and was being compared with the previous incumbent who had worked with an additional member of staff, and no one off sick.

After discussing the ADQ technique and practising it with me, then at home and with friends she tried it out with one of the partners, Andy.

He asked her to work on an audit that was on a tight deadline. She responded, "You want me to work on this audit immediately". Acknowledging the request.

"Yes, this is really urgent."

"I have also been given a priority audit to complete for James, and Eileen said she would be bringing in work later today that was needed before the end of the week. We can't complete everything at once." Gillian disclosed her situation.

"Could you have a chat with James and Eileen and agree between yourselves what work is the highest priority and let me know which job to do first?"

After expressing surprise and annoyance Andy left and had a conversation with his partners. They agreed priorities, had a further meeting where they agreed they needed another member of staff and put a new structure in place for prioritising jobs. All after one ADQ.

Gillian felt so much more empowered and has since moved on to a management role where she still practises this skill.

**It's a three-part message, easily remembered by ADQ:**

- A** – acknowledge their request, so they know you've heard them correctly
- D** – disclose something about your own situation, so they know why you haven't said 'yes'
- Q** – finally ask a question which leads you towards a mutually-acceptable solution.

To borrow an advertising slogan from a recognised DIY chain: 'You can do it when you 'AD and Q' it!' ■

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