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How Do You Say No?

Emily Ford

December 16, 2009 @ 6:00 am



[1]

Image from the National Archives and Records Administration Archival Research Catalog

Have you ever found yourself thinking: "I know I said yes to this, but now I wish I'd said no. That's what I wanted to say in the first place"? Chances are you said yes because you were afraid to say no or you didn't know how, or you don't like saying no. If you were afraid to say no maybe you felt that you would be looked on as being difficult to work with, or that you would receive a poor job performance review. Maybe you feel that if you say no now, you won't be asked again. Maybe you even feel guilty because if you can't do a project then your co-worker will have to do it; or the project doesn't get done at all. How do you say no? How can we frame "no" in a way that avoids negative consequences and enables us to be effective and healthy librarians?

Maintaining the right work/life balance can be tricky. For example, if your partner or child has an important event that conflicts with a meeting, what will you choose to attend? Some people might go to their meeting or show up late to her child's piano recital or her partner's awards ceremony. I have heard the phrase "rotating neglect" to describe these kinds of conflicts within work and personal lives. Essentially, we make choices to either neglect work or neglect

ourselves and family. One of the ways we can counteract this is to begin by saying no to opportunities for service or projects that will upset the work/life balance we have.

The ability to say no to taking on a new project at work or another committee appointment is directly related to mental wellness and a healthy work/life balance. Many of us have a hard time saying no and can accumulate too much work and responsibility. The quandary remains that if you're good at what you do you'll be asked to take on projects and commitments. As a result the quality of our work and personal lives can suffer. In order to remain happy at work and in our personal lives, it is crucial that we find balance between them so that we feel mentally able to handle the tasks handed us at work, as well as the extracurricular activities in which we choose to engage. Service on national or local committees can be demanding and time intensive; frequently on time that is your own, and not our employer's. In order to maintain balance, we need to learn how to say no. Say no when we cannot take on another commitment because our wellness is at stake. And that takes a tremendous amount of [emotional intelligence](#) [2], leadership, and let's face it, guts.

[William Ury's](#) [3] [The Power of a Positive No](#) [4] argues [3] that a positive "no" is one that first affirms your values, then clearly says "no" to the current request, but ends with a possible yes to future positive work together. The construct Ury uses for this positive no is: "Yes! No. Yes?" For example, if you're saying no to a colleague who asked if you would switch your late night reference shift, chances are you are saying "yes!" to spending time with your family, keeping your tickets to the big game, or your valued personal time. Following the "yes!" you must clearly communicate "no." "No, John, I cannot take your shift." The final "yes?" is a yes that is a proposition to an alternative to which you can both agree. An example of this might be, "I am spending tonight with my family. No, I cannot take your shift. Maybe in the future I'll be able to." While my example certainly does not do Ury's book justice, it shows the construction of a positive no. A positive no is one that is intentional and thoughtful, and in the end, carries more meaning and demands more respect than a reactive "no" or a meek "yes." Sometimes we just say yes because we fear the consequences, but if we can frame our "nos" positively as Ury suggests, we will find many of these fears ill-founded, and we will say no without feelings of guilt. Saying no in this positive way will feel good.

I recently remembered an act of self-advocacy displayed at a former job. When I was working as an elementary school library assistant, the principal asked if I would be interested in planning and hosting an after school book discussion group with students. My response is paraphrased as follows. "What a great idea. I think the kids could really benefit from something like this. I would not be able to do this on my free time. Can we work it out so that I may work more hours and be paid to do this?" You can see that my response follows the positive no construction. First, I say "yes!" affirming that I think the kids at the school could benefit from the program and I would enjoy doing it. Then I say "no" to doing the work as a volunteer. Finally, I say "yes?" to working on the project provided I get financially compensated. The principal and I were able to come to agreement and I started an after school book club for 4th and 5th graders.

"There are moments when people have to say No...and that No needs to be said with the same sincerity, the same honesty, and in the same tone of voice that people say Yes."" Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as quoted by Ury, p. 132

Just as the quote above indicates, "nos" and "yeses" that are communicated without thought will be ineffective. Before you can effectively say no you have to know yourself. You have to know your values and strengths, and you have to know your professional and personal goals. You have to be a leader. How? Discover your values first. Try using Elizabeth Burnette's outline that answers "How can you tap into your full leadership potential?" from a workshop she conducted at the NCSU libraries called *Personal Leadership & Balancing Competing Priorities*.

Personal Leadership & Balancing Competing Priorities by Elizabeth S. Burnette

How can you tap into your full leadership potential?

1. Determine your values, personal vision, and leadership vision:

- Identify your values,
- Determine what's incongruent between what you believe, what you say, and what you do,
- Accommodate changes to your values over time – they do change, and

- Address conflicts between values, career, and life.
2. Understand your leadership ability.
 - This is the sum of your skills, energy, time, and focus at a point in time.
 - Influence can impact your ability to lead well in the present.
 - Present roles can impact your ability to lead in future roles.
 3. Consider how leadership fits into your world:
 - Periodically assess your goals and aspirations,
 - Review your personal and professional agendas, and
 - Analyze past leadership roles for lessons learned.
 4. Strive for balance between leadership and the other parts of your life.
 - Balance is not about perfection.
 - Changing demands can create imbalances in your life.
 - Be fluid and look to minimize clashes between life and leadership.

Mary Pergander discussed another technique last October in [American Libraries](#) ^[5]. Take a mini-retreat to reflect on your priorities and values. (October 2008). Make an outline and while on your retreat reflect on what is important to you.

Some examples from the field

Because I was so curious about this topic I decided to informally ask my colleagues and peers how they approach saying no. I e-mailed librarians who I know and posed the following questions:

- How do you decide to say “yes” to a project/committee appointment, etc when you are asked to take on a task?
- Have you ever said “no” to taking on a project at work? If so, how did you decide to say no, and what were the key components of that decision?
- When you have said no at work, how have you communicated the “no”?
- Have you ever felt that saying “no” at work has resulted in negative outcomes? Please explain the nature of those outcomes (as you are comfortable).
- Have you ever wanted to say no but didn’t feel that you were able due to its ramifications? If so, please explain the situation (as you are comfortable) and its outcomes.

A total of 16 people responded. My favorite response is quoted below in its entirety.

“I apologize for not replying sooner. These past few weeks have been very busy for me both at work and at home. I’ve given your request some thought and I am sorry to say that I cannot participate in your informal information gathering. I know that lots of other librarians will be happy to share their experiences with you, and I hope you will think of me the next time something like this comes up.”

In addition to making my day, this is a thoughtful and well executed no. In the style of Ury’s positive “no” it affirms the “yes!” that his time is precious. It clearly states that the answer is no, and it opens the “yes?” to working together in the future.

Perhaps the most telling result of asking for this feedback was that of the 16 respondents, two (12.5%) pointed to their mental health having been compromised as a result of having said yes, when they really should have said no. Two people (12.5%) also point to having a career or job changed based on their decisions to say no. One said “no” to overwork and stress by deciding to change jobs. The other person’s no (to working on a new project) resulted in a poor performance review and later a hostile work environment when the person who originally asked for help became her boss! This eventually led to her finding a new job and in the long run, ended positively.

Another theme that appears in respondents’ answers is that saying yes or no depends on who is doing the asking. Several people noted that they can’t say no to their boss or the library director. Others noted that if the person who asks is someone they respect and admire they are more likely to say yes, noting that personal requests garner more attention. Sometimes you just

aren't able to say no without jeopardizing your job or your performance review.

What was surprising to me, although it shouldn't be, is that several people mentioned difficulty with saying no in their first "librarian" job. "I learned through my experience at that first librarian job that you have to start saying no early on because once you've shown you can do the work, no one is going to take work away from you...When I came to my new job, I immediately started setting boundaries."

Saying no can be political. For professionals who are in a position where they must attempt to get tenure, it can mean hindering their ability to either continue employment or attain tenure status. In these instances we are trapped in "not having a choice" to say no. It's not a "yes" because you can't resist the opportunity, but you fear the consequences of a "no."

In his book Ury similarly discusses tough situations and advises you that you must always have a Plan B. A Plan B is not a compromise, rather it is a plan with which you feel comfortable and are able to execute if your "no" is not accepted. If your Plan B is to find a new job or even quit your current one, you must be prepared to take that step.

The final theme I noted is that there are major differences between saying no at work and saying no to joining another ALA committee (or something similar). One of my colleagues said precisely because ALA commitments are not part of her job expectations, she is very picky about what she **does** do. In order to say yes to an appointment she must feel passionately about that particular service or task.

Let's talk praxis. How do you do it?

"Saying No is essential in life. Every living cell has a membrane that allows certain needed nutrients to pass through and repels others. Every living organism needs such boundaries to protect itself. To survive and thrive, every human being and every organization need to be able to say No to anything that threatens their safety, dignity, and integrity." *The Power of a Positive No* p. 125

So what are some tactics that we can use to decide if we're going to give a yes or no answer? The following are synthesized suggestions by respondents; and even some of their direct suggestions.

- Review your workload with your supervisor and come upon mutual agreement to whether your answer will be a "yes" or "no" can be helpful both in the way you frame your response, but also in alleviating any political ramifications or consequences your "no" may cause.
- Think about whether the project is of value to you, your job, or your patrons. Also consider whether it's a task about which you are passionate, something that will be a lot of fun to do, or add to your skills set.
- Consider who is doing the asking. Think about whether the person asking is asking for a favor or a personal request.
- Always weigh whether or not you have the time. One respondent offered a calculation you could use to figure your time commitment at work. "...keeping a calculation of your standard work week responsibilities in time-consumption (i.e. weeding=2hours/per/week, desk time=15 hours/per/week, etc.) Once you have that worked out, you'll know if you can afford another X-amount of hours to dedicate to the project."
- Decide whether you think you will have something to contribute to the project/committee.
- Weigh the consequences. If you are going to say "yes" to this project you might have to say "no" to something else. Figure out which is more important to you.
- Discuss the issue with your friends, partner and family. If your commitments will affect them you should consult them. Chances are you will get some good advice.
- If saying no, always recommend someone else who might be good at that position or would have interest in serving. (Share the love!)

Let's face it, sometimes even after answering all of these questions we have to say no. But if we've thoughtfully examined our values and the situation at hand, chances are we can communicate our "no" positively, intentionally, and with respect. Several respondents forwarded examples of how to say no. See the one quoted below (names have been changed to protect the innocent).

Hi Sue,

Seeing that you have a nice group of interested people and feeling like I've jumped on a few too many projects for this spring, I'd like to respectfully bow out of the Second Life group. You're welcome to keep me on the email list for input, but I'd rather not commit to regular meetings and additional training.

Thanks,
Sam

It's not just a positive "no," it's also an intentional and thoughtful "yes."



[1]

Image from the National Archives and Records Administration Archival Research Catalog

As I end this article I want to stress that while I have concentrated on the "no," by learning to frame and understand our "nos," we are also learning how to understand and frame our "yes." We should approach situations, opportunities and the whole of our work with thoughtfulness and intent. Thoughtful yeses and thoughtful nos will be more respected by your colleagues and carry more meaning. Moreover, you will feel better in your work and personal life when you can strike the balance, and say your "nos" without fear and guilt, but with a positive affirmation of your values.

If we can start balancing our work and personal lives and integrate positive "nos" when we need them, we'll be healthier and happier librarians

Now it's time to hear from readers. How do you decide on your yes and on your no? How do you say it? Have you had to say no to preserve your wellness?

Further Reading

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Thank You

A heartfelt thank you to Elizabeth Burnette and Katherine O'Clair for providing thoughtful feedback on

this post. Additional thanks to my colleague Laura Zeigen and Lead Pipers Ellie Collier, Derik Badman, Brett Bonfield, and Hilary Davis for their editorial comments.

You might also be interested in:

- [Our Librarian Bodies. Our Librarian Selves.](#) ^[6]
- [Tryin' to Get My Mojo Workin'](#) ^[7]
- [The Importance of Thinking about Thinking](#) ^[8]
- [What Not to Do When Applying for Library Jobs](#) ^[9]
- [Leading with Heart](#) ^[10]

22 Comments To "How Do You Say No?"

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#1 Comment By [Laura Zeigen](#) On December 16, 2009 @ 10:48 am

"Every living organism needs boundaries to protect itself". We need to set up a collection develop policy for our time. No library in its right mind would say "yes" to every item offered for its collection, so it is a wonder that we think it's OK for us to do this with ourselves.

#2 Comment By [Ann Wilberton](#) On December 16, 2009 @ 11:18 am

Hey, great post. When we spread ourselves too thin, nothing gets done well. I heard a talk given by a Buddhist teacher a while back and she was talking about how people sometimes take care of everyone else and feel selfish if they take care of themselves. She re-framed it by reminding us of the safety procedures on airplanes. You are instructed to put your own air mask on first and then help your child or someone else who may need help.

This image has stuck with me whenever I think about taking on something that might greatly impact my quality of life or the balance required to be healthy and happy.

When I am at my best, when I am taking care of myself, this is when I do my best work and when I have the most patience for customers and a flexible and creative mind for brainstorming solutions.

We can't do our jobs well if we are out of balance.

Thanks for tackling this important topic.

#3 Comment By [Infomavensdesktop](#) On December 16, 2009 @ 1:16 pm

Thanks for this wonderful post. As a librarian in her first librarian position, and without any kids, I find it hard to ever say no even though (between 3 part-time gigs) I work between fifty and sixty hours a week. This makes me feel better about the few times I have had to say no.

#4 Comment By [Kim Leeder](#) On December 16, 2009 @ 3:33 pm

Emily, thanks so much for this important post. Finding a healthy life/work balance is so challenging, particularly to those of us new to walking that line.

For me the most difficult part of saying no is that I just don't want to! I'm excited and enthusiastic about so many different ideas and projects, and I really *want* to say yes to everything and help make it all successful. But as I'm now in year 3 of my first full-time librarian job, I'm seeing how that can circle around and bite us in the butt! Instead of putting thoughtful energy into a few prioritized top projects, we end up putting distracted, incomplete attention into all of them. I think saying no sometimes is doing the other person a favor, as well as sparing ourselves.

Our energy and time are finite resources. It takes thoughtfulness and experience to learn how to prioritize and focus on those projects that have the most promise and/or interest us most. I wish all of us luck in navigating this complex issue! We can help each other, too, by being understanding when others say no to us.

#5 Comment By [Anne](#) On December 16, 2009 @ 4:01 pm

Fabulous and important post. And frankly, I would rather have someone say "no" to me right

away than get halfway into a project and have them stop showing up for meetings because they just don't have time!

I've shared this with others and one response (from a teacher, not a librarian; this has some universal appeal) was:

Finally: an article that explains HOW to say "no" effectively, rather than asserting that one should say "no!"

#6 Comment By [Peter Bromberg](#) On December 16, 2009 @ 4:25 pm

I'd like to ditto what Ann expressed: Thank you for raising this issue and exploring it so thoroughly. I'd also like to thank Ann for sharing the metaphor of putting on our own oxygen masks first. Sometimes I also need to be reminded that if I want to be of service to others I need to take care of myself first.

#7 Comment By [Mary Pergander](#) On December 17, 2009 @ 7:17 am

This is a terrific essay and I look forward to sharing it with friends. Knowing and focusing on what I DO want has always helped me say no to the maybes or the might bes. In practice it can be harder to execute, but worth it! That is how we make room for the priorities in our lives.

#8 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 17, 2009 @ 8:41 pm

I love this, Laura, a collection development policy for our workload!

#9 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 17, 2009 @ 8:46 pm

Ann, what a lovely analogy you've shared! I think that this thought not only goes to taking on too much, but taking care of our bodies to be healthy. If we are unhealthy mentally because we work too hard, if our work stations are un-ergonomic, or if we simply aren't feeling well and have a cold we should be aware that we can't provide the best service to our patrons. We all need to support ourselves emotionally, and if that means not doing a project, so be it! If it means getting an ergonomic consult about our workstation, do it. And if it means that you call in sick because you have the sniffles, even though you might miss an important meeting, call in.

#10 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 17, 2009 @ 8:49 pm

I think you raise a really interesting point here. I also don't have kids or a "traditional" family. I think sometimes people like us, who don't have the traditional personal commitments might feel guilty about saying no or might have a harder time because we can't say, "Sorry, I have to get my child from the baby sitter." The reality is, everyone, regardless of what shape their personal lives take, need to advocate for themselves by giving respectful, thoughtful, and intentional yeses and nos.

#11 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 17, 2009 @ 8:51 pm

I think that's the hardest part about saying no, Kim. Is having to say it when we really want to say yes! That's my problem a lot of the times, that I want to do it all, and I need to realize that it's just not humanly possible.

#12 Comment By [Sanjeet Mann](#) On December 17, 2009 @ 8:51 pm

Emily, thanks for your thoughtful article. I really resonated with Kim's comment about the frustration that comes from getting a little done on a lot of projects, instead of accomplishing a lot on a few focused goals. It's reassuring to know this is a common problem in our profession. Perhaps as several of you have suggested, prioritizing, and then communicating to our colleagues why what we've chosen to push for is high priority, is part of the answer.

#13 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 17, 2009 @ 8:52 pm

I agree, Anne. It can be frustrating when people are so over-committed that they can't be fully present for projects. However, I hope that we can help them out, as Kim suggested, and be a little more understanding.

#14 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 17, 2009 @ 8:54 pm

Thanks, Mary! One of my personal goals for my upcoming holiday is to make a list of personal goals. And I just might take your suggestion about the mini-retreat of a hike with a pad of

paper.

#15 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 17, 2009 @ 8:58 pm

hear hear! Communication about our priorities seems to be key. Also, I wonder if there are any time management classes or books out there that might be helpful to us, too....

#16 Comment By [Maura Smale](#) On December 19, 2009 @ 9:32 pm

Excellent post, Emily, and great timing too — it's good food for thought as I take stock of this semester and prepare for next.

I once read some advice that I've found helpful, though (of course) I can't remember where I read it. The author suggested making a list of all of your time commitments and posting it near your desk. The list serves two purposes: 1) it reminds you of all of the projects you're currently working on, and 2) it's visible to anyone who comes to your office/cubicle, which can help remind colleagues that you may not have time to take on additional projects. I divide my list into columns for librarianship, service, and research, which is a nice visual reminder to strive for balance in my job as well as for work/life balance.

#17 Comment By [ellie](#) On December 19, 2009 @ 10:01 pm

Me too! Great concept.

#18 Comment By [ellie](#) On December 19, 2009 @ 10:03 pm

That airplane analogy is one of my favorites. Thanks for the reminder.

#19 Comment By [kevin](#) On December 22, 2009 @ 9:05 am

I say "yes" quite a bit at work, but I almost always proved the consequences of my "yes", especially when the request is coming from a supervisor. "Sure I'll do that, but then I won't be able to do this." Or – and this one is much tougher for my supervisors to deal with – "Sure, I'll do that, and what would you like for me to stop doing."

I guess I say "yes" to whatever is my supervisor's latest crisis, but "no" to making my life frantic, or overworked.

#20 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 30, 2009 @ 6:43 pm

Thanks for sharing this, Maura. I am going to start doing this.

#21 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 30, 2009 @ 6:44 pm

Kevin, this is a great tactic. Thanks for sharing.

#22 Trackback By [pliqg.com](#) On March 20, 2010 @ 12:45 am

How Do You Say No? | In the Library with the Lead Pipe...

Have you ever found yourself thinking: "I know I said yes to this, but now I wish I'd said no. That's what I wanted to say in the first place"? Chances...

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URLs in this post:

[1] Image: <http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/>

[2] emotional intelligence: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_intelligence

[3] William Ury's: <http://www.williamury.com/>

[4] The Power of a Positive No: <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/70718568>

[5] American Libraries: <http://www.ala.org/ala/alonline/index.cfm>

[6] Our Librarian Bodies. Our Librarian Selves.:

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2008/our-librarian-bodies-our-librarian->

selves/

[7] Tryin' to Get My Mojo Workin': <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2010/tryin-to-get-my-mojo-workin/>

[8] The Importance of Thinking about Thinking:
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