

Let's Resolve to Say No More in 2022

With the New Year, there always comes new resolutions. I am not typically a big fan of resolutions because they can add unwarranted pressure, but this year, I am resolving to say no.

A recent conversation with some of my wonderful female colleagues and a Wall Street Journal article, "How Men and Women Treat Deadlines in the Workplace Differently," really got me thinking about the need for working women, particularly working mothers, to learn how to say no. As a working mother, I know that this is easier said than done. We feel the pressure both at work and at home to always say yes. Yes to bringing something to the bake sale, yes to being a "room parent," yes to taking on a new case or client, yes to hosting your friend's baby shower, yes to helping a colleague with work that was assigned to them, yes to the last minute deadline.

We have been conditioned to feel like we are less than for saying no. With messages like "lean in," working women equate saying no to not wanting "it" enough. Whatever "it" is. In 2022, let's re-work our way of thinking about the word no. When it comes to saying no in the workplace, here are a few things that I have learned.

The Who and What are Important. Because most of us are not comfortable with saying "no" without explanation, start with considering who is asking for something and what it is they are asking.

Are they asking for something that is better suited for someone else? For example, could the task

be completed by a paralegal or assistant and you are an attorney? If so, it is ok to respond that another person can be of better assistance.

Is the person asking a direct supervisor or not? Tailoring your response based on the person asking is always helpful. Another important consideration is whether what is being asked is helpful to your career long-term. We cannot say yes to everything even if we want to.

Save some of your yeses for the important work or the work you want. You cannot say yes to second chair for your big client at trial when a case unexpectedly does not settle if you have already said yes to a document review that could have been completed by anyone else in your office.

Saying no is a sliding scale. There are variations to the way we can say no in the workplace. A simple "no" can sometimes feel too harsh. While there is nothing wrong with just saying no, there are other ways to achieve the same goal.

Can you accomplish the work, but just need more time? Ask for more time. If the work is something that is truly time sensitive, and you want to do the work, ask for help from a colleague.

Another common scenario is that the person who assigned the task has an arbitrary deadline in their head. Please do not miss your kid's soccer game on Saturday morning because you were asked to get something done by Sunday when it can be completed Monday. Communication is key.

The Wall Street Journal article discussed how men in the workplace have zero hesitation to ask for extensions while women feel they cannot. First, it is not a sign of weakness or incompetence to ask for extensions. Second, asking for clarification on the timing of projects shows time management skills and forward thinking. There is nothing weak about either of those things.

Change comes from the top. I have spent my entire career in traditional law firm settings. As a young associate, it was impossible to say no. As a senior associate and new mom, it felt impossible to say no for fear they would assume it was because of my children, but I did it anyway.

I am a partner now because my superiors did not take "no" personally. As a partner, I love when I am told no. I am happy to step up and attend a hearing or work on discovery responses that traditionally an associate would if it meant that associate could accomplish another task that they need to that day. That "task" could be anything from another assignment to a doctor appointment that was already scheduled. Frankly, the "task" is none of my business.

I am also still happy to tell colleagues no when I need to. I hope 2022 has more "no" for you.

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