

SAYING **NO** COMFORTABLY



The legal profession is a hard working billings obsessed profession, so focus and productivity are key. The downturn and much change in the profession caused by The Legal Services Act and impact of the downturn is magnifying this and less people doing more work. Clients are also expecting more and questioning the sacrosanct charging by the hour. Redundancies have occurred and less people are doing more work with recruitment freezes common. Law is also quite a hierarchical 'telling' profession rather than collaborative, with clear levels through which lawyers have to earn their stripes and serve their time. Rachel Brushfield examines our ability to say 'no' within this professional environment.

Lawyers are very logical and analytical by nature; black and white and directive more than consultative. It is common for partners to pull rank and often they have received little if any training in interpersonal skills. They tell more than ask and delegation is a skill for which they often they have had no training.

Do you ever work late and resent it? Do you ever feel dumped on and a huge sense of frustration and unfairness? It's like having a rain cloud permanently hanging over your head at work, giving you a feeling of unease and dread, or even making your life a misery, so you feel stressed and ill. This is common and as we are responsible for our own decisions, we are in control of making things different.

Tackling someone else's unrealistic demands pushes out your comfort zone and the cause is often someone with different values and beliefs to your own. One example is a partner telling you to do a task which is unreasonable, unfair and impossible to deliver within the timeframe, without sacrificing something important to you e.g. having to work late and missing out on putting your kids to bed or attending an evening class. If you naturally think and plan ahead and your boss is last minute, this can feel hugely unfair.

So how can you deal with this? It is key to separate the behaviour from the person, because people do the best they can in life. Often underneath a 'difficult' person's request is insecurity, low self-esteem, stress and anxiety.

Remember that people always do things for a reason, so even if a request feels widely irrational or inappropriate to you, there will be some positive intention behind how they are behaving, e.g. seeking attention, protecting themselves to preserve their reputation. Managing upwards is a vital skill that you don't yet taught at law school!

10 simple tips to help you handle 'difficult' bosses and peers!

1. Identify what it is that makes someone's behaviour 'difficult' for you. Ask yourself *"What is frustrating me about this person's behaviour?"*
2. Identify and build on the common ground that you share with them
3. Seek to understand where they are coming from by asking clarifying questions e.g. *"What do you mean by that, please can you explain so I understand you better?"*
4. Try using the NLP tool; the 'meta-mirror', it's very effective to help see the situation through their eyes and identify what to do about it (e mail us rachel@liberateyourtalent.com and I'll send it to you)
5. Notice your internal 'state' and dialogue and what effect these have on you. Jotting down notes and observations can help, especially to prevent yourself making assumptions and jumping to conclusions which can only fuel your flame of frustration even more
6. Take time out to relax and recharge yourself, even if it's just listening to music or having a relaxing bath
7. Imagine that your dialogue with a 'difficult' person is a mirror. Try matching them exactly; body language, similar words and tone & energy to build rapport and then lead them in the direction that you want to go, e.g. speaking calmer and less aggressively
8. Use the time that you would have wasted venting your frustration about a 'difficult' person on asking the advice of people who have been in a similar situation or get coaching to identify actions that will lead to positive change
9. When you can't avoid being with a 'difficult' person, disassociate from the situation, e.g. when speaking with them, imagine that you are observing yourself and your emotions and them from a distance
10. Remember that you ALWAYS have choice; what you do, how and when you respond, even if you feel that your power is being taken away by them

Handling 'difficult' people can be challenging, but even small breakthroughs can be one of the most empowering things that

you experience. Standing your ground and achieving a 'win win' takes courage but you feel fantastic!

The majority of partners in the profession are men and the majority of associates rising through the ranks are women, the sexes can have a very different communication style.

Women's genetic make-up means they want to say yes

Men and women's brains are wired differently and this affects how they behave in life and especially in competitive environments and situations. In law firms, because the number of men outnumbers the number of women at senior levels of influence, are often especially competitive environments. This affects how women behave, and especially under stress, women are neurologically primed to tend others. Women fear rejection and are more easily harmed by negative assessment. They require friendship and affiliation, whereas men are greater risk takers and 'in it to win it'. Women are very good at 'beating themselves up' mentally and lawyers have particularly sharp minds, so this is heightened.

In a nutshell, women are more co-operative and collaborative by nature than men, whereas men are more competitive, combative and greater risk takers than women. This means that they are more likely to feel uncomfortable about saying no and suffer the consequences of other poor management and lack of planning.

There has never been a better time for law to wake up to the importance of people and suggests that failure to embrace these changes could hasten the exit of women solicitors from the profession. Stress and mental illness are increasing and the pressure is on. Lawyers need to have clear boundaries for themselves and say no with confidence and conviction, and feel ok about challenging authority. Fear can get in the way, so thinking through a clear argument is vital.

One thing that many lawyers do which is the opposite of what they want to do is to say 'yes' to things when they want to say no. Women are more likely to say yes when they want to say no.

Who and what do you say yes to when you want to say no?

Deciding to say no more is an example of changing your approach to live life as you want to rather than as you think you should. Many people make decisions around 'oughts/musts/shoulds' based on beliefs about how they should behave, often originating from their parents or upbringing. Saying no instead of yes is an example of handling a difficult or awkward situation and many people feel uncomfortable with awkward situations and so they avoid confronting issues, at a high cost to themselves.

Often people say yes because they want to be liked, they want to impress, because of fear e.g. about losing their job or because they feel they have to look after other people's needs. It can also be because of a lack of confidence and putting their own needs last.

"When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid." Audre Lorde

A seemingly small decision to say yes instead of no has huge ramifications and affects many things; personal and work. Can

you relate to any of these consequences of saying yes when you wanted to say no:

- You work late helping out someone instead of going to the gym because of their lack of planning
- You volunteer for things that you simply don't have the time to do
- You cancel your holiday because you overcommitted yourself to a project with unrealistic deadlines
- You agree to something that conflicts your values and feel really uncomfortable

Self-reflective question

In which specific context do you most say 'yes' when you want to say 'no'?

Benefits of learning to say 'no'

- It will give you greater satisfaction if you focus your time on things important to you
- Having clear boundaries preserves time for you
- It will stop people taking advantage of you for their own agenda
- It will help you manage your energy and time
- Responsibilities at work increasingly have 'rubber' boundaries and the number of tasks you can do is infinite
- It is empowering to stand your ground
- You'll avoid unnecessary resentment/frustration which is bad for your health

There simply isn't enough time to fit everything in that you want to do, let alone everything that other people want you to do, whether your partner or boss. Saying no and feeling comfortable saying no with confidence and conviction is something that you can learn until it becomes second nature.

10 tips to help you say 'yes' to saying 'no'

1. Answer this question: *what's the underlying reason why I say yes when I want to say no?*
2. Create a clear vision and motivating goals that you really want to achieve. This will help you say no
3. Know your values – what's important to you
4. Aim for a 'win win' not a 'win lose'
5. Remember you don't have to over-explain/justify your decision to say no
6. Say no with conviction not uncertainty
7. If you find e mail or the telephone easier than face to face, use it to say no
8. Offer alternative suggestions and ideas to help out the other person
9. Put yourself in the other person's shoes and see it through their eyes to help you prepare what to say
10. Remember an occasion when you successfully said 'no' before dealing with a tricky person/situation when you want to say no

Rachel Brushfield is a director at Energise, The Talent Liberation Company, tel 0845 22 55 010. Energise provide bespoke programs to liberate talent; performance coaching, career strategy and talent engagement. www.liberateyourtalent.com rachel@liberateyourtalent.com