

## THE THREE RULES OF SAYING NO

by [Stephen Blandino](#) | [Leadership](#)

No! Every leader has to say it and every leader will one day hear it. It's only two letters, but they can create angst and anguish. Why? Because we don't want to be negative, come across rude, or hurt people's feelings. We don't want to be abrasive or create friction. But "No" is part of leadership. If you never say "No," you'll never maintain focus. If you're not willing to say "No," you'll avoid the tough conversations. Without "No," you'll drift off mission, delay hard decisions, and dodge difficult people.

We all know there are times we need to say "No," but that's usually not the issue. Instead, we get hung up on the *how* and the *when*. That brings us to the three rules of saying "No." Each one helps us navigate those difficult moments when we have to say "No" to someone...whether it's a child, a friend, or a team member.

### 1. SAY NO CLEARLY

Saying "No" presents an emotional tug-of-war for leaders. We usually know fairly early that we need to say "No," but because we don't want to hurt people's feelings, it's easy to vacillate between speaking up and keeping the peace. As a result, our "No" gets draped in "kinda, sorta, maybe not" language. Simply put, we're not clear.

Why do we do this? Because we want to *ease* into our "No." I understand...I've certainly done it. The problem is, when you ease into a "No," you usually soften the facts and make room for alternatives. In other words, the person you're telling "No" to doesn't really think you're serious. They think it's a negotiation rather than a declaration. There's too much room for interpretation.

Instead, say a clear, concise "No!" Then give whatever explanation is necessary without stretching it out. If people understand the why, they're usually more receptive to the what. But, again, be clear and concise about it. Saying "No" shouldn't take an hour. If it does, the other party may talk you into a "Yes!" Be clear.

## **2. SAY NO QUICKLY**

Another common mistake is to put off saying “No” for weeks or even months. I’ve been guilty of this one too. If I’m unclear about what to do, sometimes I’ll say, “Let me think about that.” There’s certainly nothing wrong with that approach, unless of course you never make a decision.

The longer you wait to give an answer, the more room you leave for ambiguity. Ambiguity always produces alternative visions, unclear communication, and diminished morale. It leaves everyone in a fog, and eventually team members make the assumption that because you never said “No,” you must mean “Yes.”

A delayed “No” also causes you to put off hard conversations. The longer you wait, the more likely you are to never address bad behavior or disruptive attitudes. Say “No” quickly. It’s okay to think about it but be sure to give yourself a deadline.

## **3. SAY NO KINDLY**

One reason we don’t say “No” clearly and quickly is because we don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings. But saying “No” doesn’t make you a jerk, unless of course you say it like a jerk.

Quickly does not mean rudely. You can be clear and kind. You can deliver the right action with the right attitude. Is it easy? Usually not. Is it comfortable? If it was, you probably would have already done it. But you can exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5) while delivering difficult news. Remember, you’re responsible for your response, not theirs.

When you say “No” clearly, you remove ambiguity. When you say “No” quickly, you keep people on the same page, and you prevent alternative visions from taking root. And when you say “No” kindly, you show dignity and respect to the other person. The good news is, you can do all three.