

Learn When to Say 'No' and Better Way to Say 'Yes'

You might identify with this dilemma: You're asked to take on a project, give a speech, or just lend a hand to a colleague. We're socialized to cooperate, so our default answer is usually, "Of course, glad to lend a hand." But should we? Do we risk taking on too much? How do we go about managing the situation so it doesn't manage us? An article in the September 2020 issue of Harvard Business Review, "Learn When to Say No . . . and How to Say Yes" by Bruce Tulgan, offers some helpful tips.

Answering a request for help requires forethought, not an ad hoc reaction, Tulgan convincingly argues. Our reaction is generally to be agreeable. And sure, some requests don't need to be analyzed in any detail: What is the new IT person's phone extension? What requisition form do I use for overseas travel? Or, what is a typical contribution to the company fund to help coworkers affected by a natural disaster?

No, Tulgan's focus is on big-ticket items (or what could turn into one). His advice is to "assess the ask" by which you turn the request into a proposal. Here are the questions to pose:

- -- What is today's date and time? (The question helps you to keep track of how the project will evolve by taking it on.)
- -- Who is the asker?
- -- What is the specific deliverable being requested?
- -- By when does it need to be completed?
- -- What resources will need to be called upon?
- -- Who is the source of authority on the issue, and do you have that person's or group's approval?
- -- What are the possible benefits?
- -- What are the apparent and hidden costs?



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What's Your EQ, and Why Does It Matter?

Liam walks into an important meeting and sits down. Within minutes, the group's attention is on him and his division. One of the top executives asks him a tough question, and he freezes. The executives infer that Liam isn't as competent as they believed. They fail to realize he is a high performer and that his team has great respect for him.

Liam likely is an introvert and needs time to process what he's heard and form an opinion or provide feedback. He has a hard time "thinking on his feet." He feels trapped, and he realizes how his actions make him look in the moment. However, he doesn't understand that his unconscious reaction to the power differential is hindering his climb up the corporate ladder.

Once Liam recognizes the issue, he can learn to identify his emotions and how they are affecting his behavior, and take action to make corrections. Then he will be better prepared to navigate meetings with top executives. That will reduce his stress in the situations, leading to better emotional and mental health and higher job satisfaction.

Jill goes in to see her boss, Sarah, to ask if she can change her work hours. Sarah quickly shuts down the conversation, suggesting the business can't be built around individual employees' needs and preferences. As Jill leaves, Sarah can't help but think, "Why does she feel like she's entitled to a special schedule?"

What Sarah fails to understand is that the company made employees go part-time and took away their benefits. Jill is now struggling financially and must go to the food bank for groceries to feed her children. Beyond that, the company moved all employees to four-hour shifts to make scheduling easier. The problem is, Jill lives far enough away that the cost of gas eats up a great deal of her pay. Working the same number of hours, but in eight-hour shifts, would help ease the financial burden of the extra gas costs. Sarah failed to listen to the reason behind her request, which shows a lack of empathy.

Liam and Sarah suffer from a lack of emotional intelligence, also known as emotional quotient, or EQ. We've all seen similar situations at work. We know how much they destroy productivity and morale and hinder the success of relationships, teams, and businesses. Here are three fatal assumptions about EQ that you should avoid making:

1. EQ is soft. Nothing could be further from the truth. Accounting firm Grant Thornton engaged in a five-year organizational transformation in which it built EQ into its leadership training program. The company saw a 35% revenue increase and a 16% uplift in client satisfaction. Studies have shown that EQ is attributed to 58% of job performance, and 90% of top performers have a high EQ. In one study of restaurant performance, locations with managers having a high EQ achieved profit growth of 22% versus the average growth of 15%. EQ eats IQ for breakfast!

2. You can't measure EQ. There are numerous assessments out there that measure a person's EQ. Some are better than others, so do your research to find one with a higher level of reliability and accuracy. However, just measuring EQ isn't enough. Make sure you tie the measurement to a growth process.

3. You can't argue with results. Don't settle for short-term results over sustainable results. You can push people until they burn out, check out, or leave. You can scare people into performing well for short bursts. Don't let short-term numbers trick you into thinking your leaders are successful or convince you that your business is doing better than it really is. Remember, it's a long game. High turnover, bad PR, and a lack of engagement will catch up to your business.

Having a high EQ is a reliable growth strategy for you, your team, and your company.

Get Moving to Ameliorate Workplace Anxiety

These are anxious times. A slow and unevenly shared economic recovery has engendered widespread feelings of anger and despair. Electoral politics, the democratic process that united us as a nation, now seems to be dividing us instead.

Rather than merely disagreeing over the methods that will advance our shared values, we now are dubious of our fellow citizens' motives and ascribe animus to those on the other side of controversial issues. There's great distrust of the institutions woven into our daily lives, be it the government, the judicial system, the media, or the tech giants on which we have come to depend.

One easy way to ease anxiety of those stressors is to mobilize. When we go for a walk, our hearts pump faster, circulating more blood and oxygen not just to our muscles but to all of our organs—including our brains.

Many experiments have shown that during or after exercise, even if it's only mild exertion, people perform better on tests of memory and attention. Because we don't have to devote much conscious effort to the act of walking, our attention is free to wander, which is precisely the kind of mental state that studies have linked to innovative ideas and strokes of insight.

When we are sedentary, nothing ratchets up anxiety like sitting in one place, hunched over a computer all day. Take time to get up from your desk and take short walks throughout the day. Not only will your stress levels go down, but your innovation and creativity are likely to go up.



What's the Value of Cultural Competence?

The culture we come from affects how we interact and think, often in ways we don't recognize. For example, our culture influences not only the language and the particular dialect we speak but also the way we talk and the phrases and slang we use. Our culture shapes the way we perceive, interpret, and understand the world as well as our values. It affects the way we greet one another. For example, firm handshakes and eye contact are expected in some cultures but are considered hurtful or disrespectful in others. Our culture also dictates our social activities—different cultures celebrate different milestones, like baptisms or coming-of-age ceremonies.

Cultural competence means recognizing that the way we interact and think is partly a result of our own culture. It also means understanding that other people have different ways of thinking and interacting. And those differences are worth learning about.

One of the tricks of cultural competence is to think of situations from vantage points other than our own. For example, consider whether anyone has ever had a negative reaction to you based on your membership in a certain class or group. It can be disheartening and maddening, and it can make you withdraw. One thing shared across cultures is that it's hurtful to be looked at negatively merely because of a stereotype about your culture. Having a negative reaction based on a preconception is one of the disadvantages of lacking cultural competence.

Unfortunately, it's pretty common. We tend to be raised around people with cultures similar to our own, gravitate toward those people, and be uncomfortable with differences and change. We tend to think in terms of stereotypes, mistakenly believing that people who are like us on the surface are also the same underneath, and people who are different on the surface are different underneath. Of course, that's not true—everyone's unique.

Stereotypes hold us back as individuals. Dealing with someone else's prejudices stifles our productivity, makes us feel bad, causes us to be overly sensitive, dampens our interest in doing our personal best, and promotes conflict and strife. Accepting people and valuing diversity, on the other hand, promotes positive feelings and a sense of inclusion. In short, increased cultural competence leads to increased happiness.

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Work and Life Lessons from the Pandemic

COVID-19 brought an abrupt transition to our lives. Yet, from the unfamiliar territory, we've made discoveries that, if carried forward, might gird us for tough stretches or help us to savour the good times to come.

Don't swim upstream. Not surprisingly, many of us found the events of 2020 to be overwhelming. Those who fared well, however, were people who declined to continue to swim upstream in the misplaced hope we could go forward without any change. Events soon made it evident that moving forward without change simply wasn't possible. Thus, we need to prepare for, accept, and ultimately embrace change. Although abrupt, many of the changes brought by COVID-19 were inevitable and will ultimately be beneficial to the workplace, such as improved technology and mobility for workers.

Life is a team sport. The global pandemic has been the ultimate example of the interconnectedness of not only Americans but also our world community. Workplaces function in the same way. Workers had to learn to connect in new, creative, and sometimes technologically difficult ways. Things not only couldn't be done the same old way, they also couldn't be performed without the whole team's cooperation. Perhaps more than ever, the importance of a collaborative spirit is a lasting lesson for 2021 and beyond.

Communicating involves more than just talking. As virtual meetings quickly became commonplace, people soon realized the importance of listening during the conversations. Even more so than in familiar in-person meetings, we learned it's virtually impossible for more than one person to talk at a time and meaningfully communicate on a video conference call. Going forward, we should benefit from having practiced the lost art of patience and enhanced our listening skills so we could really communicate with coworkers and others.

Life goes on. Actor Gregory Peck is credited with saying, "Tough times don't last; tough people do." As we deal with and overcome the very real hardships of COVID-19, economic distress, and political unrest, most businesses and workers will survive and thrive in better days.