



When — and How — to Say No to Extra Work

By Melody Wilding

Consider your average work week. What percentage of your daily tasks fit into your job description? If you're like most high-achievers, chances are that over time you've assumed many responsibilities outside your main scope of work. But how much do these new obligations contribute to your professional advancement versus running you ragged?

In the wake of the Great Resignation, quiet quitting, and major layoffs, many professionals are being asked to do more with less. When organizations are understaffed, the workload is typically redistributed to remaining team members. While an increase in scope can temporarily boost individual commitment and performance, in the long-term it can lead to burnout and hurt the organization's results as a whole.

Top performers are a prime target for additional requests. Not only do they enjoy a challenge and the opportunity for growth, but in my experience as an executive coach, I've found many high-achievers are motivated by a need to please and to earn the proverbial gold-star for going above and beyond.

Take Irene, a project manager whose team headcount was recently reduced by 15%. Kind, generous, and loyal (sometimes to a fault), Irene wanted to look like a team player and to ease her boss's stress at this moment of crisis. She volunteered to assume three major initiatives within 48 hours of her colleagues' departure, rendering her over capacity. Irene soon found herself living at work, moving through each day with a cloud of dread hovering over her head, unable to find time for herself, family, or friends.

While there's typically nothing wrong with pitching in to help when the organization or your team is short-staffed, you need to make sure you're saying yes for the right reasons. If you're someone who, like Irene, tends to agree to every additional request that comes your way, here's how to gauge when it's appropriate to push back and how to do so with grace and professionalism.

Say no when ... your primary job responsibilities will suffer.

Let's say you work on the product team, but you've been asked to help with marketing. You may soon find yourself spending so much time reviewing promotional material that your primary job responsibilities — things like user research or strategy — suffer.

If an assignment would detract from your core responsibilities or would compromise your ability to consistently deliver high-quality work without any significant upside in terms of learning or skills acquisition, it's best to decline and focus on what's already on your plate.

Avoid saying, "Sorry, this isn't in my job description." A better approach is to use a strategy known as the relational account, or explaining why your refusal is in the best interest of everyone involved. Put simply, this means you say "If I helped you, I'd be letting others down." Or more specifically "I would be unable to do a good job on your project, and my other work would suffer." Research shows that this strategy can help you be viewed as caring and conscientious. For example, you might share, "I have to say no, because if I devoted time to marketing activities, then we'd miss several key product launch dates and our revenue goals would suffer."

Say no when ... it's someone else's work.

In an age with matrixed teams and highly collaborative workflows, it's easy to get sucked into doing work that isn't your job, like the sales rep who finds themselves fielding customer service calls. Irene, the project manager whose story I shared earlier,

found herself being dragged into solving issues their director of operations should have been overseeing. She approached her boss to find a workable compromise and explained: "It's not possible for me to continue executing these operational duties, nor is it within my purview. Continuing to do so only creates confusion. I'm happy to put together detailed documentation so that the operations team can take over."

If you don't mind doing the additional work or feel it contributes to your growth in a meaningful way, clearly outline what you expect the new responsibility will result in, such as better assignments in the future, a move toward a promotion, or a mention at the board meeting. Consider a compensation adjustment to reflect your added value. You could say, "For the last six months, I've assumed responsibilities A, B, and C. What's the best way to ensure my compensation is commensurate with my increased scope?"

Say no when ... there's no clear exit strategy.

Only take on additional responsibilities when you understand the full scope of what's involved. You want to avoid miscommunication down the road and you don't want it to be an open-ended arrangement. Perhaps your boss asks you to participate in a new initiative. Get specifics. How long will you be needed on the project? What meetings will you be expected to attend?

If after receiving clarity, you determine it's not a fit because the opportunity of saying yes is too great, you can lead with gratitude and say, "Thank you for the opportunity. It sounds like an interesting project, but it would be out of integrity for me to commit to it knowing I wouldn't have the bandwidth or resources available to achieve the goal."

You might also offer to help in some smaller way. Could you attend brainstorming meetings or agree to consult on drafts of the business plan? Pitching in where and how you can proves you're a do-er and shows you're a team player.

Say no when ... the ask is unreasonable.

Maybe senior leadership has requested a business plan from scratch within two business days. You know that's not possible, but what do you do? Try a positive no, which allows you to protect your time while still furthering the relationship. In response to senior leadership's request, you could explain what you can get done in the time allotted. For instance: "It's not possible to deliver the entire report by Friday afternoon. What I could do is have a first draft of section one. How does that sound?" Or, you might offer to adjust the timeline, saying something like, "I hear this is important. Friday isn't possible, but I can have everything for you by Monday afternoon."

Perhaps you offer to introduce the person to a coworker who can help or a contractor they could hire. This may sound like, "This isn't my zone of expertise, but I'll email you the name of a colleague who I would suggest working with."

You can't say no to everything, but saying no for the right reasons can help you feel more confident and empowered.

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