

Here's Why Your Team Needs to Say 'No' More Than 'Yes'



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We say “yes” too often – and every “yes” adds to our list of things to do. When we want to achieve more, we add. When we want to solve a problem, we add. And when we want to feel strategic, we add. As a business, it’s especially challenging to stay focused on the right things, because even more people say “yes” and pile ideas, opportunities and priorities onto the plate. Now your company has a plate so full it’s spilling all over the floor. That’s when the productivity hacking ensues.

The reality is that we can only be so efficient. We can’t move at Ludicrous Speed through our to-do list as human beings. We reach a point where we’ve pushed our team so hard that they leave for a company that respects them and their time. The

better approach is to say “no” more often than you say “yes” – and to empower your team to do the same.

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Efficient and effective are not the same thing

It can be hard to resist the instinct to say “yes” and add to what we do. We want to do it all as a company. And we feel like if we’re not on every social channel taking advantage of every trend and new idea, we aren’t doing something right, or worse, we’ll fall off the cutting edge into the darkness of irrelevancy.

But when you only add as a business, you end up with a priority problem – which leads to an accountability problem, which then leads to an execution problem. That’s what happened to Jim. Dressed in jeans and a V-neck shirt, Jim doesn’t look like the typical CEO of a large accounting firm or like someone who understands all the ins and outs of the tax code.

For years, he pushed his team to do more and said “yes” to every opportunity that crossed his desk. Then he realized that while everyone was “doing stuff,” not everything was getting done. And in many cases, the things that were getting done weren’t done well. Moreover, his team struggled to figure out what to do first and frequently pursued ideas that conflicted with each other.

Initially, Jim doubled down and pushed, convinced he could hack doing all of the things at the same time. He loaded up on productivity apps, expected his team to wake up earlier and stay up later and frequently had people multitasking outside their skill set. He’d convinced himself that tech would solve the problem.

Like Jim, we’re inundated with new productivity apps, even

though there is no silver bullet that allows us to do everything at the same time. Worse yet, we spend more of our time trying to solve our productivity problems and fiddling with our apps than actually getting the job done. Asana's recent Anatomy of Work report suggests that people are overwhelmed by apps. They call the problem "tool fatigue."

Eventually, Jim realized that instead of advancing his business, he was burning out his team and risked losing the excellent reputation they had with the clients they served. He needed to change his approach.

We need to shift from efficiency to effectiveness. Effectiveness isn't about doing everything; it's about doing only the right things and doing them well. Because there's nothing so pointless as doing something efficiently that you shouldn't have done at all.

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You know the point. Say "no" to the rest.

As a purpose-driven business, you know why you exist. You're productive when you do things that enable you to deliver the value you're here to deliver. Everything else should be minimized. That makes "no" your most powerful weapon for staying focused and effective. When you know the point of what you do, you can make strategic choices about where and how you invest your time.

In Jim's case, he asked his customers where he and his team delivered the most value. After some refinement, the team defined its purpose: "to make entrepreneurs financially smart." He also assessed where the company's unique capabilities were. It was clear they did something distinct by

providing tax strategy to entrepreneurs.

Using these two filters, Jim identified things he needed to remove to make his business more effective. One of the biggest “nos” went to bookkeeping. While a valuable service, it didn’t align with their purpose or play to their strengths. Instead, he focused on the strategic advice component of their offering. They knew entrepreneurs wanted to scale their impact and needed capital to do it, so they developed a systematized process that kept the client engaged in their finances year-round. Now, they and their clients could be proactive rather than reactive.

Jim met with clients, informed them of the changes and referred anyone who was only interested in bookkeeping or tax filing to someone else. The clients who stayed were willing to pay more for the crystal clear value and started to refer colleagues more frequently because they knew it would be a productive fit.

By maintaining his focus and saying “no” to the things that distracted the company, Jim’s team could put their time and energy into the right things. It also gave them time to strategically pursue new opportunities, including offering a course so clients could further build their skills and bring better information to the table.

Finally, Jim used “no” to remove barriers for his team. He determined that many of the apps he had thrust upon them because they were the latest and greatest were taking time away from getting work done. Once the team understood the point of the applications, they could assess them more thoughtfully and ultimately reduced the number of apps and got much better results.

Here's how to say "no" more

It takes skills and structure to develop the practice of saying "no" as a team – especially if you want to do it more often. Here are three ways to use "no" to evolve the way you do work:

1. Adopt the shift: Give people permission to say "no." Many people avoid saying "no" because they worry their peers or managers will think less of them. As a leader, you can model the behavior. You can also recognize people who said "no," explain how that choice kept the company focused, and highlight what you were able to do with the time that was more valuable.

2. Be strategic – ask not only what to add but also what to cut: When developing a plan or strategy, review your existing tactics: products, programs, campaigns, processes, events – really, everything you do. Then kill your darlings. Be willing to cut things that aren't working or don't make sense so you can put your resources into the things that do and into testing new tactics or exploring new opportunities.

3. Learn how to say no – and how to hear "no:": Saying "no" without offering context is the business equivalent of telling a child "because I said so." How you say and respond to "no" goes hand in hand with building a laser-focused business that fosters strong relationships between its team members.

Before you say "no", ask the proponent to make their case. They should be able to explain how their proposal fulfills your purpose, helps achieve your vision and enables you to meet your mission. Once you hear them out, you can either offer a revision to make the decision an aligned "yes," or you can say "no."

When you hear "no," consider the person's rationale. Sometimes you can go back and forth with revisions to get to a "yes;"

sometimes the answer is “no.” Whether you are saying “no” or hearing “no,” always remember that you are doing so because you want your team to invest their time in the things that matter, not waste it on aimless tasks. Helping each other say “no” means you value and respect each other.

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Do the right things – and the right things only

There’s a vast difference between being busy and being productive – and an even bigger difference between being busy and being effective. When we say “yes” to everything that crosses our desk, we undermine our focus as a team.

We take on ideas at the wrong time. We take on products and projects we shouldn’t make or don’t have the capabilities to do well. We overload ourselves and then waste time on apps trying to be more efficient as if we could get it all done.

We need to shift from efficiency to effectiveness. Effective means investing your time into the right things and the right things only. It means saying “no” more often than you say “yes.” As a purpose-driven business, you exist to improve someone’s life. You know the point of what you do every day. Why would you waste your time doing anything else?

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