



# A LEADER'S MOST POWERFUL TOOL: CHOOSING WHEN TO SAY NO

Janelle Bruland

# “No should be one of the most important words in your vocabulary.”

It was a typical work day and I was at my desk working on a project for a couple of hours before heading into meetings for the afternoon. My phone rang and on the other end was a good friend of mine inviting me to lunch. I hadn't heard from this friend in some time and was delighted to hear her voice. She and I had one of those long-time, special friendships where you could be separated for months and when you got back together felt you didn't miss a beat. “Just a minute,” I said. “Let me pull up my calendar and see when we can get together.” The minutes stretched on as I poured over my calendar not able to find any open space for lunch this week, or the next week, or the next... I was so overscheduled, so jam-packed with back-to back events during and after work that I couldn't find a time to fit her in—for two months!

This seemingly small, yet very telling moment was a wake-up call for me. A dear friend who called at random looking to connect with me was going to have to be put on the back burner for two months, so I could fulfill all my other obligations. The realization of how absurd the situation was hit me hard. Because I had committed myself to so many things, I didn't have time to do something that was important to me. I obviously needed to do a better job of choosing when to say “no.”

Isn't it funny that one of the most important words to say is also one of the hardest? One simple word: no. Yet, to say it brings up a flood of feelings—guilt, defensiveness, a fear of offending.

Sometimes the feelings flash by so quickly we don't even notice what they are. We just know that we don't want to say that one little word. Yet, the ability to say "no," to set boundaries and build a structure that works for us, is one of the most important tools we can add to our arsenals to successfully create our best lives.

## The Communication Tidal Wave

There is no doubt about it. It is becoming increasingly difficult to separate ourselves from the onslaught of incoming communication and ceaseless activity that seems to come along hand in hand with success. Demands on our time stack up. People who need us invite us to their meetings and ask our opinions and for a minute or two we feel good about being able to help. But then, there comes an inevitable breaking point. Suddenly we find ourselves overworked, overcommitted and overwhelmed. If we were already headed that way, technology has added jet fuel to the journey. This barrage can derail the best laid plans and even keep us from making them in the first place.

Today, the average knowledge worker is interrupted every 10-12 minutes by some form of communication. And, during those 10-12 minutes we tend to interrupt ourselves at least twice to check email, phones, etc. This kind of schedule is the enemy of deep thought, the kind of strategic thinking we need to lead both in our businesses and our personal lives. In fact, in many ways, there is no separation between work time and everything else.

All of this is affecting all aspects of our lives and how we run our businesses.

Add to the communication tidal wave the problem I call “The Curse of Capability.” If you are perceived to be a capable person, you probably get lots of calls asking you to donate your time to important causes. You’ll be asked to sit on boards, attend meetings, and people will seek your wisdom and input. These are all good things, by the way, when you have the time, energy and interest in the mission you are asked to be involved in.

## But I Love Saying “Yes”

I’ll be the first to admit that I am a leader who has struggled with creating boundaries myself. After all, who doesn’t love saying “yes?” Who doesn’t enjoy the look of gratitude, or relief on the face of the person who has asked the favor? Besides, saying “yes” can at times almost be a matter of pride. With the high bar I have always set for myself and my “I can do it all” attitude, I really thought I could do it all. So, of course, at one time in my life I always said “yes.”

As my business grew and gained traction, and I was out networking and involved in the community, my face—my brand—became well established. The more frequently I got involved

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in community activities and nonprofit organizations, the more I was recognized. Besides, those activities were fun for me and being involved was very rewarding. It wasn't only about me wanting to always say "yes." But as a result of my frequent participation, I was asked more and more to be involved in this event, serve on this board, and attend that luncheon.

I loved to help, to bring value, to say "yes," and there are so many good things out there to be a part of. Along with this myriad outside opportunities to serve and help, I was also helping regularly in my children's schools while serving on two community boards and on our international industry board. I was doing all of this while running and growing my service business. I really thought I could do it all, and I did for a while before realizing that it wasn't sustainable.

Not being able to schedule lunch with my friend was that small yet significant moment that finally pushed me over the edge. The way I was living my life wasn't working. Simply put, I couldn't "do it all." Another thought occurred to me at that moment: who says I have to "do it all?"

We high achievers are driven and want to accomplish things, and because of that, we find it easy to get caught up in doing more and more. However, if we aren't careful, we will miss out on the very things that matter most to us.

I said "yes" so much. I wanted to. It felt good. It made people happy. It made me happy—for a while. That is, until I realized I had loaded my plate up so high that it was in danger of toppling over, taking me down with it.

I learned that saying "yes" to everything was not the path to true success. In fact, if I wasn't careful, it could become my undoing. Instead I needed to understand when and how to say "no."

# You Can Learn to Say No

Let's face it: there is only so much time in a day. We all have the same 24 hours– it is up to us to be intentional in how we use them. Part of this intentionality came when I realized that everything we say “yes” to means saying “no” to something else. Think about that. It is so important I need to say it again.

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What a tragedy it would be to get so caught up in saying “yes” to everything that comes along, that without knowing it you take away precious time from your most important priorities. Yet this happens so easily that oftentimes we don't even notice. It's subtle.

Great leaders that we admire have, for the most part, figured this out. Saying no doesn't mean you don't care. Saying no doesn't mean you are not capable and able to help. It simply means you can't help right now and still do all the things you have already committed to.

The great Warren Buffett has a powerful quote about the importance of saying no:

“The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say ‘no’ to almost everything.”

Buffett, chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, is one of the wealthiest and most successful people in the world. Most impressive to me is that he is among one of the greatest philanthropists as well, having given over \$30 billion to charity.

When we think of the most successful leaders in the world, we are usually thinking about all the remarkable things they “do.” What we don't think about is all the things they “don't do” in

order to accomplish their extraordinary results. With the amount of demands on him every day, Buffet learned early on about the value of time and mastered the art of defining his top goals and setting boundaries around them.

He even implemented a rule he calls the 25/5 rule. Buffett's 25/5 rule emerged from a story his personal pilot, Mike Flint, told to the late Scott Dinsmore, motivational speaker and founder of Live Your Legend. Dinsmore shared the story with his audiences and it's taken off as an effective goal-setting technique.

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According to the story, Flint was talking with Buffett about his career priorities and Buffett had him go through a three-step process. It is a technique that we all can use. First, list your top 25 goals. Then, circle your top five; and cross out the rest. Most people presume that you should focus on the top five and from time to time on the remaining ones. On the contrary, Buffet suggests crossing the remaining 20 off the list altogether. Yes, eliminate them entirely. Then make your Top Five Plan and get working on them right away. He believes that if one has too many priorities, they really have no priorities. Focus instead only on your top priorities, giving them all your attention and energy.

## What Do You Need to Stop Doing?

I had the privilege of meeting one of my favorite business authors and speakers, Jim Collins, several years ago when he delivered a keynote at a conference I attended. He spoke on principals from his *New York Times* best-selling book *Good to Great*. One of them was his recommendation to have a “stop doing list.”

Collins asked, “Do you have a ‘to do’ list? Do you also have a ‘stop doing’ list? Most of us lead busy but undisciplined lives. We have ever-expanding ‘to do’ lists, try to build momentum by doing, doing, doing—and doing more. And it rarely works. Those who built the good-to-great companies, however, made as much use of ‘stop doing’ lists as ‘to do’ lists. They displayed a remarkable discipline to unplug all sorts of extraneous junk.”





I have adopted this discipline in my own life, making a point to eliminate unnecessary tasks and narrow down my “to do” list to my top priorities. Here are the top five items I have learned to say “no” to:

- 1. The opportunities that come up that I’m not completely passionate about.** When we choose to participate in something, we should be excited to be involved, not doing it out of guilt or obligation.
- 2. The things that are not aligned with my core values and priorities.** To stay true to our values, our words, behavior, and actions must be in line with our beliefs.
- 3. To those requests that are not in my wheelhouse.** Often, we are asked to do things that truly belong on someone else’s “to do” list. Be sure to pass on those, or delegate them to a more appropriate person.
- 4. To the things that drain me of energy.** Our time should be spent on activities that we enjoy and give us energy, not deplete it.
- 5. To relationships that are unhealthy.** We will never be our best if we are constantly having to lift ourselves up from interactions with unsupportive or negative people. Eliminate these relationships.

It is not on my list of five, but I have also learned to say no to living a reactive life. I have learned that I don’t have to answer every phone call or text in real time, especially if I am involved in something else that requires my undivided attention. These days, I don’t wake up in the morning and turn my electronics on first thing. I schedule a time to start reading and responding to emails and phone messages and, as much as I am able to, I stick with it.

I had to learn how to do this. I realized one day that I wasn't doing anybody any favors by responding at light speed to every piece of communication. I do want to be responsive, but I want those responses to be thoughtful. Managing to do that on a daily basis requires me to be vigilant about how and when I respond. Bottom line: If you are going to manage your life you must manage your technology, and say no to it, at least for now. I know. Easy to say. Difficult to do.

If you are like me and find yourself having a hard time saying "no," listen up. To have the successful life you desire, you must be disciplined to say "no" more than you say "yes." Prioritize. Figure out what really matters. Then build your life and schedule around those things and those things only.

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# Pick Your Passion

You will find yourself faced with these yes/no decisions daily. As time and resources are limited, you will find that you will have to say “no” to most things that come up, in order to say “yes” and remain focused on what matters most to you.

We are often easily distracted by new “shiny” things, some even call it Shiny Object Syndrome (SOS). If you are prone to this, be aware. You have the power of choice. When the next shiny object comes your way, choose to do the following: Stop. Evaluate. And only say “yes,” if it is something that you are passionate about, and that aligns with your priorities and goals. Otherwise say no. And don’t second guess yourself or feel guilty about it.

And, when you say no, do it politely. Somebody thought enough of you and your ability and knowledge to ask you for your presence and your opinion. Be kind but firm. Hold your ground but do it with grace. Think about who else in your circle that you could recommend who might be perfect for the project.

Like most people, I have a lot of interests and passions. I am passionate about growing leaders, bringing value to business entrepreneurs and executives, and showing them how to break free to lead lives of legacy and significance. In addition, I am passionate about helping women who need help emerging from difficult situations so that they can live their best lives. These societal needs are something I believe I can help with, and they align with my values and priorities. I should be dedicating my time and effort to these things, thereby allowing others with different passions to give to what matters to them.

I have a doctor colleague who is very passionate about protecting salmon so that they can thrive in our waters. Another friend of mine spends volunteer hours keeping animals out of

shelters and finding them good homes. Yet another is dedicated to a life of politics, to ensure businesses have the freedom to grow and thrive in our community.

The Success Lie™ led me to believe that I needed to say “yes” at all times, or else. This just wasn’t true. Understanding when to just say “no” has been a key learning experience for me and has led to days of better balance and higher results. It still can be hard to say no, but it is getting easier.

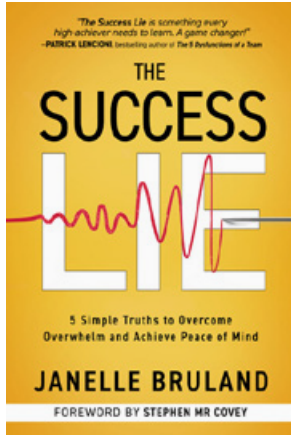
Not too long ago I took a call from a colleague asking me to participate in a brainstorming session for a local fundraiser. It sounded intriguing and was something I would enjoy. Where in the past I would have automatically said “yes,” this time I paused, realizing that agreeing to participate would compromise other commitments I had already made. Even though it was a great cause, I realized that someone else would need to join the session. I just couldn’t take it on and fulfill all my other obligations. I graciously declined.

And it was ok—my saying “no” to a request didn’t mean the world was going to end.

Want to have a more successful, productive, and enjoyable life? **Figure out what you need to say no to, and then spend more time on a smaller number of commitments and really giving them your all.** 📌



# Info



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### About the author

Janelle Bruland is an entrepreneur, business leader, and high-performance coach who inspires others to live highly engaged, impactful, and successful lives. She is Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Management Services Northwest, a company she started in her living room in 1995 with a handful of employees. Today, MSNW is an industry leading company, named one of the Fastest Growing Private Companies by both *Inc.* magazine and the *Puget Sound Business Journal*. Janelle has won numerous awards including the James E. Purcell Leadership Award, SBA Washington Business Person of the Year and the Nellie Cashman Woman Business Owner of the Year.

Janelle is Co-Founder of Legacy Leader, a leadership development company where they teach entrepreneurs and business professionals how to build legacy, transform their leadership, and love their life.



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