

Four Ways to Respond to No: How to Choose the Most Effective Response



Relationships at Work and Home

The Center for Career & Life Transition
Building Bridges For Change

A Resource From CCLT



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You have been leading a project team for the last six months, and the stress is increasing as deadlines get tighter and more critical. You have all taken on extra assignments, worked late, and becoming weary. You know that one team member is best qualified to help the team achieve its last big milestone. You privately ask her for one more push—and she says “NO!”

Or, you have a clear vision of how the office (kitchen, living room, back garden) should look. You’ve seen pictures that are close to your ideal environment, and you can see yourself comfortably working in that space. You explain your vision to your partner/spouse, and the first thing out of his mouth is, “NO!”

Most of the time, when you get a NO it’s because the two of you have different needs, wants, information, or expectations about how something should be. Whether the relationship is at work or at home, often differences like these can be sorted out by having an amicable conversation. However, if you feel highly stressed, without intending to, you may respond to a word, phrase, tone, or facial expression with a less-than-agreeable reaction.

Unfortunately, people often respond without thinking—out of habit—and become angry, defensive, quiet, or withdrawn. That is called a “knee-jerk reaction.”

All disagreements are not the same and, therefore, need to be managed differently.

When you are in a situation where someone says NO, you need to press pause. You need to take a breath and ask yourself, what am I trying to accomplish? What are my goals, and what are the best ways to achieve them. Different situations and different people require different approaches to help you achieve your desired outcomes. When you get a NO, it is time to make some specific decisions that will help you slow down before you react without thinking.

Use the questionnaire below to help you become comfortable with your options for responding to a NO. By choosing the appropriate option, you will be better able to respond to a NO in a way that helps you and those with whom you live and work enjoy healthier and more productive relationships.

If you can answer yes to any of the items below....	Consider using this approach...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The issue is trivial and not worth damaging the relationship. ● One of us is losing self-control and may do or say something we might regret later. ● The issue isn't the real problem between us. ● Even though it's not what I want, I can live with it and maybe even learn something new. 	<h3 style="text-align: center;">1. Give Up or Give In</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explain why you are giving up or giving in without putting yourself or the other person down. ● Explain if, how, or when you may revisit the issue, or if not, why not ("I care too much about you and our relationship to argue about this.") ● Check your words, tone of voice, body language, and facial expression to ensure that you are not saying one thing but communicating a different message.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This is an emergency, and quick, decisive action is vital. ● The issue needs to be resolved now because the consequences of working for resolution or changing an attitude are bigger than either of us can afford, but I WILL go back and do damage control. ● I have to protect myself against someone who takes advantage of my natural (easy-going, reasonable?) nature. 	<h3 style="text-align: center;">2. Hold Your Ground</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explain why you are holding your ground without making you a hero or putting the other person down. ● Describe if, how, or when you may revisit the issue, or if not, why not ("Once we are through this, I will be glad to talk with you and explain why I am pushing the way I am.") ● Check your words, tone of voice, body language and facial expression to ensure you are not saying one thing one thing but communicating a different message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● My desired outcome is moderately important, but I'm willing to "split the difference." ● Both of us have similar or equal power and are committed to goals that are mutually exclusive (traditional labor negotiations). ● I want to buy time to allow for a deeper dive into resolution. ● Both of us need to "save face." 	<h3 style="text-align: center;">3. Find a Happy Middle</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Think ahead about what you are or are not willing to give up in order to meet the other person's needs and find a happy middle. ● Ask for the other person's position before you state your own, and work together to find an outcome that is mutually acceptable. ● Check your words, tone of voice, body language and facial expression to ensure you are not saying one thing one thing but communicating a different message.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We have the time to find a different solution than what we are thinking. ● We can get a better solution if we put our personal needs aside and look for something that addresses both of our concerns. ● We each need to learn something new in order to grow. ● We need to resolve some feelings that have been getting in the way of a productive relationship. 	<h3 style="text-align: center;">4. Get Creative</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explain why you want to spend the time to find a creative win-win solution. ● Describe what processes you are familiar or comfortable with, and ask the other person what processes he is familiar or comfortable with ("Let's figure this out and learn something new together.") ● Check your words, tone of voice, body language and facial expression to ensure you are not saying one thing one thing but communicating a different message.