

The Power of a Positive NO

It's never fun to tell someone no, even when you know it's best.

If you are like the vast majority of leaders in ministry, you love people. You want to help and empower others, but more often than we prefer, leadership requires unpopular answers.

In fact, a great deal of leadership is learning and practicing the art of saying no in a way that encourages, earns trust, and even inspires, rather than in a way that may alienate or discourage people.

Set aside (just for a moment) strategy, culture, and what has been discerned in prayer, even the simple practicality of a leader's schedule reveals that you simply can't say yes to everyone.

All churches receive weekly requests such as:

- Can I start this new ministry?
- Can I get personal financial assistance?
- Will you promote my cause on stage?
- Will you make this change in the worship service?
- Would you endorse this political candidate?
- Would you financially support this ministry I care about?
- Will you bring in my favorite speaker or evangelist?

I have often responded in these conversations by saying, *"If we said yes to all the requests we receive, we'd no longer be the church you love to be part of."*

It is not only possible, but it's also our responsibility to learn how to deliver the undesired response, and still leave the person encouraged and hopefully spiritually empowered.

5 practical suggestions on how to say no in a positive way:

1) It's important to know why you *want* to say yes.

What motivates you to say yes, when you know the best response is no?

- Do you want to avoid disappointing someone?
- Are you out of time and this is how you move on?
- Do they have a strong personality and you want to avoid the pain of conflict?

Perhaps this is a rare situation that needs an exception. It's important to know when the request is open for consideration, and when it's not up for negotiation.

If you don't know where you stand, what you believe, and what would best reflect the church's culture, you can't lead. You are merely in an ongoing negotiation.

When you can't lead, you will be led. That causes insecurity, and you attempt to feel better by saying yes. That never works well in the long run, especially if your yes is misaligned with the church as a whole.

If you remain aligned with a compelling purpose, healthy culture, clear strategy, and all under the Holy Spirit's direction, saying no may still not be easy. Still, you can do it with confidence and a humble spirit.

2) You must believe your answer is in the best interest of the person *and* the organization.

You can't make the right decision every time. No leader can.

But you must believe your answer is in the best interest of the person and the church. This requires thoughtful preparation and prayer.

To fight for what is in the best interest of the church and for each individual is often the greatest tension a leader must handle.

To alter the direction of the church to serve a particular group or even an individual is often short-sighted. And yet, if we are not willing to consider the individual, we are in danger of missing the heart of a shepherd.

That tension leaves us in a good place of dependence upon the Holy Spirit for wisdom to know the right answer and the strength to own it and deliver it well.

3) Never merely say no.

It's important to listen, and it's essential that you engage in a genuine conversation.

When you must say no, don't power up or get defensive, and above all, don't pull spiritual authority and hide behind, "God said." Pray and get God's mind, yes, but also own the decision for yourself.

This is not a battle for you to win; it's a conversation. If you lead it that way, it will likely go well.

Seek to understand the person's point of view, not convince them you are right. Then, if your position has not changed, be honest and direct. Explain why you think the way you do.

The answer no one wants to hear is "no," but you have honored the person, communicated respect, and likely strengthened a relationship.

There is always the possibility of an alternate yes. What I mean by that is sometimes you may need to say no to a specific request, but there is another way to accomplish the same thing.

4) Don't apologize for the need to say no.

If you say, "I'm sorry I have to say no," that sends a confusing message.

It's better to say something like: "I'm sorry this disappoints you, but it's the right thing for now."

Keep in mind your answer of "no" comes after a genuine and honoring conversation. And it's never delivered bluntly. Make it clear, but not with a hammer.

The conversation is usually easier if there is an established relationship of trust, and you have a solid track record of leadership.

But even if the relationship is relatively new, trust can be established relatively quickly by taking time to connect, communicate appreciation for who they are, and understand the why behind their request.

Don't mistake saying yes as automatically a good way to empower a leader. Sometimes saying yes can hurt a leader or the church.

The best decisions that must include no for an answer helps develop the leader and strengthen the church.

5) Say yes as often as you can.

Empowerment, not control, is the better choice whenever possible. Therefore, always say yes when you can.

For example, there have been many times when someone has approached me about wanting the church to start a ministry.

We obviously can't take ownership of every ministry someone wants to start. But I can often say, "Yes, and *you* can start the ministry." You can do it personally and start as soon as you would like.

(Generally, it's not a ministry inside the church, but one outside in the community. Starting more and more ministries within the church is rarely a good idea.)

On that topic of "a lean ministry" I've written a post you can read [here](#).

I might continue the conversation with something like, you are very capable, and if God has placed this idea or vision within you, you don't need to hand it off to the church to do, *you* can go for it. And they often do!

You can offer to meet with them to brainstorm and to help get them started, but they own it, not

the church.

It's never easy to say no, but as leaders, it is often our responsibility to be courageous, direct, and deliver the answer no one wants to hear.

> [Read more from Dan.](#)
