
Saying 'No' Is Often The Key To Effective Leadership



As difficult as it can be, saying no is often the key to effective leadership, says an ethics and management expert, just as most successful leaders have little difficulty to say no to a losing deal, to a project that's wasting money, or to a request that doesn't align with their priorities.

These same leaders may feel awkward to speak up when their concerns are less clear or when their organisation is hell-bent on pursuing a plan, while in certain situations, it can feel politically risky to hesitate or ask too many questions, says Elizabeth Doty, founder of [Leadership Momentum](#), a consultancy that focuses on the practical challenges of keeping organisational commitments.

Even with their direct reports, many leaders try to avoid addressing issues such as drifting standards, inappropriate behaviour, or emerging bad habits, adds Doty.

But, without the ability to push back when needed, there is a risk of "commitment drift": promises made to customers or employees, or to promote safety, specific values, financial discipline, or social and environmental responsibility are eroded incrementally, without anyone really stopping to think about the consequences.

As Joseph Fuller and Michael C. Jensen pointed out in their 2002 paper "[Just Say No to Wall Street: Putting a Stop to the Earnings Game](#)," saying no to such dysfunctional momentum can be the best strategy for helping a company or organisation succeed while maintaining values.

That is why Doty highlights [five moments](#) when saying no is considered the best strategy.

The first step in building capacity to say no is to recognise some common situations that should raise a red flag. The following five moments suggest when it is critical to pause and make a considered choice, based on a thorough understanding of your options and what is at stake.

1. You are being pushed to make a promise you can't keep.
2. Something sticks in your craw.
3. You feel you have no choice.
4. The "plan" has taken on a life of its own.
5. You see a dangerous trend in the works.

Elizabeth Doty argues that being prepared to recognise and act on these moments of truth "makes it less likely that you will blow by critical decision points without giving them the attention they deserve. The fact is, it only gets harder to speak up if you wait. And, as you practice saying no or raising questions constructively, you increase your ability to exert a positive influence on your organisation."

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