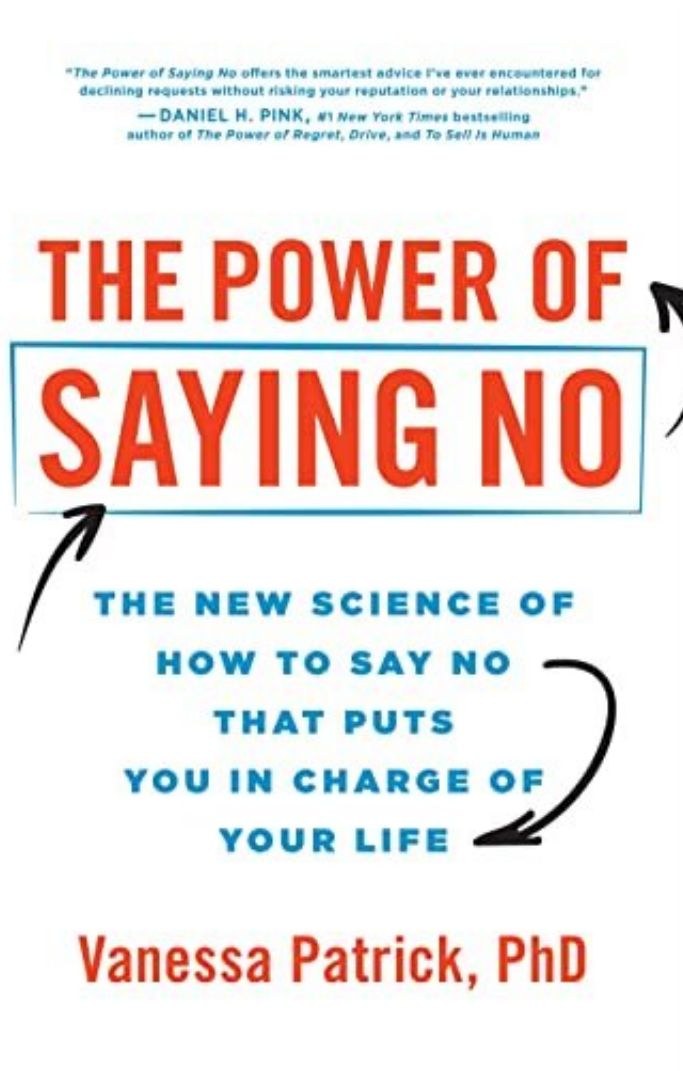


Think you're good at saying no? Actually, you could probably use a few pointers

June 1 2023, by Sally Strong



About a decade ago while researching the practice of empowered refusal, Vanessa Patrick spotted something: When it comes to turning down requests for their time, energy or money, people can be surprisingly inept.

Many fumble, some totally cave. That lack of skill and preparation puts them at risk of losing out on opportunities important to them while they stay busy pleasing others.

It was not just in the everyday world where the skill was lacking. Patrick also found an absence of scientific research among psychologists and communicators about how "no" can be effectively communicated.

"Saying no can be tough, and people actually struggle with it," said Patrick, who is the Bauer professor of marketing, associate dean for research and lead faculty for the Bauer Executive Women in Leadership Program at the University of Houston's C.T. Bauer College of Business.

"In popular books, there is a lot of published advice that encourages you to decline requests that divert energy from the things that matter to you. Many highly successful people count that skill among their most essential. But how do you do it? That's the point where published advice has always fallen silent and where my research comes in. I investigate how to say no more effectively," Patrick said.

Building upon that earlier research on empowered refusal (which she describes as the aligning of your commitments and actions with your life choices and ideals) Patrick began studying strategies of people who are adept at giving a clear "no" while they still—and this is the trickiest part—manage to honor the [personal relationship](#) with the person who asked and keep their reputation intact. Some basics stood out.

For example, a simple swap of words speaks volumes. Consider the

difference between the words "I can't" and "I don't." In the context of a dinner guest declining dessert, they sound almost synonymous. But there is a key difference.

"The 'I can't eat cake' statement begs the question, 'why not?' The response initiates a dialogue in which the guest is being asked to justify her response. The alternative is the more empowered 'thanks, but I don't eat cake,' which permanently settles the matter by invoking the self and reflecting a personal policy—this guest is not a cake eater. When you use 'I don't' you come across as more convincing and determined," Patrick said. "Empowered refusal puts you in the driver's seat of your own life."

To be effective, be ready to convey your personal policies.

"Once you state a personal policy that is based on your own values, priorities, preferences and beliefs, you reflect a set of values to others and you get less pushback, which is an important thing when navigating these situations. You do not want to leave room for someone to argue," Patrick explained.

"Your personal preferences can come in two types. They may be announcements you state to others—'I don't take morning meetings,' or 'I don't take on a new project until I finish an old one.' Or they may be rules for yourself that keep you on your chosen path: 'I don't touch the phone in the car,' or 'I don't ride the elevator if I can take the stairs.'"

These personal policies (which are standing rules, not on-the-spot decisions) differ from boundaries, as defined by psychologists. Patrick considers boundaries, like barbed wire, to be a response to a threat and something that keeps people from approaching.

"I see personal policies as more like stanchions, those red velvet ropes that you might see at a movie theater that gently guide and shape your

path. You set your personal policies to shape the life you want, and allow your red velvet ropes focus you on the direction you want to go, as if granting a voice to your values, priorities, preferences and beliefs."

It was during her early working years when Patrick first encountered the "no" obstacles that are especially common for women. "I learned firsthand the struggles women have with saying no," she said.

"Based on my research, I have developed a set of modules in which I teach people how to develop personal policies, how to communicate a 'no' in an empowered way that maintains their reputation with the asker and secures the relationship with them, as well," she said.

She boils down the advice into her A.R.T. toolkit. "The 'A' stands for awareness. 'R' stands for rules, not decisions. And 'T' stands for totality of self," she explained.

"I teach in the Women in Leadership class the ways in which you can figure out for yourself when you are most energized and what re-energizes. What are some strategies that can reenergize? It can be something simple, like going for a walk, sitting in the sun, having a cup of tea, taking to a friend. All of these can replenish our energy and help us get more meaningful work done," Patrick said.

"What has been so rewarding is taking my research and then translating it into practice in a way that has been helpful to others. When people learn these techniques, they can run with them and see improvement in their lives right away," she said.

Patrick is the author of the book "[The Power of Saying No](#)," available in June.

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