

Options Other than “Yes”

by [Mike Hawkins](#)



When you are busy and someone requests your time, how do you respond? If you are like many people, you stop whatever you are doing and give them your time. You probably like to help people. You want to accommodate people's request, especially those with whom you work and live. So, you often say “yes” to their requests or start down the slippery slope by saying “how can I help you?”

In saying yes to someone's request for your time, they receive your help, but then you have a problem. Assuming you are busy, then you have to defer something you had planned to do. Or you don't get to do something at all. In effect, when you said “yes” to something they wanted you to do, you were saying “no” to something you wanted to do.

This isn't necessarily wrong. Deferring what we want is part of life. We don't always get to do what we want. Helping others is what we do most every day. We help our colleagues at work. We help our kids, parents, and spouses at home. We help our friends. We volunteer. Unless we are so self-centered and unavailable, we don't merely get to do what we want.

Since no one is omniscient and therefore self-sufficient, including ourselves, we also ask others for help. We request information. We request assistance. Every day we depend on others for something. If for no other reason than we also need help, we generally try to say yes when we are needed.

Yet, is saying yes always the best option? What if by helping one person we are not helping another who is more deserving? What if by helping someone we are cheating them out of learning how to do something on their own? What if by helping we are deferring something truly more important? Or what if we are enabling someone's undesirable behavior by helping them?

While saying yes and helping people can be the right answer in many situations, it isn't always the right answer. If your son asks you for help doing his science project, “doing” his science project is probably not the best answer. If colleagues at work constantly ask you for help doing what they are responsible for doing, doing what they are paid to do probably isn't the best answer. While the temptation to say yes might be strong and the tension of saying no might be stressful, regularly deferring or skipping important tasks probably isn't the best answer.

There are many reasons to help or not help people. One is particularly relevant which originated in economics. [Opportunity cost](#), despite its financial affinity, is a concept that applies to any decision regardless of its nature. Opportunity cost is the value of the next-best alternative you give up when making a choice to do something when you have limited resources of which your time is one. Value could be financial, relational, reputational, developmental, or anything. Value is whatever is important to you.

When our time is limited and we say yes to something, we are saying no to the alternative which we would have otherwise allocated our time. Our opportunity cost is the value of whatever we are not going to be able to do. If what we are saying yes to is more valuable than what we are not going to do, we can generally be okay with the opportunity cost. The opportunity cost we would experience in that case would be less than the value we are saying yes to.

In contrast, when the opportunity cost of whatever we are deferring is higher than what we've decided to say yes to, we are saying yes to the alternative with the lower value. For example, if by saying yes to someone who asks for our assistance, we are unable to do a task of higher value, we've chosen the less valuable alternative. We may be doing this unintentionally, but like when we address a symptom of a problem instead of solving the root cause, we are choosing to do the lower value alternative.

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The good news is that there are alternatives to saying yes to people’s request for time. One obvious alternative is saying “no.” This is virtually impossible for some people for several reasons. When you say no to people’s request, they don’t get the help they need. You are going to disappoint them. You may even make them mad. How many of us want to make people disappointed or mad? Not many. Yet no is the right answer in some circumstances and should be considered a viable option.

You can also answer with “maybe”, but this is generally not a good option. It can leave people with uncertainty. In most circumstances it is about the same as ignoring someone’s request. Whether ignoring, or answering with maybe, people don’t know if they can count on you or not. They don’t know if they should ask someone else or wait on you.

While yes, no, and maybe may seem like your only options, there are other options which are often better. You can defer the request until a later time that is more convenient. You can delegate the request to someone else if you have someone else available. You might be able to use technology to automate your response if the request is informational in nature. Or you can put conditions on your yes.

Putting conditions on your yes is saying “yes, if” instead of “yes.” You are agreeing to do something, but with a condition. Conditions might be responding to people’s request for help with a reciprocal ask. For example, if someone asks you to help them with their project, which takes time away from your project, you might respond with “yes, I’ll help you with your project if you can help me with my project.”

Another example of a condition might be when someone asks you to do something in its entirety. Instead of doing the entire request, you could offer to do a part of it. If someone asks you to create a project plan, you might reply with “yes, I’ll help you with your project plan if you draft it first so we have something to review.”

Or, if you want to give your time, but don’t need anything in return other than more time, you might ask for something that helps accommodate your schedule. For example, you might say “yes, if we can do it tomorrow during lunch.” Or “yes, if you can provide lunch tomorrow, I’ll help you then.”

Listed below are eight options you might consider when being asked for your time. You may still decide to say yes, but do so intentionally knowing you have other options:

1. Do (say: yes)
2. Do with a condition (say: yes, if [condition])
3. Don’t do (say: no)
4. Defer to later
5. Delegate
6. Ignore (not recommended)
7. Maybe (not recommended)
8. Automate

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