



Saying No to Your Boss

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One of the best pieces of advice I have received in my professional life was that I needed to learn how to avoid strictly working from out of my inbox, and drive innovation and growth for my employers resulting from my own strategic thinking. Great in theory, but that meant that I needed to figure out how to avoid simply taking on each and every task suggested by my bosses.

I am not suggesting that I have all the answers in this area but given that I am confident that most professionals face the challenge of knowing when, and how, to say no to their bosses, I will offer my insights. First and foremost, you need to know your boss, and if you know any of the tactics to be discussed will not be received well, then you need to think long and hard before deploying them. You may want to consider starting small, get a win in saying no to a small task, and then work your way up to larger scale requests.

Of course, you actually never just come and say “no” in response to a direct request from your boss in those exact words. The art is in communicating what is being asked may not offer any type of ROI for your time, or that the task needs to be redefined to drive even better results. In terms of the former, you may want to level set where any task fits into your current priorities. You may come back with something like “I could do this project, but that would mean that I delay project B that as we discussed is a priority because...” That can help at least put the idea in the parking lot for the time being. It may be a two-step process to get a project off your task list; to the bottom, and then to eventually drop off as it stays near the bottom for any amount of time. Redefining a request from your boss into your terms can involve asking questions around the task to better understand the motivation for the request and the intended results expected when you complete the task. At times a different tactic can achieve the same results and can allow you to work a redefined task into direct alignment with your current projects.

A flurry of tasks may often come when your boss has a long plane ride. How many times have you gotten at least five new tasks as a result of his plane time? You may consider taking two approaches when you receive a flurry of new tasks, and there are a few in which you know just do not hit the mark. A direct approach would be a response such as “in all honesty, if we want to achieve “xyz” I do not see how doing “abc” gets us there. If you want me to pursue of course I will, but I am just not seeing it.” You may also employ a less direct tactic, what I will call the stall tactic. You need to acknowledge the tasks, but then allow them to stew with your boss, and see if they stay top of mind. Often ideas from the plane ride seem important, but lose priority after a few days.

In summary in saying no your boss here are some approaches to consider:

- 🔗 Level set a request into your current set of priorities.



- » Redefine a request on your terms.
- » Directly state your opinion supported with facts as to the relevance of a request.
- » Let a task stew to see if it still remains relevant.
- » Use humor at any point you feel stating your opinion will cause tension.

The relationship you have and develop with your boss determines when and how you say no to your boss. The better you become at politically expressing your differences of opinion with your boss, and instilling his trust in your judgment, the more control you will have over your inbox and your ability to offer the highest ROI for your talents.