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How and when to say 'no' to a requestBy Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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The 'yes/no' response may sound like something small and mechanical. But in fact, your decision of whether to agree or to refuse a certain request may impact deeply on the outcome of a particular project and also on your own reputation and image.

One factor affecting your response is tradition, or even 'race memory', from the age of hierarchical systems, so recently ended, but still deeply embedded in our consciousness.

In that culture, saying 'no' sounded like outright disobeying of orders, with serious implications for your career.

And there is no doubt that some dictatorial managers may still try to play on the instinctive weakness of their staff to avoid confrontation.

If you feel you're being targeted in such a manner, then it is for you to counteract that image by making sure you are clearly heard to say 'no' to any request that seems, to you, to be unreasonable.

This is part of assertion training, where you establish an image that forms a suitable blend of compliance with a degree of independence.

Impact

Within today's reduced hierarchical management, the issue of reasonableness does not have so much to do with offending your superiors or risking dismissal. It has more to do with effectively managing your own workload and safeguarding your reputation within the team.

Saying 'no' to an extra task that could involve night or weekend working that may adversely affect your normal work schedule, might be a reasonable response.

However, refusing a job merely because it is unappealing - for example, writing a time-consuming article for the company magazine, could well affect your future promotion.

In this example, a colleague may volunteer for this task instead, which might be seen by senior management as a desire to please, and which could impact favourably on their career prospects.

And if you have made a considered decision to refuse a particular demand,

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then it needs to be said unequivocally, in a manner that is firm but still courteous. Ambiguity can cause untold problems.

A typical example might be as follows: Rashid, the manager, asks Pervais, his assistant, to finish a report by 3pm. Pervais says "Much as I would like to do this for you - unfortunately I can't meet your deadline due to other tasks that I already have to do, but I can do it for you for by tomorrow morning."

This is called the 'positive-negative-positive sandwich'. It is important to always end on a positive comment as this is the one that will be remembered last.

If, however, Rashid is insistent, Pervais could say "OK, I will meet the deadline, but could you please re-prioritise my other tasks, in order for me to do this?"

And finally, if you ever do find yourself hesitating to say 'no', in case you might offend, then just consider how many times you've had it said to you recently. And let that put the matter in perspective. On the other hand, remember to use your power to refuse, wisely.

Key points: Response

- Managers may try to exploit a natural reluctance to say 'no'.
- The new-style acceptability of 'no' carries its own risks too.
- When saying 'no', make the message clear and unambiguous.

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

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