

Saying No Positively-Assertiveness Skills

Saying no to a request can feel like a betrayal of your colleagues, and saying yes to helping them can feel like a betrayal of your own focus. Most of us bounce between two extremes — over-complying until resentment builds or holding a line so firmly the relationship cracks. Assertiveness is the skill of doing neither.

Why we default to one extreme or the other

Under pressure, these defaults often trace back to unspoken internal scripts. Someone running on a Please People pattern accommodates others and disregards their own needs, often building quiet resentment. Someone running on a Be Strong pattern demands what they need and disregards others, cracking relationships instead. Assertiveness sits between these — not a fixed personality trait, but a flexible skill that can be built regardless of which default feels more natural to you.

Assertiveness is best understood along two dimensions. The vertical axis is *Regard* — how much respect and value you're holding for yourself and for the other person. The horizontal axis is *Influence* — whether you're aiming to influence the situation or stay open to being influenced by it. The goal isn't to sit rigidly in one quadrant. It's to stay in the upper half of the model, where regard for both people — yourself and the other person — stays high regardless of influence. Sometimes that means stating clearly what you need, why something has to happen a particular way — holding your position with regard for the other. Other times it means asking questions and adapting, genuinely open to negotiation. Which one fits best depends on the situation, and ideally you will have the flexibility to adapt, not rely on a fixed style you default to.

Opening the conversation

The hardest part of a boundary-setting conversation is often simply starting it. Chris Fenning offers us a useful structure: *Context* (what this is about), *Intention* (what response you need), and *Key Message* (your point, stated plainly). It takes a few seconds of thought and it saves the listener from having to work out what's being asked of them.

For an analytical colleague: “About my workload, I need help prioritising. I have three competing deadlines.” For a more relational colleague: “About the team's workload, I need your input to prioritise — we have three deadlines, and a quick chat will help us get this right.” Same boundary, tailored delivery.

The shape of a well-formed “No”

A clear no tends to follow a consistent shape: affirm and soften, to maintain the relationship; signal that a refusal is coming; give the real reason, not an excuse — people can always find a way around an excuse; restate the no without over-apologising; offer an alternative if one exists.

For example: “I know we have a deadline at the end of the week, and in other circumstances I'd be glad to help. But I've made arrangements that are difficult to change at short notice, so I can't work late tonight. Would tomorrow work instead?” Regard for the other person's situation, a genuine reason, a clean no, and a real alternative where that's possible and genuine.

Continued...



Holding the line under pushback

Watch for habits of over-qualifying — “I just think,” “I’m probably wrong, but” — small phrases that undercut a point before it’s finished. Your expertise doesn’t need a disclaimer.

When pushback comes, you don’t need a new argument. Acknowledge what’s been said and restate your position calmly: “I realise this leaves you in a difficult position, and I still can’t stay late tonight.” Acknowledging someone’s need isn’t the same as conceding to it.

The next time your heart rate rises in a difficult conversation, that’s usually the moment to pause, lower your voice rather than raise it, and ask yourself: how much regard am I holding right now, for myself and for the other person? That question is the anchor back to a well-held no.

Said this way — positively, fairly, and with respect — no isn’t something to fear. Handled well, it tends to strengthen a professional reputation rather than cost one.

**This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins.
Find more inside Research Navigator at MargaretCollins.com.**

