What To Do If They Say No

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Few people like to hear the word NO – perhaps less so if it comes from a manager or a colleague they’re trying to persuade.

In its defence, NO might be a blessing. As painful as it may be, NO could be exactly what we need to hear to re-think our strategy or change messages. Perhaps re-position the argument overall.

Or just as likely, NO could be the next step in the conversation. For example, real negotiations don’t begin until both parties reach an impasse.

If nothing else, NO does not mean NO OPTIONS. The next time they say NO, you might consider this list of common actions and responses. Compiled from my workshops in Negotiation Skills and Persuasion & Influence, these suggestions are deliberately general because no matter which direction you choose, always consider the entirety of the situation: the people involved, the issue, its context and history, and most important, the consequences of your actions.

At the very least, always remember to respond to NO with professionalism and grace. Both attitudes could pay in dividends the next time you’re trying to persuade. Or, as my Nana Eklund used to say, there is no reason to burn a bridge before you come to it.

1. Anticipate the NO.

Regardless of your topic, you should always properly prepare by thinking in advance how you’ll handle NO.

- **Learn about the other party in advance.** What’s their POV of the current business situation? What are their hot buttons or priorities? How have they made decisions in the past, and on what criteria? What’s their personality like? Do they make decisions on the spot, or do they prefer to reflect before deciding? Do they have a profile online, such as on LinkedIn or Facebook? You may find clues here about their background or skills to help you decide how to approach them with your proposal.

- **Pick apart your argument before they do.** What are the holes in your proposal? How would you answer each criticism? You might ask an objective person for their feedback if you’re too close to your argument.

- **Talk to someone who’s already been in your shoes.** Sometimes, the other party is inaccessible by hierarchy or distance. Even if you know the person well, it’s never a bad idea to use your network to find someone who’s negotiated with them in the past, to learn what worked and didn’t work, and get their insight and counsel on your strategy.

- **Focus on rapport before you jump into your argument.** Rapport helps build bridges before you start. In fact, in cases of culture, age or status, a mutual relationship is just as important as – if not, more important than – the argument or outcome itself. For example, you might identify a shared contact in your network who can not only give you a proper introduction, but they might also give you a gloss of credibility, which could be vital if your proposal initially sounds irrelevant, expensive or provocative.
2. Be assertive with alternative solutions.

- **Focus on ‘what is right’ versus ‘being right.’** Consider the reasoning behind the NO without attaching their decision to your emotions. Depending upon the situation, good managers make decisions based on the business overall, not one individual. If you were in their shoes, would you have made the same decision? If so, try thinking of alternative solutions from their **POV** which support the good of the group, not you alone.

- **Look for common ground.** Are there aspects of the situation where you both agree? It’s easier to persuade when the other party genuinely believes there is mutual agreement. If so, you might consider brainstorming solutions together which address the issues. At the same time, the other party is less likely to back away from solutions which they helped create.

- **Use this as an opportunity to learn – about them, the problem, their solutions.** Particularly important if you’re reporting to a new manager, use their NO to learn about how they make decisions. For example, you may be too green to understand the complexities of the problem or the situation. By asking the right questions, you could learn something which can be translated into an alternative solution. If nothing else, by showing you are open and receptive, you set the stage for a better persuasion next time.

- **Ask for their help and feedback.** Some NO people are exceptional at poking holes in arguments. Take this opportunity to learn from their critical analysis. If possible, ask for their feedback in advance of the actual discussion. And, if you take the time to improve your argument based on their initial assessment, you could turn the rejection into an approval.

- **Talk face-to-face. Or, pick up the phone.** Distance allows people to say NO at a safe distance. With Skype, FaceTime and similar apps available on most smartphones, there is no excuse for having a less-than honest conversation live. However, if you’re using distance to hide because of a lack of confidence or a lack of preparation, it may become quickly evident to your manager they were right to answer NO in the first place.

3. Re-position the argument.

*Be sensitive with how you implement these strategies as they can make you look manipulative and backfire on your desired result.*

- **Make your idea theirs.** I don’t recommend using this strategy subliminally (it’s misleading, it takes time, lots of room for errors). Instead, try being open and honest. In fact, this transparent approach is a variation on the manager’s cry: ‘**Don’t come to me with a problem, come to me with a solution.**’ Just recently, a friend used this method with her manager. She told her manager what she wanted, saying she knew he’d deny her request (he agreed). In turn, she asked if she could challenge his thinking with an alternative idea (again, he agreed). A week later, she gifted him with a fully mapped-out idea, adding that she was more than happy if he wanted to present the idea to senior management as his idea. In the end, she got part of what she wanted, but was more happy with her manager’s response. “I got a lot of credit for stepping up and being proactive,” she said. “Also, once I took my ego out of it, I realised it shouldn’t matter who comes up with the best idea.”

- **Appeal to the hero complex.** Some managers enjoy being the Good Samaritan. Their DNA is to help. To make this strategy work, you need to demonstrate that you alone cannot solve the problem, or that you’ve tried to solved the issue but you need their help with a problem beyond your scope. Whether it’s tapping into their higher authority or knowledge, your appeal for their help may give you the persuasive edge.
- **Take your argument elsewhere.** Some proposals or arguments have multiple decision makers. Others have different levels of clearance. Look around the situation and see if there’s a way to adapt your needs, even if it’s testing it in a smaller form.

4. **Take aggressive action … but know too there could be consequences.**

- **Put it in writing.** In the end, after gracefully and patiently trying to win over the other party, you realise they aren’t going to do as you want. Depending upon the situation, you may need to put your request formally in writing, copying key people. But, even in these cases, I’d suggest you have a conversation with mentors as there’s nothing like publicly shaming someone into action to turn an ember into a fire.

- **Don’t bother to ask.** As the cliché goes, sometimes it’s better to ask for forgiveness after the fact. Given your level of experience, the responsibilities in your role, sound gut instinct and the flexibility of your manager or team, you may find that the best decision is simply to make the decision, get on with the task, and work like hell to prove your decision was right.

- **Start looking around for a new job.** After you’ve admirably tried everything on this list and more, you may find this strategy is your last recourse if your work and reasoning are continually knocked back without merit or explanation. *This is not the strategy to start with, nor to try on a whim.* But at the same time, I know of lots of people who finally ended up in this group – myself included – and it turned out to be the best thing they (and I) ever did.

5. **Sometimes it’s simply best to move on.**

Yes, you should always look for alternatives, by preparing well and being pro-actively assertive when they say NO. However, you also can’t win every single argument. In the end, there’s a difference between a battle and a war. Is the energy worth it? Are there bigger battles looming on the horizon? If you can’t decide, perhaps the best advice is to sleep on the NO and decide with a clearer head in the morning.