5 ways to say no to anyone—politely

It's okay to decline sometimes

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Can you be chair of this department? Can you be a faculty advisor to that student organization? Would you like to be on this planning committee? Can you put in a good word for me?

Chances are that you get questions like these pretty often, and they may increase as you move up the career ladder. Writing for the Chronicle of Higher Education, Robin Bernstein, who is a professor of African and African-American studies and chair of studies in women, gender, and sexuality at Harvard University, discusses five ideas for saying no to new projects when you already have a full plate.

5 daily habits of the best managers

1. Suggest someone else

When coworkers ask you to do something, they don't always have a good reason for asking you specifically—they just know they need someone to do it.

Bernstein recommends suggesting someone else who you respect. One person's busywork can be another person's exciting opportunity. Consider whether you know anyone who could use this task to grow in his or her career.

2. Be vague

You may feel guilty about saying no, and may have the impulse to explain your reason for declining. But Bernstein warns against this, because almost any reason you give can be scrutinized, judged, and negotiated.

3. Let them know when you actually can't do it

Sometimes, you really just can't: Accepting would require you to be in two places at one time or to learn an entirely new field of expertise. Bernstein points out that there's no need to apologize and it's okay to ask the person not to make a similar request again.

Is that conference worth your time? Ask yourself these 4 questions

4. Set personal ground rules

Proactively choose clear guidelines about the kinds of requests you will accept. For example, Bernstein only agrees to 12 external review projects per year. "After I've said yes to 12, I say no to all further requests. When I say no, I usually offer no explanation because the purpose of the policy is not to justify my decision to anyone else but instead to provide me with an internal compass," she writes.
Bernstein also suggests that you could set your guidelines in conjunction with your department chair, dean, or another supervisor so that you have a third party to use as a fallback.

5. When in doubt, just ignore the request

Sometimes you will get email requests that are simply impersonal or unreasonable. In this case, Bernstein advises that you should feel free to just delete it, especially if you have never heard of the person or have never been in touch with them (Bernstein, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3/19).

*Just say "No." It's how your most successful colleagues get ahead*