

## Managing Upwards and the Art of Saying No.

“Half of the troubles  
in this life can be  
traced to saying no too  
quickly, and not saying  
no soon enough”







## Managing upwards and the art of saying no

In any workplace, strong communication skills are essential for building trust, setting boundaries, and fostering a supportive, productive environment. Two essential skills that can elevate your professional relationships and boost your career are managing upwards and learning to say “no” politely. Mastering these can help you build stronger connections with senior colleagues while maintaining balance in your workload.

### Why managing upwards matters

Managing upwards is about creating an effective working relationship with your supervisors and leadership. It doesn't mean “managing your boss,” but rather finding ways to align with their goals, anticipate their needs, and become a proactive, reliable partner. Here are some strategies to help you manage upwards effectively:

- **Understand Their Goals:** A solid understanding of what's important to your manager allows you to align your priorities, anticipate needs, and become a proactive problem-solver.
- **Communicate Effectively:** Adapting your communication style to match theirs—whether it's through concise emails, direct conversations, or regular check-ins—can significantly enhance your working relationship.
- **Build Trust:** Consistency and reliability build trust over time. By delivering results, keeping commitments, and following through, you'll establish yourself as a dependable team member they can rely on.



### The power of saying “No” politely

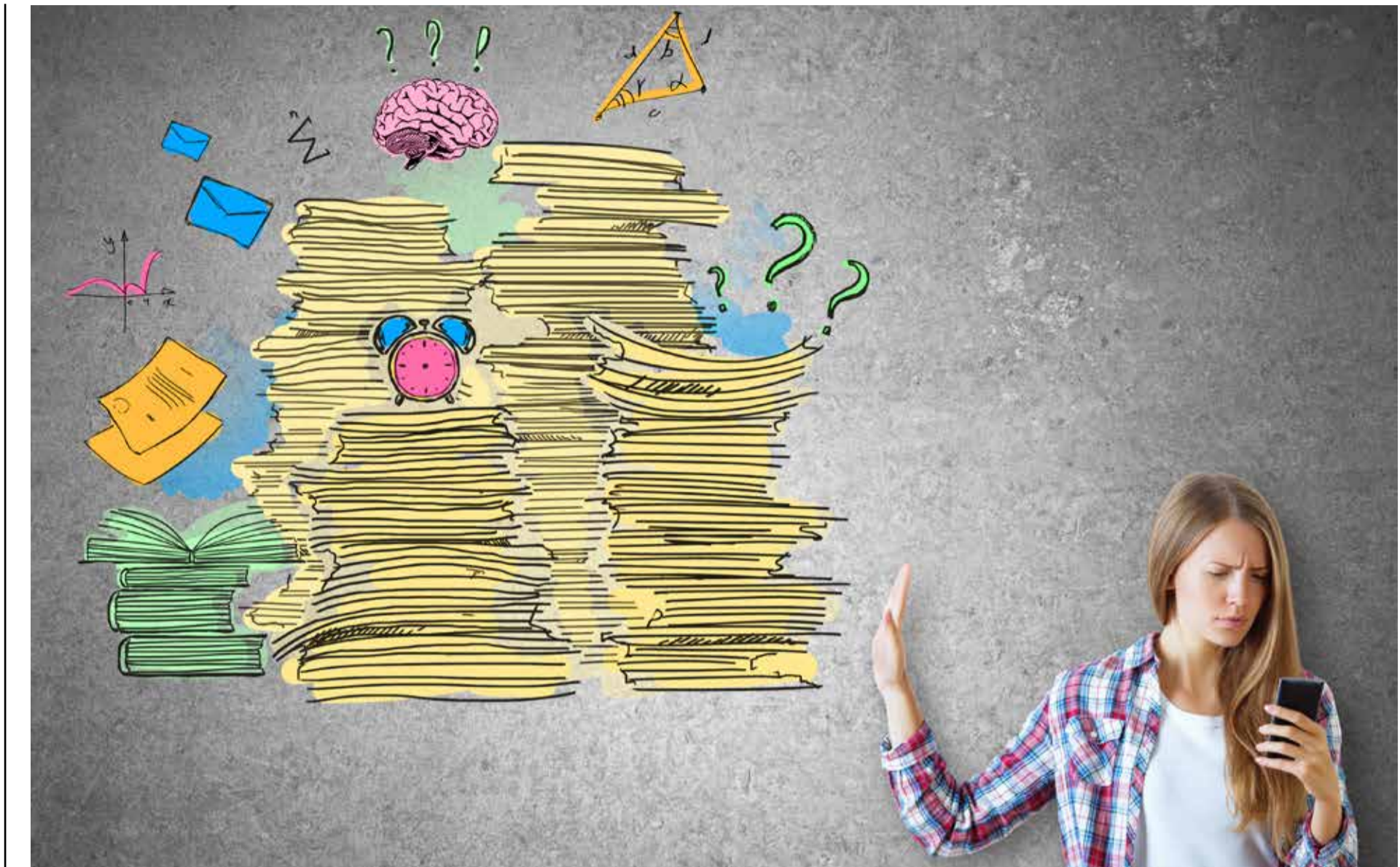
Knowing how to say “no” respectfully is a skill that can be surprisingly difficult yet incredibly valuable. Here's why it matters and some ways to approach it effectively:

- **Prevent Overcommitment:** Saying “yes” to every request can quickly lead to burnout. Setting boundaries allows you to focus on key priorities without compromising the quality of your work.
- **Maintain Professional Relationships:** Saying no politely ensures you maintain respect and professionalism. It's all about addressing the request, not the person.
- **Practical Phrases:** Here are some go-to phrases to make saying “no” easier:

1. “I'd love to help, but I'm currently focused on [specific project]. Could we revisit this later?” Shows interest and openness to helping in the future.
2. “I'm at capacity with my current workload, but let's discuss how we might be able to prioritise this.” Demonstrates willingness to collaborate on solutions.
3. “I'm not able to take this on right now, but [Colleague's Name] may have the availability and expertise to help.” Offers an alternative person who could handle the task.
4. “This isn't something I can commit to at the moment, but I can help brainstorm solutions or offer guidance.” Keeps you involved without taking on the full task.
5. “Given my current commitments, I wouldn't be able to give this the attention it deserves.” Communicates respect for the quality of work required.
6. “I can take this on after [specific date or project deadline]. Will that timeline work for you?” Offers a potential future timeframe if you're currently busy.
7. “Thank you for thinking of me! I'm currently focused on [other responsibilities], so I'll have to pass on this for now.” Shows appreciation while setting a clear boundary.
8. “I'm unable to help with this right now, but I can send you some resources or recommend someone else who may be able to.” Provides helpful support without overextending.
9. “This project sounds great, but I'm fully booked at the moment. I'd love to help on future initiatives if there's another opportunity.” Keeps the door open for future involvement.
10. “I appreciate the opportunity, but my current priorities won't allow me to give this my best effort. Let's discuss how I can support in another way.”

Emphasises commitment to quality without overcommitting.

Each response is assertive but respectful, making it clear that while you're unable to take on additional work, you're open to finding constructive solutions



### When it is important to say no

There will be times when it is very important to say no, and you should learn to recognise these situations. Learn to say No when:

- When you need to protect your bandwidth, sanity or quality of work
- When you lack the skills / competence required
- When the task does not align with your or the organisation's goals

### When to escalate a concern

Sometimes, managing upwards means recognising when an issue needs to go beyond your immediate scope. Knowing when and how to escalate can improve outcomes and ensure issues get the attention they deserve. If you need to escalate something, frame it constructively and present clear reasons for involving a higher level.

Example language: 'I believe this issue might need senior-level input. Here's why...'

### Why these skills matter

By developing these skills, you'll create a more fulfilling and productive work environment for yourself and your team. Managing upwards fosters stronger relationships with leadership, while knowing how to set boundaries protects your time and energy. Together, these skills allow you to thrive in a supportive, respectful, and balanced professional setting.





## What happens if you don't

Burnout can occur when people feel overcommitted and unable to take adequate rest. The issue of burnout has become more prevalent in the age of the Knowledge worker. A knowledge worker is anyone who predominantly uses their brain to do their work. Productivity is very difficult to measure in the knowledge worker and therefore time and visibility became the proxy, increasing the pressure on people to be 'always on'.

Without adequate care of lifestyle factors, including sufficient, quality rest – this can lead to burnout. Burnout is commonly linked to disassociation from friends & family, unable to find joy in usual ways, decrease in self-care, increased irritability and feeling physically exhausted but mentally 'wired'.

Focusing on the key principles of well-being; sleep, hydration, movement, connection with a community and good nutrition will act as protective measures against burnout. Re-integrating the core areas of well-being into your life if you are starting to feel the early signs of burnout can also help to restore your energy levels and resilience.

The list below is a good way to help identify the early signs of burnout in ourselves. If you recognise 1 or 2, that is very normal. If you recognise more than 3 or 4, you may need to speak to a trusted friend or health professional about how you are feeling.

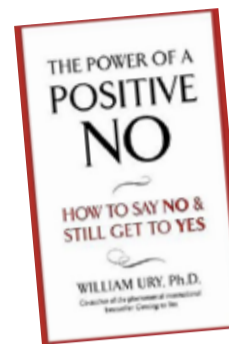
### The early warning signs of burnout

- Disconnection from people around you – go inward away from partner, friends & family
- Emotional exhaustion – small things / requests agitate you. Outbursts of anger
- Lack of creativity – can't think of new ideas or solve problems
- Inability to gain pleasure from simple everyday things
- Procrastinating – don't take actions or make decisions
- Selfcare starts to go – food choices worsen / don't eat / comfort eating
- Physical exhaustion – tired but wired / brain fog and no self-awareness

If you recognise that you might be suffering from burnout, please reach out to a friend or colleague to talk about it. The Employee Assistance programme (EAP) is also available and can offer personalised support and counselling.

## If you want to learn more:

Here are five insightful books on learning to say "no" effectively and assertively, while still maintaining positive relationships:

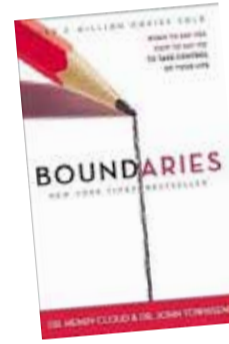


### 1. The Power of a Positive No: Save the Deal, Save the Relationship, and Still Say No by William Ury

- Ury, a renowned negotiation expert, presents a practical approach to saying no. He outlines the concept of a "Positive No," which helps you refuse requests without damaging relationships. The book provides strategies to assert your boundaries while staying respectful.

### 2. Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less by Greg McKeown

- This book dives into the importance of focusing on what's truly essential and cutting out the non-essential. McKeown emphasizes saying no to distractions and unnecessary obligations, so you can commit to what really matters in your life.

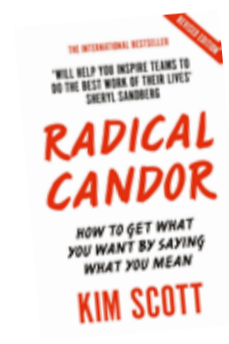


### 3. Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend

- Cloud and Townsend explore how setting boundaries in relationships is essential for personal growth. They offer guidance on saying no to protect your emotional and mental well-being, with examples from work, family, and friendships.

### 4. The Art of Saying No: How to Stand Your Ground, Reclaim Your Time and Energy, and Refuse to Be Taken for Granted by Damon Zahariades

- Zahariades' book is a straightforward guide on the art of assertiveness and learning to say no without guilt. He provides actionable advice and strategies for dealing with various scenarios, helping you manage requests in a confident, balanced way.



### 5. Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity by Kim Scott

- Although geared toward leaders, this book is helpful for anyone looking to improve communication skills. Scott introduces the concept of Radical Candor, which encourages saying what needs to be said honestly and directly. The principles can be applied to saying no in a way that strengthens relationships.

