

Leading by saying No

The reluctance, and often inability, to say No is an insidious robber of success. Success takes vision and focus. Not saying No takes nibbles, often full bites, out of your time and your energy and keeps you from creating the life and making the difference that you long to make in the world. This danger extends far beyond the mother of school age children who is asked to send homemade cookies for the class party the next day. It plagues the gifted CEO eager to take the company to the next level. It haunts the entrepreneur who struggles to focus his efforts. It dilutes the ability of these leaders to pursue what really matters to them.

Is that sounding selfish? Consider what is possible if each of us pursues what truly matters to us. Perhaps the human race will get done what truly matters. What if you carefully chose where you gave your time and your energy, and lived lives consistent with what you value most? As leaders, we would model the importance of not settling for lives that are spread too thin to make a lasting difference. Does *that* sound selfish?

Leadership skill: Lead by saying No.

The key to saying No is to be very clear about what is important enough to you to say Yes. The truth is that your resources are finite. Each time you say Yes (or don't say No) you are in essence "robbing Peter to pay Paul." There is nothing wrong with that as long as paying Paul is more important to you than paying Peter.

The tricky part is that very few of us are living lives filled with things that we *don't* want to do. But many of us are living lives that seldom get to the things that we *really* want to do. We are often responding to what is in our face rather than what is in our heart – also referred to as the tyranny of the urgent. We are neglecting the *important* to deal with the *immediate*.

The answer is to sort through your myriad of *good* activities, or intentions, to tease out those that are the *best*. Start by imagining that you are 10 years older. Ask yourself what you would want to be able to say about your life in the past decade – the person you had been,

the goals you had reached, and the difference you had made. Write those things down and make a list of the values they represent. Compare those values with how you are spending time and energy today. It will be clear where you need to say No.

How are you doing, 0 – 10, leading by saying No?

Knowing where you need to say No and actually saying No are two different things. If that is your struggle, please know that I join you as do most of the executives that I coach. But just because it is a common issue in our culture, it doesn't mean that we should settle for the mediocrity that it creates in our lives. I challenge you to develop a picture of what your life would look like if your primary values were honored every day. The clearer the vision, the more compelled you will be to create boundaries, to say Yes to what really matters and No to what doesn't matter as much.

Selfish? No. Just imagine the profound effect of the most important things getting done in the world each day. That couldn't possibly be a bad thing.