

The price of saying 'no' at work

By Suzy Welch

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(OPRAH.com) -- Last year my 26-year-old assistant asked me to write her a recommendation for business school. I was happy to help. For two years, Megan had worked around the clock, or so it surely felt to her, bringing insight to my work and order to my life.



And so when I sat down to compose my letter to the school that had become her number one choice, my goal was to convey praise of the highest order, the kind that wouldn't fail to impress prototypical Powers That Be.

At last, the right words struck me. "No matter what the request," I wrote, "Megan's answer is always yes."

She got in. Now, I'm not saying my recommendation was the reason. She had grades and test scores going for her, too. But when someone says yes all the time, she tends to find that doors open, and that the elevator is usually going up.

She also tends to find, in due time, that she's exhausted, or at least torn in too many directions -- between work, family, friends, and all the messy rest of life. Indeed, a decade or two out, halfway up the career ladder or higher, a yes-yes-yes woman will discover that she wants to start saying no sometimes.

But can she? Can any woman in a fast-paced, high-powered career ever stop saying yes -- without self-destructing?

I've debated that question with a group of my friends for about 20 years now. I've also discussed the "yes question" more recently with about a half-dozen women who are our heroes -- friends and colleagues who have made it to the very top of their professions with their lives looking, well, perfect.

The president of a large consumer company with the romantic husband of 35 years and three great kids in college. The consulting firm CEO who was elected class mother at her third grader's school and sits on two prestigious boards. The respected anesthesiologist who finds the time to run marathons with her husband and sing in a choir with her three children. (Maddeningly, these women are not composites; they're completely real. We agreed to leave their names out of this article and alter minor identifying details for privacy reasons.)

These super achievers would be the first to tell you that they do not have it all together. They have their little crises. They forget birthdays; they're late to staff meetings and soccer games more often than they'd like. They cry in the car every now and again. That's no shock, really; everyone's life has ragged edges and little dings.

What is more of a surprise, to me at least, is how much these superwomen tend to agree about the "yes question" as they reflect on their career bumps and bruises, many sustained from falling off the ladder and scrambling to get back on.

Go ahead, they'd all tell you, say no anytime you want. Say no to the relocation 500 miles away from the one house and one town that your kids know as home. Say no to working one weekend so you can be with your ailing father before it's too late. Say no to the client who wants it done tomorrow so you can go on the vacation you've been planning for a year with your best friend. But before you utter that word, know the consequences of that answer, or, as my friend the corporate president calls it dryly: the consequence kickback.

"You can say no, and you can restore some order and balance to your life," she says. "And your career can even thrive, but you will have narrowed the opportunities. That's the way it is."

She should know. She is 56, and after two decades with her company, she had become so successful and powerful that her name was beginning to appear on the short list for its next CEO. Then, five years ago, when the firm was acquired, she was asked to move to headquarters, now located in another part of the country. She declined.

The result: "I am highly regarded now," she says, "but I am no longer in the inner sanctum."

"Is it painful?" I asked her. There was a pause, and then she replied, "Well, I hate it. But I'd hate busting apart our lives more." As for her husband, an artist, she said, "He'd move, but it would be crushingly lonely for him in another city."

"Look," she added, "I've spent a fair amount of my career saying yes. I've learned, of course, to say no occasionally to the small things, just to keep it sane at home. About five years ago, I turned down a 15-day trip to Asia that would have been very good for my career. These days, I generally won't look at e-mail on Sundays. But there's no question I will tell my daughter to say yes at work for a long time if she wants to get to the top. Right now I am living the consequences of saying a big no. Luckily I am old enough to know it was the right choice. But it was a choice."

I repeated this story to another friend -- the consulting firm CEO -- and she nearly fell off her chair at the restaurant where we were sharing a quick lunch before she ran off to a meeting.

"How could she not move?" she cried in disbelief. "After all she fought for all those years? To give it up at the end? That's crazy. It's awful."

I asked her if a professional can ever say no if she wants to get ahead. "Never, never, never" was her instantaneous reply.

Some context: This is a woman who delayed having her two children until she was 41 because she loved her job so much. With her husband's support, she's made her career paramount in her life. Many of the country's most powerful CEOs rely on her counsel.

"You know why I never say no?" she asked me that day. "Because I think about the consequences of someone else saying yes. Someone else gets my piece of the franchise."

"But what about the personal price?" I asked. I reminded her of a Christmas dinner party a year back. Thirteen of us, including her husband, laughed, ate, drank, and sang all night long as the snow fell gently outside, while she stayed at the office working with a client in crisis mode. "Fine, fine," she snapped. "You know, I miss my teacher conferences, too. I miss school picnics. That is why I am at the top."

At which moment, she dropped her voice and leaned in. "To get where I am," she said, "I have given up so much. My job has inflicted untold brutality on my marriage. Untold brutality on my life. I will not start saying no and take the hit in my career, too. The price I've paid is already high enough."

I gently mentioned that she is the CEO -- the top boss. Doesn't that give her the freedom to leave at 5 p.m., even one day a week? Again, a quick and decisive answer. "It is this hunger and insecurity that has made me CEO," she said. "Man or woman, winners go to work every day never letting up. Never letting their guard down for one second."

I couldn't wait to take these comments -- indeed, this entire version of reality -- to my friend the anesthesiologist. She is not a boss, but she is a member of a much-admired team at one of the country's best hospitals. Her life seems to contain remarkable flexibility. She's always competing in some road race or another, or practicing a song with one of her kids. Could a successful woman who wasn't particularly interested in climbing the ladder any higher say no with more ease? Or did her choice to stay put -- and her nonboss status -- make it even harder?

When I asked her if she ever says no at work, her reaction is to laugh sardonically. "It's a bit of a shell game," she said. "I said yes to every request for probably 15 years. I took the hardest cases, worked the worst hours, volunteered on holidays -- I'd do anything to make it into the hospital on those snow days when other doctors couldn't get their cars out of their garages. I stockpiled goodwill as if a nuclear war were coming." That strategy, she said, is what allows her to say no -- selectively -- now, and like magic, her life appears balanced. "In reality," she told me, "I paid up front."

Her husband, also a doctor, was listening in on our conversation. "She is also damned good at what she does," he said. "It helps a lot that she's made herself indispensable. The other docs desperately need her brain on the team."

His remark led to the three of us comparing notes on the professional women we've known who've started their careers with the boldly stated goal of work-life balance. "I've seen them a

million times," my friend said, rolling her eyes. "They come in right after their residencies and immediately start trying to negotiate time off. Everyone can't stand them. They get managed right out. You can't say no until you've earned it, unless, of course, you're willing to pay the price of irrelevancy."

With that one comment, all the voices I'd been hearing began to harmonize. The question, I realized, is not whether you always have to say yes or when you can start saying no, but how you want to live your life. How much your identity is connected to career success. How fast you want your career to unfold and where you would like it to end up. There are as many answers to those questions as there are women.

And men. To be fair, men make career choices and feel their consequences, too, although usually not with the same blunt force as women.

"My husband can say yes at work without too much hand-wringing," one of my stay-at-home friends said of her spouse, a senior manager at a high-tech company, "because I can clean up the mess when he does. Like when he said yes to the Denver transfer. I was packing the house and interviewing new pediatricians and everything else. He didn't have to think about any of that. His yes was easier."

Even my working friends find their husbands can say yes to career choices with less angst because they know their wives will "mop up the logistics," as a partner in a PR firm I know puts it. When her husband, a lawyer, was asked to run his department and then the entire organization, she said, "it did not dawn on him how the kids would feel about his basically vanishing all of a sudden." To get through that period, she said, "I went to work, came home early, took the hit for saying no to a few clients, and fronted for him. And if I hadn't told him what I was doing for our lives, he wouldn't have noticed."

Her words, it is important to say here, were not angry or bitter. She loves her husband. She loves her job; she quickly regained lost ground. And she did that by saying yes to every challenge put in her path for a few months afterward.

Will she say no again someday?

Maybe. The choice will be hers. So, too, will the consequences -- and the lives these decisions create for all of us.

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