

# Service, Support and Success

## International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

### THE POWER OF 'NO'

By: Carol Landaverde

It's such a simple word and not hard to pronounce. Then why is it sometimes the hardest to say? Consider the power you have by saying the word 'NO.' It can get you out of that Tupperware party you really don't want to go to. It can keep people from taking advantage of you or your precious time. It can save you money.

Now think about our members (term used for the people we serve). Depending on their history, they may have been in situations where saying "NO" was not allowed or not respected, but I'm sure they heard it, repeatedly, throughout their day. I spent my early years in the field experiencing many different types of support settings, where a member saying "No" was not allowed and certainly not respected. 'No' is a word that invokes negative feelings just by hearing it and, if it is the first word of a sentence, we will hear nothing else. We are in a new era where a member saying "NO" is a member saying "NO." We need to value and respect all requests our members make and consider each request as we would want our requests to be considered before we make a decision.

We, as staff, need to be mindful of the power of 'NO,' as well as the impact it has on others. We need to be familiar with telling others that they cannot, for whatever reason, do or have something, and we, ourselves, are not always comfortable with properly saying "No." Saying it to members can, at times, ensure their physical safety but can also contribute to their emotional security.

I understand that we, as support staff, can be challenged with the ability to say, "No" on our own behalf, both in our personal and work lives. I would encourage you to use the suggestions in this article to become confident in saying "No" to superiors, coworkers, family and friends for yourself. Once you feel a certain degree of confidence, you will find that you can more comfortably both say and model this behaviour more effectively with members.

We have to consider why we are saying "NO" to members. Is it really that they cannot have nor do something or is it that we think or feel they should not? We need to consider each person's request, leaving our opinions and attitudes at home, then we can decide what requests are safe. We need to take the time to think, "If I was asking for this, what



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answers would I expect?" or "If I was asking this, what would I want the other person to consider before making a decision?"

Too many times we behave as parents and not support staff when we are considering our members. We have to remember that they are adults who make adult decisions and, like so many of us, do not always make the best choices. We need to educate our members to ensure they have the necessary knowledge to make future decisions but we are not to force them to make the 'right' decision. Safety is a factor but, only then, should we consider the need to say, "No."

On the other side of things, we and our members also need to learn that no is part of life, and consider the many 'no's' we've survived. We have all been on the receiving end of multiple 'no's' to a request we've made. In the end, was it really so terrible? Did you survive? We do deserve to know why we are being told no. It helps to make sense of why people cannot fulfil our requests when we make them.

I have taken the time to put together a few basics, as it were, to help you learn to say 'no' more effectively. In turn, you can respect another's request to decline some things, as well as learn to turn down non-preferred activities more comfortably yourself.

## **PREPARING TO SAY 'NO'**

1. Learn from others. Some people are so good at saying "No" that you don't really notice. Watch how different people say it, and learn from them.
2. Speak, speak, speak. Pick out some 'no' responses from this article, and practice saying them out loud (until you are more confident). Practice with a recorder or in front of the mirror.
3. Learn to hear and take 'no' for an answer. Make note of how often you are told "No" each day to requests that you make, and realize that it really isn't a big deal. You may want to keep that in mind when you are preparing to say, "No" to someone.
4. Be consistent in your responses and, as much as possible, have a united front with your coworkers or parents when dealing with families or children.
5. Have a standard set of consequences for behaviours.
6. Don't be afraid to repeat yourself.
7. Expect cooperation from the person you are saying "No" to, not problems before they occur.
8. Be a role model not a "Do as I say, not as I do" person.

Consider the ways that saying "No" can make your life better.

## **BASICS**

Buying Time:

- I need to check my calendar; I'll get back to you.
- I've got to think about that; I'll let you know.
- I've got to look at my cash flow/finances/money.

#### The Policy:

- Sorry, I have a policy to not lend money to coworkers/family/friends.
- Sorry I can't come; I have a policy to have Friday's as family time once a month.
- I have a policy not to date coworkers.

Having a policy makes the refusal more general, meaning you do not do a certain thing for anyone, not just the person who is asking.

#### Honest Reasons:

- Today has been rough, and I just need to go home.
- I'd really like to go out with you but I just wouldn't be good company.
- I need the down time; I've just been so busy.

#### Face Saving Excuses:

Honesty is not always the best thing. If you are turning down a date with someone you don't really like or don't have anything in common with, use a face-saving excuse such as:

- I have plans with someone else/I'm seeing someone else.
- I'm not into dating anyone right now.
- I'm not looking for that right now.

**Now let's take a look how these strategies combined with simple kindness can apply in a variety of different situations that you may encounter in everyday life:**

#### Second Dates:

- I've enjoyed being with you, but this doesn't feel right for me.
- I don't think we should see each other anymore.
- This isn't working for me.

#### Saying 'NO' to Loans/Requests for Money

- Sorry, this just isn't a good time for me to be lending money.
- I wouldn't feel comfortable lending you money right now as my budget is very tight.
- I have a policy about not lending money to coworkers/family/friends.

#### Saying 'NO' to rudeness

- I can't discuss this with you if you're going to raise your voice to me/use that tone. Let's take a break, and talk about this when we can speak to each other politely.
- I can put up with criticism, but I will not let you insult me/I will not stand for abuse. There is no reason to speak that way. If you have a problem, let's discuss it professionally/politely.
- I'm really trying to work with you but, if you cannot put your emotions aside, we will not be able to accomplish anything.

#### Saying 'NO' to sexual/inappropriate behavior

- That kind of talk is not appropriate in the office/workplace. It's offensive, and makes me uncomfortable.
- This feels like harassment to me.
- Do I need to go to Human Resources with a formal complaint?

#### Prevention:

- Avoid the situation where you will be pressed into being asked for something or to do something.

Prevention doesn't offer control over every situation, but it can make a difference until you come up with a better way of dealing with the situation.

### I Have Plans:

Give yourself permission to make plans for yourself. If you need to, pencil them into your calendar. Treat them like important dates because they are.

And, for those really nosy people who make you feel that you have to have a reason for turning them down for which nothing else seems to work, try saying, "It's personal." Any respectful person should take it at face value. Remember we do not have to have a good 'excuse' to turn someone down, our reason should be enough. No means no.

## **SAYING 'NO' AT WORK**

It's important that you have or create a positive context in which you'll be able to say "No" successfully, so know your image or reputation. Being seen as a complainer with a poor work ethic will work against you. People who are seen as dedicated and positive will have an easier time saying "No" so put your best foot forward. When you turn down assignments/overtime, your superiors know you will give your all the next time.

### Saying 'NO' to coworker

I wish I could help you but:

- Because of my other work/deadlines I don't have time right now.
- I have to get my own work done first.
- I have to leave right on time today.

### Saying 'NO' to overtime

I can't work overtime tonight/ this weekend because:

- I have other commitments.
- My evening/time/weekend is already spoken for.
- I have family plans.

### When it falls outside of your job responsibilities

- Angela knows Health and Safety, that's her specialty.
- Although I have done a brochure in the past, it really is the responsibility of the copyright department.
- That really belongs to the expertise of the Clinical Services Department.

These are just a few examples of how to handle saying "No" in those situations that you find difficult. Continue to practice saying "NO," and remember your time is important as is other people's. Remember what is important to you and, by saying "NO," you may avoid those situations that threaten to consume your day or just are not comfortable for you.

The people in our lives including our members may handle rejection and disappointment in a much more constructive way. If they don't, this is your time as a support staff to help them through the feeling of disappointment, frustration, anger or whatever emotion they are feeling, and nurture their skills of communication and negotiation. When someone is told 'NO,' let them learn the skill of negotiating an alternative or at least the skill to talk about when or how they can get what they are actually trying to get. "No" may be the answer today or right now but, upon negotiation, they may find they can get it later that day or another time. They may be able to get it, but in a different way than they originally envisioned.

I want you to take a moment to review all the suggestions that have been given, and note that not one of the responses has the word 'no' in it. I'm not suggesting completely avoiding saying

the word, but to consider all the other ways you can decline someone or something using other words you have available to you.

Consider, do you approach a refusal situation with members the same way you do with your friends, family, co-workers? Do you take care and always act with kindness when choosing your approach? Do you consider the impact of your approach/response on them and how they handle situations?

It is important to think about your approach with members. The sad fact is that there are times we may have to say 'no' because of issues outside our control – staffing, transportation, finances – not because the request is unreasonable. So here are some suggestions:

#### Saying NO to an activity/outing

- I'm sorry, but we can't do that activity/outing because... (a truly valid reason)
- We can't do that activity today, but let's sit down and see when we can.
- That sounds like a good idea. Let's figure out how we can plan that/see what's involved/figure out a good time to do that.

Other times there may already be agreed upon rules and expectations. It's important to remember to offer to teach people how to speak up if they disagree with a rule; self-advocacy is an important skill for all of us!

#### Saying No to already established limits/rules

- The rule is there so that everyone can feel safe.
- It really sounds like that is important to you. Let's talk to someone (who has the authority to make decisions) about the rule and let them know how you feel. For today, we need to follow the rule.
- That is an expectation for everyone who attends/participates.

As discussed above, having general "rules/limits" doesn't make the person feel centered out when being refused as the refusal applies to everyone making the request.

In these circumstances, we need to balance between what we feel is correct and the member's individuality. We, so many times, think the member's appearance/choices are direct reflections on us as support staff. A simple heads up to others supporting the member lets them know what is going on, as well as helps the member to exert their individuality. At the end of the day, a 'no' response from a member to any of the questionable choices is just that – a 'no.' We all make bad choices – even with knowledge.

When in a position of considering whether or not a member can really do or not do something, you have to be an honest and sincere listener. You need to take every situation/request seriously as you would not expect any less on your own behalf. Be prepared to take time to seriously discuss the situation, and work with the member to come to some conclusion or next steps. No one would like to hear 'no' and then just be left with that. It fosters resentment, anger, frustration and various other rather uncomfortable feelings. It certainly does not foster good self-esteem or autonomy.

Do not put a judgement or value on the requests of members as they have already let you know that the request is important to them just through the action of asking. If they want a stuffed Smurf, a dresser with a heart-shaped mirror or a ride in a limousine, then that is what they truly want.

Equally, if you are in a position of power or supervising others, keep in mind that every person's request, question or idea is important to them. If I had a nickel for every person in one of the groups I facilitate who said, "I have a stupid question" or "I apologize for stating the obvious," I would be rich. If someone needs to ask the question or bring up an idea, then that person needs to hear the information no matter how simple or obvious the answer or suggestion may appear to you. It makes me sad that they feel they need to justify speaking up for themselves.

Please remember the power of someone's requests, as well as the power that your response has to make or break a person's dreams, visions and wishes. Nurture their sense of being a valued person, just like everyone should be.

Saying "NO" every day, with confidence and assurance can make a big difference in how you feel about yourself, as well as how you present yourself to others. It gives you the power to control your choices in every aspect of your life, from the ability to stop yourself from buying unwanted products from clever sales people to being able to set your own agenda.

Let's stop suffering in silence and take back our power. Let's stop silencing our members, and encourage them to have a voice and gain power they lost or never had in the first place.

Inspiration and wonderful ideas for this article and a great book to review:  
Breitman, P. and Hatch, C. (2000). How to Say No without Feeling Guilty: And Say Yes to More Time, More Joy and What Matters Most to You. New York: Broadway Books.

#### **About the author:**

Carol Works at Vita Community Living Services/Mens Sana Families for Mental Health. She has held many positions in her 29 years at Vita and is currently in the position of Work Wise/Learning You Facilitator.

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