

The Power of



By Sarah Wortman, CPSM

We're in a rare moment in the A/E/C industry when, for many of us, there's more work available in the marketplace than there is staff to execute it. While this may sound like a business developer's dream, it's more complicated than it looks, because it requires us to get comfortable with saying "no."

When a firm chooses to lead with purpose, its members make deliberate decisions about what kinds of work they do and don't want, and what challenges they are and aren't well-positioned to meet. As people and as organizations, it's important to establish guardrails of mutual understanding among our teams, consultants, clients, and prospects around these issues. Then it's important to honor those boundaries to chart a deliberate path toward long-term success. So why do many of us find this so difficult to achieve?

For those who have lived through downturns and recessions, the pain of cutting employees loose and the intense effort required to keep staff in seats is a not-so-distant memory. Business developers realize

that the time it takes to get new work from brand new clients is typically 18 months to two years, so it's challenging to have to turn down opportunities from clients we've been actively wooing for a while. Some business development professionals, whether full-timers or closer-doers, find their compensation and bonuses are dependent on hitting revenue targets. For these folks, it's tough to turn down work that will enhance one's earning potential, even if it means overtaxing already overworked staff. However, most of us also understand that one bad review is worth ten good ones and that staff burnout has contributed to the "Great Resignation." So how do we move forward and get ourselves and our firms comfortable with saying no?

Put No into Perspective

Author Susan Gregg gives us a good place to start when she writes, "Early on in my journey I found developing the ability to say no expanded my ability to say yes and really mean it." This is as true for organizations as it is for individuals. Once we have identified our purpose for being and articulated how we want to conduct business, we give ourselves reasons for and comfort in saying no to distractions and make room for saying yes to what more clearly aligns with our values. To put it more simply, you can't receive a gift when your hands are already full.

Learn How to Say No Respectfully

I recently read an article about how Southwest Airlines handled a challenging customer who routinely wrote to customer service about all the things they didn't like about the airline, from boarding procedures to flight crew uniforms to the humor with which safety briefings were delivered and asking what the airline was going to do about it. When one of this customer's letters made it to CEO Herb Kelleher's desk he simply replied, "Dear X, we will miss you. Love, Herb."

As Kelleher's example demonstrates, there are lots of ways to say no that are perfectly professional, respectful and, dare I say it, loving. Other versions of

no include things like "not yet," "not right now" and "as soon as X happens." I had an experience early on in my career with a client who continued to send us RFPs but never hired us. Upon receiving the sixth consecutive RFP, we contacted the client and said, "While we appreciate you continuing to consider us, we've noticed we haven't been awarded a project during our last six attempts. If there's a concern you have about our firm, we'd love to hear about it so we can correct it. Until we know more, we respectfully decline to submit." The client responded that they had no problem with us, were unaware of this track record and encouraged us to submit. We won the job. Another approach is to turn a no into a yes by focusing on the positives. For example, instead of saying "we can't do that because it's not in scope" one could say, "We'd love to! Let me get an additional services authorization for you to sign and then we can get right on it."

Making decisions that honor our purpose and communicating them to employees, partners, and clients respectfully are key to creating long term success in our careers and to shaping the legacy of our organizations. When we get comfortable with no, in all of its varied rhetorical iterations, we take command of a key tool for leading purposefully, in alignment with our values and with respect for our professional peers. ■

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