

## "No" is the New "Yes": Four Practices to Reprioritize Your Life

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I was sitting with the CEO and senior team of a well-respected organization. One at a time, they told me they spend their long days either in back-to-back meetings, responding to email, or putting out fires. They also readily acknowledged this way of working wasn't serving them well — personally or professionally.

It's a conundrum they couldn't seem to solve. It's also a theme on which I hear variations every day. Think of it as a madness loop — a vicious cycle. We react to what's in front of us, whether it truly matters or not. More than ever, we're prisoners of the urgent.

Prioritizing requires reflection, reflection takes time, and many of the executives I meet are so busy racing just to keep up they don't believe they have time to stop and think about much of anything.

Too often — and masochistically — they default to "yes." Saying yes to requests feels safer, avoids conflict and takes less time than pausing to decide whether or not the request is truly important.

Truth be told, there's also an adrenaline rush in saying yes. Many of us have become addicted, unwittingly, to the speed of our lives — the adrenalin high of constant busyness. We mistake activity for productivity, more for better, and we ask ourselves "What's next?" far more often than we do "Why this?" But as Gandhi put it ([http://thinkexist.com/quotation/a-no-uttered\\_from\\_the\\_deepest\\_conviction\\_is/216440.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/a-no-uttered_from_the_deepest_conviction_is/216440.html)), "A 'no' uttered from the deepest conviction is better than a 'yes' merely uttered to please, or worse, to avoid trouble."

Saying no, thoughtfully, may be the most undervalued capacity of our times. In a world of relentless demands and infinite options, it behooves us to prioritize the tasks that add the most value. That also means deciding what to do less of, or to stop doing altogether.

Making these choices requires that we regularly step back from the madding crowd. It's only when we pause — when we say no to the next urgent demand or seductive source of instant gratification — that we give ourselves the space to reflect on, metabolize, assess, and make sense of what we've just experienced.

Taking time also allows us to collect ourselves, refuel and renew, and make conscious course corrections that ultimately save us time when we plunge back into the fray.

What follows are four simple practices that serve a better prioritized and more intentional life:

1. Schedule in your calendar anything that feels important but not urgent — to borrow Steven Covey's phrase ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Things\\_First\\_%28book%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Things_First_%28book%29)) . If it feels urgent, you're likely going to get it done. If it's something you can put off, you likely will — especially if it's challenging.

The key to success is building rituals (<http://hbr.org/2007/10/manage-your-energy-not-your-time/ar/1>) — highly specific practices that you commit to doing at precise times, so that over time they become automatic, and no longer require much conscious intention or energy. One example is scheduling regular time in your calendar for brainstorming, or for more strategic and longer term thinking.

The most recent ritual I added to my life is getting entirely offline after dinner each evening, and on the weekends. I'm only two weeks into the practice, but I know it's already created space in my mind to think and imagine.

2. As your final activity before leaving work in the evening, set aside sufficient time — at least 15 to 20 minutes — to take stock of what's happened that day. and to decide the most important tasks you want to accomplish the next day.

Clarifying and defining your priorities — what the researcher Peter Gollwitzer (<http://www.psych.nyu.edu/gollwitzer/>) calls "implementation intentions" — will help you to stay focused on your priorities in the face of all the distractions you'll inevitably

face the following day.

3. Do the most important thing on your list first when you get to work in the morning, for up to 90 minutes. If possible, keep your door closed, your email turned off and your phone on silent. The more singularly absorbed your focus, the more you'll get accomplished, and the higher the quality of the work is likely to be. When you finish, take a break to renew and refuel.

Most of us have the highest level of energy and the fewest distractions in the morning. If you can't begin the day that way, schedule the most important activity as early as possible. If you're one of the rare people who feels more energy later in the day, designate that time instead to do your most important activity.

4. Take at least one scheduled break in the morning, one in the afternoon, and leave your desk for lunch. These are each important opportunities to renew yourself so that your energy doesn't run down as the day wears on. They're also opportunities to briefly take stock.

Here are two questions you may want to ask yourself during these breaks:

1. Did I get done what I intended to get done since my last break and if not, why not?

2. What do I want to accomplish between now and my next break, and what do I have to say "no" to, in order to make that possible?

Carpe Diem.