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Just Say “No” to Drugs (but Say “Yes” to People!)

The catch-phrase “Just say ‘No’ to Drugs” has passed into our language today, and hopefully into the language of our young people. But, in truth, we as a culture don’t really have much trouble in saying “no” to things, do we? In fact, we are more accustomed to saying “no” than “yes” when it comes to our business responses. In fact, “no” seems almost the typical answer, when coupled with some common qualifiers:

“No, we’ve never done it that way....” “No, we tried it that way once, and it didn’t work....” “No, if we do that for one employee (or customer), we’ll have to do it for everyone....”

Why is this so? We get some answers from our leadership development programs when we look at our executive personality data: First of all, over half of the executives in our leadership groups score as “TJs” on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The behavior that follows is to make a decision quickly (J’s, Judgers, tend to do that), and T’s, Thinkers, tend to be logical and rational, no matter what the impact is on other people. Cold and impartial might be an accurate description, so the fast answer is “no” – By the way, What was the question again?

In the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) database, the proportion of TJs in the business population is just over 50 percent. In Latin America, our average tends to hover around 75 to 80 percent. “Didn’t I tell you ‘No’ last week? Why are you asking again this week?”

Again, looking at the data from our FIRO-B (interpersonal preference) instrument, we find another answer: In both the U.S. and Latin American data, the expression of inclusion and affection toward others tends to hover in the lower ranges (with the Latin American affection scores slightly higher, but not significantly). So we executives are pretty cautious, in general, about letting our interpersonal feelings be known by others, holding our cards pretty close to our chests. Again, this approach to others doesn’t tend to feel very warm and cozy, and more conducive to “no” than to “yes” (or even “maybe”) when prompted to get out of our comfort zones.

These tendencies suggest a core of apathy and lack of altruism in our business cultures across the American continents. However, nothing as bad as the story word-painted in Steven Levitt & Stephen Dubner’s second book on *Freakonomics* (“...The Hidden Side of [Almost] Everything”), called *SUPER Freakonomics*. Levitt and Dubner cite the case of Kitty Genovese, who was assaulted in plain view of her neighbors a total of 3 times over a period of 35 minutes, while an accumulation of nearly 40 people watched – and did nothing, not even calling the police. And this was in Queens, NY, not in the streets of Washington, D.C. or Mexico City. How was it possible that no one said, “No, hell no!” or more accurately, “Yes, I will help!” and stopped this awful crime?

I suggest here that “No” answers are easier for many of us to give – to detach ourselves from others, emotionally and interpersonally, to avoid connection, and leave behind commitment. And in environments where connection and commitment are far from the norm, in a cold business climate or on a busy city street, “yes” is just not the coin of the realm.

I have to say that in our training groups there also exists a sometimes-prevalent style that might pull away from this norm: this is the case where FIRO-B expressed control scores are high, and wanted affection scores are also higher than the norm. This is kind of a double-whammy for some executives: they want to be liked, so they tend to do everything that people ask of them; and then they have to control it all, so they end up overloading themselves. In this case, we advise that maybe these folks have to learn to say “No” rather than the opposite. In the FIRO jargon, these folks are sometimes nicknamed “Patsies”.

(Interestingly enough, this style may be exhibited in as many as a third of the participants in any training group, and we sometimes wonder if there is some implicit recruiting process underway in some companies that selects people who will overload themselves for the company’s benefit.)

But the message here in this piece is that we can help each other remember that the most appropriate answer to our employees, and to our customers, may be “Yes, we can do that.” Or “Yes, we should try that!” Here’s an example of what I mean: In one of our dynamics with a group, which we called “Coaching to Yes”, we asked participants to make demands of each other, for which the only appropriate answer was “Yes”. To keep things realistic, we added the possibility of the phrase, “Yes, and the implications of that might be...” or better, “Yes, and what do you think the implications of that would be...” (a so-called “High-performance question”). Although things got crazy for a little while with some participants, the net result in the debrief was a lot of good ideas that had not been explored, especially as regards the positive things that came up for employees’ (and customers’) welfare! Try it some time and see for yourself!

All the evidence from the social sciences tells us that we were put here to help each other out. Not to be “patsies” for each other, certainly, nor to suck the juices out of leach other like so many raisins lying out to dry in the sun. The word “yes” should be on our lips, not “no”, it’s so much easier to relax our lips than to purse them up, anyway!

Years ago, I was doing a program for senior managers at CCL, and one of the participants was Charlie Glassick, then-President of Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. When he introduced himself, he said he was a new grandpa, and that he had discovered the perfect theory of grandparenting: Find out what the grandkids want --- and give it to them! I’ve always thought that this was pretty good leadership advice, too, and a great tool for marketing....find out what people want and need and try to make sure they get it....

There is, of course, one caveat to the above general recommendation: much of the discussion above supposes that we have what economists call “excess capacity” in the system – the ability to turn less-employed resources to other areas of our system. Where we are running at full capacity, saying yes to one alternative usually means saying no to another. And, by the way, there are commitments, when we have already committed to a course of action and cannot easily back out, such as in a marriage or a promise to a family member. But there are also commitments made that turn out to be the wrong yes at the wrong time – think Ford Motor Company’s the Edsel.

Someone wiser than I said, “It’s better to make the right decision at the wrong time, than to make the wrong decision at the right time...” Or something like that....

REFERENCES:

Steven Levitt & Stephen Dubner, *Freakonomics*, Harper Collins, New York, ©2005.

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~T. Noel Osborn, Ph.D.