
Reflect, Re-claim, Reconnect: Learning to Say Yes Wisely and Strategically

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Abstract

Academics often report becoming increasingly overwhelmed with work and are often told to learn to say 'no' more often. In this course, we'll put the emphasis on learning to say 'yes' to what is important, which then provides the necessary basis for learning to say 'no' with purpose. It is about taking control and making proactive choices wisely and strategically instead of reactively and randomly.

Author Keywords

Work life balance; Values; Time management; Health and well-being.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.7.0. The Computing Profession: General

Introduction

Academics all over are experiencing increasing work pressures and feeling increasingly overwhelmed. In a 2013 University and College Union report [3], nearly three-quarters of UK survey respondents reported finding their job stressful, working high numbers of hours, and with work demands contributing to lower reported well-being and high work-life conflict. These findings are replicated in many other studies, for

example as referenced in [4] and [5] and illustrated in personal stories e.g., [6].

In response, we hear again and again that we need to learn to say 'no' more often. Examples include recent articles directed to academics in the press or on blogs, with titles such as "Do yourself a favour – learn to say 'no.' " [2], "Early career researchers: the difficulty of saying 'no' as a newbie" [1], and "Workload Survival guide for academics: Advice on how to cope with all the work and when to say no to opportunities." [8]. In the 'Changing Academic Life' podcast series [see Resources] just about every interviewee has also talked about learning to say 'no'.

While many of these discussions also argue for defining what you do want to do, the first emphasis on saying 'no' can lead some to miss the far more critical and important point of learning to say yes – yes to what is important, what is higher priority, what is our contribution to the academic 'circle of niceness' and so on. A 'no' without a clear motivating 'yes' to something else can come from a place of random reactivity and overwhelm. A 'yes' with a consequent 'no' to make space for and support the 'yes' is more likely to come from a place of clarity and control. Time is a finite limited resource that we can't stretch or change. We have to make choices about how we spend our time and our energy within that time.

In this course we will explore strategies for how to say 'yes' wisely and strategically, re-claiming some control of how we spend our time and energy, while still being part of and contributing to peer communities (faculty, peers etc.) – to work and serve strategically.

Benefits

By the end of this course, it is expected that attendees will understand:

- Their values and what is important to them – as a basis for decision making
- Practical strategies for how to evaluate choices and make yes/no decisions
- Practical tools to manage self-care

Intended Audience

The intended audience is anyone wanting to take more control and make strategic choices in work (and other aspects that make for a good life).

Practical Work

This course will take place across three 80-minute sessions. The format of the course will be highly interactive.

Session 1: Reflect

The first session is about going back to basics and providing space for participants to individually reflect on their core values and what makes for a meaningful life. This will be a facilitated process, making use of self-assessment tools, such as values sorting, wheel of life etc. The aim of this session is to define in broad terms the things that are important to say yes to across all areas of life. Participants will not be required to share the details of these exercises but can participate in discussions more generally. The second part will focus on what a 'good life' and what a 'good academic work life' would look like for each person.

Session 2: Re-claim

The second session is about getting practical. We will explore why we might feel the need to say yes more than we can handle and, on the other side, when and why it is good to say yes. There will then be a facilitated process to explore how much we are happy to work, how we want to allocate that time and to identify the 'non-negotiables'. This leads to practical strategies such as: scheduling all areas of life, how to create a pause before answering requests, how to evaluate requests against values, purpose and existing commitments etc., and how to say no.

This will be done through a combination of input about suggested techniques, break out groups and whole group discussions.

Session 3: Re-connect

The third session will focus on practical personal tools to reconnect the self through good self-care practices. A variety of self-care options will be explored based on participant interests, covering exercise, social life, creativity outlets and so on. Particular emphasis will also be given to exploring various breathing and relaxation techniques drawn from meditation/mindfulness, to increase focus and concentration and to help manage stress. (The benefits of such techniques have been shown in substantial scientific research including, e.g., a recent meta-analysis, which indicated a significant reduction of high emotional exhaustion and burnout for physicians using techniques that included stress reduction and mindfulness techniques [7].)

This session will involve a mix of participant-led discussion, and demonstration and practical experience.

The final activity will involve each person creating their own action plan for how they plan to build self-care into their own routines.

Post Course:

Attendees will be offered the possibility to participate in a dedicated follow-up virtual session two months after the course, e.g., using Zoom (max 50 participants), including the small group breakout feature of Zoom. Two dates will be provided if there are more than 50 interested people.

Participants will be able to reflect on and share their experiences to date in realizing their action plan, honouring all areas of their life and in saying yes wisely. The goal is to provide further feedback and support as needed, and to seed peer support networks where participants can then self-organise to support one another.

Instructor Background

Geraldine Fitzpatrick is a full professor at TU Wien in Austria and an ACM Distinguished Scientist and ACM Distinguished Speaker. She has 8 years experience as a trained coach (personal, professional, group) and more recently as a meditation teacher. She has an extensive background in managing people in diverse contexts: research groups and institutes/labs in academic contexts, and as a charge nurse of various hospital departments (before her academic career) and as a Senior Manager of User Experience in industry. She has a deep understanding of the challenges and issues facing young academics through participating in numerous doctoral consortia and through informal mentoring. She is passionate about enabling people to connect to what is meaningful to them and enabling

people to connect together for community and change. Motivated by seeing the increasing pressures and stress that so many academics are experiencing, she has also started a podcast series called 'Changing Academic Life' where a common theme has been the issue of work demands.

Resources

Personal web page:

<http://igw.tuwien.ac.at/hci/people/gfitzpatrick>

Changing Academic Life podcast page:

<http://www.changingacademiclife.com/>

Listen to Mary Czerwinski talk about values – at around 25 mins:

<http://www.changingacademiclife.com/blog/2016/8/3/mary-czerwinski>

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