To Become a High-Performer, Say “No”

Most employers highly prize employees they can reliably depend upon to accomplish the tasks assigned to them. In turn, most employees want to be dependable and helpful. Yet these good intentions often lead to situations where management asks a productive employee during an already hectic week to complete an additional project. In those moments, that employee often thinks helpfulness and dependability look like saying “yes” and adding that extra project to their deluge of to-do’s and deadlines, hoping they won’t sink beneath their overwhelming task list before Friday.

But research shows that doing more doesn’t always lead to higher performance.

So why do we say “yes”? And what are the benefits of saying “no”?

Saying “Yes” for the Wrong Reasons

On the surface, saying “yes” to additional tasks and projects is a way to be helpful to our organization. If these projects need to be addressed, why not be the one to take them on?

However, self-focused reasons might be motivating us to say

“yes”…causing us to take on additional tasks for the wrong reasons.

We might see additional work as an opportunity to project a certain image of ourselves. If we’re hoping to advance our careers, we might accept the extra tasks so our bosses might perceive us as being hardworking, cooperative, and dependable. And while we may indeed have to be hardworking, cooperative, and dependable to manage the additional work, this motivation is still problematic because it changes the end goal. Our objective isn’t to do a good job on our project—it’s to be *seen* as doing a good job. Ultimately, our focus isn’t on the work itself but on how our boss sees us.

We might also see additional work as an opportunity to project a certain image of ourselves to *ourselves*. We might be working 70-80 hour weeks so we can deem ourselves better or more dedicated than our colleagues who work fewer hours. We might take on a project to prove to ourselves that we are capable—even as we doubt ourselves. Or we might leverage our extra work to justify a claim to higher status, even without that promotion.

With any of these reasons, more work and longer hours don’t lead to high performance…because that was never really the point.

Occam’s Razor: Saying “No” for the Right Reasons

Professor Morten T. Hansen at UC Berkeley set up a study to understand what high-performers do that others don’t. Together with a team of researchers, they conducted a 5-year study of 5,000 managers and employees, including sales reps, lawyers, actuaries, brokers, medical doctors, software programmers, and even a Las Vegas casino dealer.

What he found was that high performers were skilled at applying Occam's Razor. This dictum, invented 700 years ago, stipulates that the best solution to a problem is the simplest one. At work, the simplest solutions are processes with the fewest steps, fewest goals, and fewest meetings.

High performers, Professor Hansen observed, didn't accumulate tasks and work more hours. They did the very opposite—they cut back. They recognized that to do their work well, they had to be selective about what they did and didn't commit to. For the work tasks they did select, high performers then "applied intense, targeted effort on those few priorities in order to excel." This selectivity accounted for two-thirds of variation in performance.

Adjusting Work Culture for Higher Performance

Unfortunately, most work cultures operate under the antithesis to Occam's Razor—that more is better. If we think that working 70-80 hour weeks makes us appear hardworking and dependable, it's because it does. Our culture often recognizes hard work in terms of quantity: hours worked, projects finished, people managed, and profit margins—and more is often considered better.

However, such work culture doesn't encourage employees to be high performers.

So what can we do to foster a culture that does allow employees to be high performers?

Allow Employees To Say "No"

Often we approach our employees with additional projects and expect those who are hard workers to accept with a "let's get this done" attitude. However, to help their employees be

selective in their work load, managers should be open to discussing reprioritization without assuming that the employee is being unhelpful or lazy.

Even better, Professor Hansen suggests that managers should simply set fewer priorities for their teams in general.

However, these suggestions are given with the caution that employees shouldn't say "no" too often, as one small task done well still doesn't amount to high performance.

Take Value Out of the Numbers and Put It into the Impact

While performance is often currently measured in numbers—patients seen, hours logged, sales made, etc.—performance should be recalibrated according to impact. When we measure for impact, we're not simply quantifying our output, we're assessing whether or not it made any difference.

Professor Hansen shares the story of an engineer who set aside an entire week to submit his quarterly report…that only sank to the bottom of his supervisor's inbox. The quarterly report had become obsolete to their process and offered no impact.

By contrast, a business analyst noticed that she received calls regarding a puzzling part of an online filing process. She decided to work with the company's software coders to simplify this part of the process, making the filing easier and more efficient for a large cohort at her company. Her selectivity had a significant impact.

Summarizing high performers, Professor Hansen writes,

> *They outperform because they have the courage to cut back and simplify when others pile on, to say "no" when others say "yes," to pursue value when others just meet internal goals, and to change how they do their jobs when others*

stick with the status quo. They're innovators of work.

When we put self-focused motivations aside, saying "no" makes sense—it helps us do our job and do it well. We're also available to assess the impact we're having and to see new opportunities to have an impact.