Learning to say ‘no’ — without guilt or fear

I t’s 11 a.m. and you have seven emails, three voicemails, four Facebook messages and eight texts — all requesting your attendance at functions or events in your district. It’s only Monday.

For nearly a quarter century I have been speaking to state legislators on managing their time, and I’ve learned over the years just how hectic and demanding your schedules can be.

Part of this learning has come from the interviews that I conduct with legislators as part of our annual BILLD session on time and priority management. Many technological advances have occurred since I first started doing these interviews; for example, the rise of email, smart phones and social media all require new skill sets for managing time and focus. Still, I have observed consistent responses over time from two of my interview questions.

• “Why did you want to run for office?”
• “What information would you like me to present that would help making your time easier?”

To the first question, the answer has been the same throughout many BILLD classes: “I ran for office because I want to make a difference.” Likewise, to the second question, the top request for assistance (though not unanimous) also has remained the same: “Can you help us learn to say ‘no’?”

Like most of us, legislators might say “yes” because of two old culprits: guilt and fear. But what if you could say “no” in a way that matches your intentions “to make a difference” and that is not in conflict with your own well-being and the need to manage your time effectively? Here are five guilt- and fear-free ways of responding to the many requests for your attendance and participation.

1. The pleasant ‘no’

“Kate, I’m going to have to pass on this year’s Arbor Day Parade.”

This “no” is really a “yes” in two ways: It shows respect and keeps open a possibility in the future. Caution: If someone does not return the respect to you by asking an inappropriate question such as “Why can’t you?” you are under no obligation to give a reason. Don’t fall for it.

2. The conditional ‘no’

“John, I’m unable to speak at the police officers’ meeting in April, but I can be there in May.”

This is perhaps one of the most useful and effective ways to say “yes” by saying “no” to the conditions as presented. Caution: The constituent or colleague making the request will appreciate you giving it your best try by moving to this next “no” — the negotiated “no.”

3. The negotiated ‘no’

“Before we give up here, John, let’s see what else we can possibly do.”

Caution: There is a time when negotiating will need to stop before it turns into a “yes” that you don’t want to really make.

4. The considered ‘no’

“Kate, let me think about my participation in the parade.”

Many times we say “yes” too quickly. How do we know it wasn’t a true “yes”? We quickly wish we had said “no.” Caution: Avoid an irreparable breach in trust (and loss of future support) by getting back with an answer. Do not give a “no guts no” — when avoidance of conflict or lack of courage replaces respect. What to do: Add, “I’ll get back to you by noon tomorrow, Kate.”

5. The assisted ‘no’

“Kate, I’m going to have to pass this year on the Arbor Day Parade. May I suggest my assistant Becky come? She is quite the ‘ham’ and would love marching.”

Caution: Ask Becky first!

Finally, one bonus suggestion: There are times you simply need to be compliant and say “yes.” You might just be in for a really nice surprise!

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Join us in Chicago as BILLD celebrates 25 years of leadership training

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development, or BILLD, provides annual training on leadership and professional development for newer state legislators from the Midwest. This page highlights key upcoming BILLD dates, provides updates on alumni of the program, and features articles by BILLD faculty and others on topics related to the work of state legislators.

STATELINE MIDWEST   APRIL 2019

CSG MIDWEST’S BILLD PROGRAM

BILLD Alumni Notes

This session, Iowa Rep. Linda Upmeyer, BILLD Class of 2004, was re-elected to serve as speaker of the Iowa House, a position she has held since August of 2015. Prior to serving in this top leadership position, she was House majority leader for five years.

Upmeyer is the first female in Iowa to serve in either of these leadership positions, and she and her father are the first father-daughter pair in the nation to have served as house speakers. Upmeyer, whose district is in the northern part of Iowa, was first elected in 2002. She has also held leadership positions in the Republican House caucus as minority whip and assistant majority leader.

Iowa Sen. Janet Petersen, BILLD Class of 2002, was elected by her caucus colleagues to serve as minority leader. She is the first woman in Iowa to serve in this position.

Petersen, who represents a district on the northwest side of Des Moines, was first elected to the Legislature in 2000. She served as 2017 chair of The Council of State Governments’ Midwestern Legislative Conference.

Other Iowa BILLD graduates holding leadership positions this session include:

• Sen. Joe Bolcom (class of 1999): assistant minority leader;
• Sen. Waylon Brown (class of 2018): assistant majority leader;
• Sen. Amy Sinclair (class of 2016): majority whip; and


Please submit Alumni News to Laura Tomaka, CSG Midwest program manager for BILLD. She can be reached at l.tomaka@csgh.org.

Seth Pendleton