

PROGRESSIVE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PRESENTS:

THE
STRATEGIC POWER
OF

NO

Protect your time, be a better leader



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WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

The Strategic Power of NO

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THE STRATEGIC POWER OF NO

Protect your time, be a better leader

Do you dread glancing at your calendar, wondering where you're going to find room for upcoming appointments?

Do you hear yourself agreeing to volunteer your time at the request of others, then wonder if that commitment will conflict with something else?

Do you eagerly agree to accept duties, participate in meetings and volunteer for projects ... only to collapse once you're alone, thinking, "How in the world am I going to find the time?"

Most women hate to feel rejected. And since we're empathetic humans, we also hate to reject others – even when it's called for.

But just because we don't like saying no doesn't mean we shouldn't. When we don't say no, we build a mountain of anxiety for ourselves, followed by an avalanche of resentment that can snowball into shortchanging duties that are most meaningful to us – career performance, family time, etc.

Saying no isn't only essential to channeling our best selves; it's also an important leadership skill. When we're in charge, we have to give ourselves the tools and the ability to say no when it's warranted. Otherwise, we put not only our own work in jeopardy, but also that of those we lead. Calling the shots means sometimes refusing certain ideas, plans or proposals – and doing it in a way that creates stability, not friction.

There are ways to balance our already busy lives with constant demands on our time, both big and small. What follows are the steps you can take to fortify yourself against always giving in to requests for your time. We'll show you a unique way to think of your time as something to be protected and respected by others. We'll give you common situations where you could be tempted to say yes even though you should say no – and how to avoid those traps. Some steps are easy to adopt and others require more practice. But they're all worthwhile, and can help you start taking control of your time and stop overcommitting.

The Art of Rejection

Turning someone down easily is a study in grace, tact and pragmatism. People do it all the time, even to us. But we might not even realize when we're getting no for an answer – because it's done with such skill we're hardly aware it happened.

It's easy to say no when you establish, protect, communicate and enforce your boundaries.

Why do we women need boundaries? For several reasons, not the least of which is because we literally can't be in two places at once. Part of this involves making our priorities known, and sticking to them.

To do this, you have to both accept and set your limits. For women managers, these can sometimes be hard to do. We're living in an increasingly "No Limits!" world, where everyone (so it seems) magically has all the time they need to do 20 things at once.

Once you establish boundaries and set limits, they need to be communicated effectively. Good communication is critical. One of the many reasons people say yes too often is fear of looking like a slacker or someone who won't step up. Someone who won't carry her own weight. Someone who's...*lazy*. But if you effectively communicate the good reasons you've got to turn something down, people will understand and respect your decision. It's all in how you frame your 'no' – you'd love to say yes, but for reasons A, B and C, you've just got to pass this time.

Finally, there's little use in establishing boundaries and limits and explaining what they are if you don't bother to enforce them. Ask yourself the next time you think that "people just take advantage of you" – do you invite it by not standing your ground? If you're giving up valued time and energy on things that aren't important to you, you could be your own worst enemy.

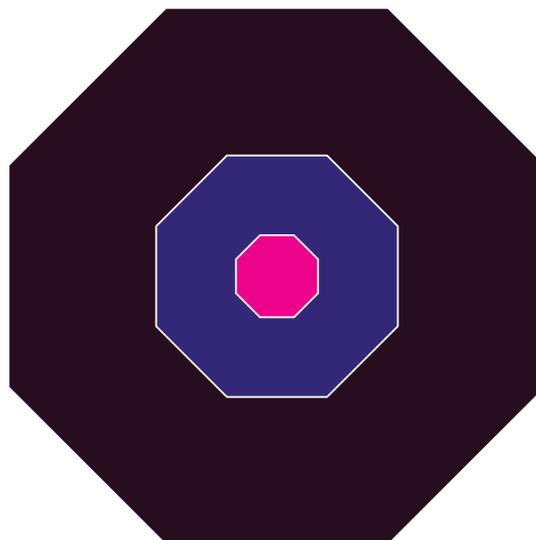
Here are the steps to perfecting the Power of No:

First, Establish Boundaries (Build Your Time Fortress)

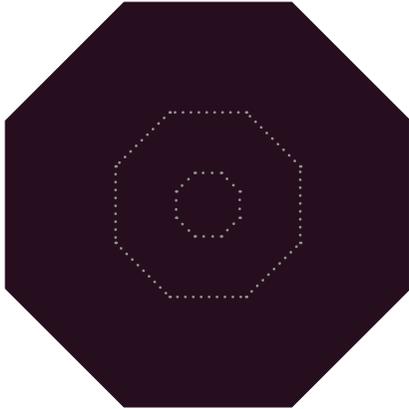
Why should you create boundaries? Because if you don't, you run the risk of your work life blurring into your family/personal life without knowing where one ends and the other begins. You put in more than enough time at work – 40 hours is the minimum most weeks. It's not unreasonable to feel you can get all you need done for work while you're AT work.

Especially for women, the more power we wield in the office, the more difficult we find it to put the work down, without guilt. But even in the most high-powered careers, you need to set boundaries, or coworkers will never recognize when you're off the clock.

What to do: Imagine your boundaries as concentric gates surrounding a fortress. (In this case, the fortress represents you and your time.)



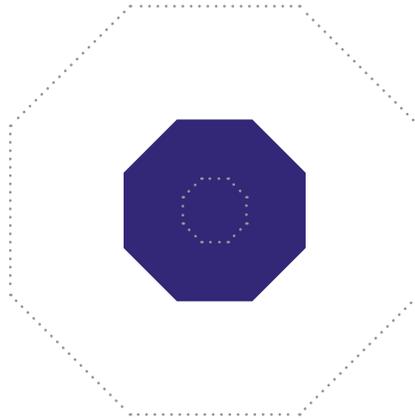
Build Your Time Fortress



The outermost wall

...is day-to-day work time; it's only made of fencing. Occasionally, you can open the gate to let someone in, or someone might be willing to climb the fence to get to you.

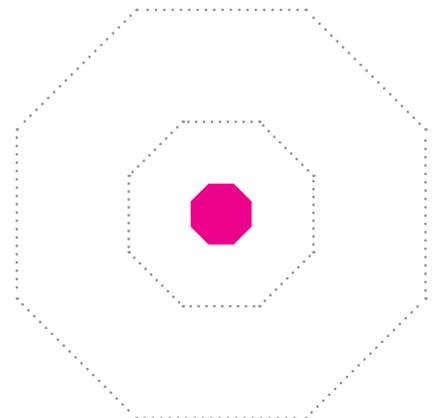
This area of your time "fortress" is the largest, and this boundary is your most flexible one.



The second inner wall

...is your most productive times – the "meat" hours of the day or week when you get most of your work done and are needed on-site most frequently. This wall is made of wood; outsiders can still get in but they need to knock.

You let people into this boundary less often, because it's already taken up by important needs.



The third inner-most wall

...is the strongest; this is your official "off the clock" time to be focused on family and your own wellbeing.

This wall is the least impenetrable – it's made of reinforced steel – and is 90% of the time off-limits to outsiders demanding to get in. This is the most critical area to protect – the time you spend with your spouse, partner, children, pets, parents, friends, on relaxation, workouts, hobbies, fun times.

It might be the smallest area of the fortress, but it's also the most sacred.

Q: How do you recognize when your boundary lines are crossed?

A: You'll know it when you feel it.

In the book "From Stressed to Centered: A Practical Guide to a Healthier and Happier You," authors Dana Gionta and Dan Guerra explain the importance of establishing both personal and professional boundaries.

When we feel discomfort, resentment, guilt or even anger, they're likely huge signs we need to either set tougher boundaries or start to better enforce them, the authors point out. Feelings like these are wake-up calls that we're allowing our boundaries to be disrespected. If a particular situation, person, or area of your life causes you to feel pressured or frustrated, and it's happened several times, then it's time to take action. For example, resentment is often a signal that you're extending yourself beyond your own limits because you feel guilty or want to be considered a good manager, co-worker, employee, parent, spouse, sibling or friend. When this happens, it's a sign you should decide where your boundaries are and how you're going to communicate them effectively.

Then, Set Limits

Why should you set limits? Limits are slightly different than boundaries; they're more like ways you cope with the curveballs daily life brings. Some days, the limits for certain aspects of your time will be tested more than others. Things like work travel, unexpected illness, holidays and such can naturally cause your time limits to shift to accommodate one thing over another.

What to do: Think of limits as a budget spreadsheet of your time. With a monetary budget, you make a list of necessary fixed expenses (e.g., mortgage or rent, utilities, loan and credit payments), your necessary flexible expenses (e.g., gas, groceries), your discretionary expenses (e.g., clothing, gifts, personal services, charitable gifts), and your savings "expense" (what goes directly into a savings account, if anything). In another column you'd list your income, breaking it down weekly or monthly depending on when you get paid, so you have a set idea of which funds must go to cover which expenses.

How “I” Language Helps You Say No

When he developed his Leadership Effectiveness Training programs, Thomas Gordon, PhD, had a hunch that leaders get more positive outcomes from employees by using “I-statements” (or “I-messages”) rather than “You-statements.”

The theory is that an I-statement focuses on the feelings of the person speaking, not the actions of the person spoken to. It withholds judgment and blame and places the motivation on the speaker. This concept is often used when giving feedback, and it also applies to the Power of No. Consider how the following statements compare:

Instead of: “You caught me at a really bad time.”

Try: “I think this is a bad time for me.”

Instead of: “You have no idea how busy I am.”

Try: “I’ve got a full schedule right now.”

Instead of: “If you’d have told me earlier, I might have had time.”

Try: “Had I known earlier, I might have been able to do it.”

Instead of: “You know I have no time for that.”

Try: “I think I remember saying I was busy this week.”

Basic, right? So why can’t you effectively do the same with your time?

Make a list of your time “expenses”: this would include work, clients/customers, school (if you take classes), family/kids, friends, organizations (if you’re involved). Each of these categories will have subcategories; for example, under “work” you’d itemize “boss/supervisor,” “coworkers,” “reports,” “travel,” “regular meetings.” Under “family” you might list “kids/school,” “parents/relatives,” “family gatherings,” “doctor appointments.”

The idea isn’t to drive yourself nuts thinking about everything that needs your time and attention. And there’s no need to list specific amounts of time for each list item.

But like a monetary budget, creating a time budget helps keep you MINDFUL of just how many responsibilities you do have – which helps you set reasonable limits. With practice, you won’t need your physical list; you’ll mentally note your time expenses and spend what you can appropriately.

How setting limits allows you to say no: Writing your time availability down in budget form makes saying no not only easier, but also, in many cases, the only practical decision.

You wouldn’t let someone talk you into buying a \$500 purse if it didn’t fit into your budget. So why let someone talk you into spending several hours or days you don’t have in your time budget on some activity that you can’t “afford”?

At this point, you can essentially blame reality. Just as you’d say, “I don’t have a spare \$500 for a designer bag,” you can likewise say, “I don’t have a spare 4 hours to devote to your project.” It’s not about being undependable, it’s about being sensible.

Put in this light, it’s hard to argue with the facts: “I’d really love to help – the project sounds interesting. But I know I don’t have the time to spare right now. I’d make a poor excuse for a volunteer; try me again next (month/year) and I may be open.”

Try this exercise: The Preemptive Strike

It's one thing to muster the strength to say no to an acquaintance or someone you barely know. Even harder is saying no to people who already know what's going on in your life.

These are the people who know your daily routine and where you need to devote your time. They're the ones who are closest to you and know that you're someone who's willing to overstretch to meet other's needs when called on.

They're the Guilt-Trippers, and everyone knows at least one.

They're often the most persistent when it comes to trying to wrangle valuable time from you. Like that friend who says she's helping you diet but drags you to the Asian buffet, the Guilt-Trippers are crafty at good-naturedly derailing you away from your time budget.

How you strategically say no to these people, when pressed, requires a bit of skill and a lot of moxie. Nothing less than a Preemptive Strike will work.

You've got to be prepared. So try this exercise:

- 1) List the people in your life who you know you have the hardest time telling no. It can be general or specific (with names): your boss, your best friend, your parents/sibling(s), co-workers, clients, your children's teachers/school, volunteer board members.
- 2) Head them off at the pass. Are there certain times of the month or year when you KNOW you're going to be approached? A work-related conference? A reunion? An annual charity drive? Preparing yourself beforehand prevents you from getting sideswiped.
- 3) Brainstorm ready answers. When you're sure you're about to be pressed for a piece of your time, it can be simple enough to say, "I've got other plans" or "I'm watching the kids." For work colleagues, a basic "I'm swamped right now" will likely work.
- 4) Your ready answer didn't work. What now? If you can't beat 'em, meet 'em – halfway. Tell them to send you information about their request: When is it? How long would you be needed? Ask if you can play a smaller role in the project. This way, they won't hear "no" and keep bugging you.

Next, Communicate (i.e., Frame Your No)

Why should you concentrate on communication? As leaders, women pride themselves on being great communicators, but this is perhaps the hardest part of developing the Art of No.

As mentioned, the top reasons people (especially women) often hesitate to say no even when it's warranted: We detest looking rude and uncaring. We're too busy thinking, "Susan will think I'm a TERRIBLE PERSON if I don't volunteer for her health expo!" rather than thinking, "It sounds nice but there's no way I can devote three nights a week to that." So out comes, "Sure - I'd love to!" While there are many people who won't take no for an answer (see Preemptive Strike, above), most people will, IF you rationally tell them why. In this case, it is both what you say and how you say it.

What to do: First and foremost, pause. When we're stressed, we tend to explode when confronted with another demand. Many times women fall prey to exasperation when yet another person asks for their time, and groan, "What now? I've got no time - there's no way!" People aren't mind-readers. They may genuinely not know how much you're juggling. You can't blame them for asking (on the flip side, consider it somewhat flattering that they thought to ask you at all). So take a breath and count to five before you answer. When someone asks for your time, there's no need to freak out on the messenger.

Secondly, watch your language. Use 'I' language, not 'you' language. As in, "I wish I had those days open, but I've got a work deadline and will need to finish a project for class." Not, "You just don't get it - you don't have a work deadline and a project to finish for class." Even if you know the person well enough to lose a little cool, resist the urge to whine. That's how you'll end up with the (mistaken) reputation that you have no time for anyone but yourself.

How effective communication allows you to say no: Knowing how to respond with a ready answer and an even tone enables you to reject a request without worrying that you'll seem selfish or rude. Once we're rid of the fear that saying 'no' will make us look bad, we're free to be honest with people and own the idea that we're not Super Woman and never claimed to be. In turn, this enables people to both understand why you had to refuse and leaves the door open for future requests. No one will go behind your back saying, "Don't ask her - she never has time for anything!"

Try This Exercise: How to Stop Saying “I’m SOOO Busy!”

For the next two weeks, ask people “What’s new?” and note how they respond. If you had a dollar for every time someone says, “I’m so busy!” you could treat a few friends to lunch.

We’re probably not as busy as we SAY we are. If we were, we’d be holed up in our homes or offices, only emerging for food or water like victims of a nuclear meltdown.

Busy is not inspiring, it doesn’t make anyone more important or valuable, and it doesn’t boost time or energy, notes Anese Cavanaugh, author of “Contagious Culture” in *Inc. Magazine*. It only makes you sound overwhelmed. And the more we throw “busy” around, the less likely others will really believe we’re busy. It becomes a deflection mantra, a way of getting people out of our hair. What you’re really projecting is, “I’ve got no time for you!!”

All the same, you DO have to guard your Time Fortress. And you want to be respectful even when you know someone’s “What’s up?” will lead to “Do you have a minute...?”

Ways to say you’re “busy” without sounding like Martha Stewart’s housekeeper:

- “I’ve got a lot going on.” It’s open-ended and can invite conversation, so use this only when you want to go there.
- “I’ve been pretty booked lately.” **Translation:** “I’m not sure I can add anything else to my calendar.”
- “I’ve got some projects lined up.” **Translation:** “I’m not going to be as available as I usually am.”
- “I’d love to, but given my schedule, I wouldn’t be able to get this back to you for a couple of weeks.” This tells people you’re willing, but on YOUR terms.

Remember to Enforce (Be Your Own Backup)

Why do we need to reinforce our boundaries? Here's where most of us well-meaning no-sayers get into trouble: We've established our time boundaries. We've set our time budget – and we're following it. Maybe we've even already said no.

But we just can't stick to our guns. Even though we checked our calendars and gave a proper reason, we caved in to guilt. And we go back on our promise to ourselves to defend our time fortress.

It's like someone on a diet giving in to homemade brownies. Who doesn't want to be a part of that new venture the company started? Or volunteer to help sick kids? Or watch someone's pet? Sticking our hand up and saying "Pick me!" is often a knee-jerk reaction for women in both the workplace and on the homefront. ("Gee, I'll fit it in. Surely I can find time for this great opportunity/worthy cause!")

What to do: We've all been in this position, and most of the time when we feel ourselves giving in, we're also at a vulnerable place – tired, or frazzled, or have too much on our minds. Or conversely, we're relaxed and content, and feel a surge of optimism that tricks us into feeling overly generous. Then, hours or days later, with our yes firmly stated, we come to our senses ("How on Earth will I have time to head our employee handbook committee?!")

When you feel like you might cave in on your no, the best way to be your own Enforcer (think of yourself as a cartoon heroine, if that helps!) involves a few steps:

- 1) Get details. The first step is being mindful of what you're committing to. Don't let a well-meaning colleague talk you into something you're not familiar with. Ask who, what, when, where and get specifics. How long are you needed? How much prep time is required?
- 2) Don't jump right in. It's ok to be a little non-committal: "Why don't you get me the information tomorrow and I'll let you know." You're not saying 'no' outright, but are holding onto it for future use if needed.

Remember, enforcement takes practice. If you've developed a reputation for always jumping to meet everyone's requests, there may be people who don't like your new approach. But by consistently practicing better responses, you'll end up making more people happy – including yourself.

How being your best enforcer helps you to say no: It allows you to be flexible, but on specific terms. Your inner Enforcer repeats the reasons you said no in the first place: you'll be too strapped for time, you won't leave spare time for other duties, you could compromise work on some other project, or you're sacrificing valuable family or me-time.

If you're seriously going to rethink your no, you've got to be honest with yourself about why. Is it an opportunity you may not get again? Is it a cause that's near and dear to your heart? Before you change your mind, consider whether you honestly CAN fit it into your schedule, or if you're motivated by some other reason. Don't let emotional tugs pull you in a direction you can't afford to go. Do an honest assessment of whether you can spare the time and effort necessary.

Resisting the Urge to Overschedule

A friend suggests you attend a local networking event with her next month. Sounds like fun, so you grab your phone or dayminder to note the day and time. That's when you notice you've only got an hour or two of free time for the entire next two weeks.

Why do we do this to ourselves? It seems more than ever, if we can force more obligations onto our calendar, we do it, even if it barely leaves any time left over. And we do it for weeks in advance.

Most women don't realize it until it's too late. You know it's a problem when a far-flung friend says she's in town for two days and you can't even make a spontaneous plan to meet her for coffee.

If this sounds like your life, it's time to seek help for a debilitating condition known as *Calendarus overloadi* – calendar overload, aka overscheduling insanity. Fortunately, there is a cure. Before you touch that calendar, consider these points to help you determine if you should just say no:

1. Does saying yes align with my goals/values?

Basing your priorities on your values is an excellent way to remove any guilt in telling someone no. Make a list of your top values (freedom, career growth, family, money, health, etc.) and compare it with your list of commitments (activities/events). If a commitment doesn't match any of your current life goals, consider cancelling it. And communicate your goals with the people in your circle who matter. Your friends will understand if you cancel dinner plans because you're working late – and have your eye on a promotion.

2. If You Have to 'Squeeze It In,' Just. Say. No.

"When someone asks you to do something and you think, maybe I can squeeze this in between my workout, meeting, etc., it's a good indicator you should say no," says Val Matta, VP of business development at CareerShift. "Tell the person you appreciate the thought, but you can't help at this time. Briefly explain the other commitments you have, and that you don't want to say yes to something you can't devote the amount of time required for you to do your best work."

3. Use A Printed, Monthly Calendar.

Better yet, use a lot of calendars – one at work and at home, to remind yourself not to schedule stuff on top of other stuff. Or buy an old-school agenda and carry it everywhere. Write in pencil so you can erase or move things around. Calendar apps are great, but they often aren't as flexible as your life is. Physical calendars allow you to write in the margins, create to-do lists, and literally see your days and weeks laid out in front of you.

4. Schedule Personal Time.

Millennial entrepreneur Bonnie Treece said she schedules "me time" into her calendar, which allows her to say, "I'm sorry, I am busy at that time," or, "I already have other plans." The key to managing your life sanely is to keep some blocked-off time sacred. Even if you don't make specific plans, make sure somewhere in your day or week you've got a couple of hours free of responsibilities.

Drastic Measures – Dealing with the Person Who Never Hears No

Your boss. Your colleague. Your friend. Your brother-in-law. Your well-meaning aunt. You name it.

They're the bane of your existence, because you Just. Can't. Tell. Them. No.

You always cave in to their pressure. But there are techniques to heading them off. You've just got to be firmer than usual with the PWNHN. Practice polite but assertive ways of saying no that contain no explanation/workaround, such as:

- "I can't this time."
- "Sorry – not today."
- "That won't work for me right now – I'll get back to you if anything changes."
- "I really appreciate you thinking of me, but I've just got too much on my plate right now."

One of the reasons the PWNHN is so successful at manipulating people is through effective use of emotional persuasion techniques.

Be on your guard – common ones include:

- Reciprocity. PWNHNs often give you something before making an ask. This is because they understand the psychological tendency to want to reciprocate.
- Making two asks. When the PWNHN asks for something and you say no, it increases the odds that when they ask for something else (usually something smaller), you'll say yes. "Well, if you can't do all three days, could you at least do one?"
- Anchoring. Ah-hah! This sneaky PWNHN move cleverly counts you in before you agreed to anything. "Most parents volunteer 6 hours; can I put you down for 4?" Don't let this move trap you. Proper answer: "No, not yet. I've got to check; that week might be a full one for me."
- Establishing empathy and flattery. "I know you care as much about (fill in cause du jour here) as I do!" "But you're the best chairwoman we've got!"

Pay attention to what people are asking you for and how. And don't let them game you.

The Power of Saying No: Why It's Critical to Good Leadership

Why does our ability to say no reflect good leadership? Overextending ourselves can put our work relationships, careers and family life-balance at risk. The ability to say no is a leadership trait that defines value and sets key boundaries.

Strong leadership skills are often the first line of defense when saying no to demands on our time. They allow us protect the fortress of the available time we have to give to others, and to effectively communicate why we have to decline a request.

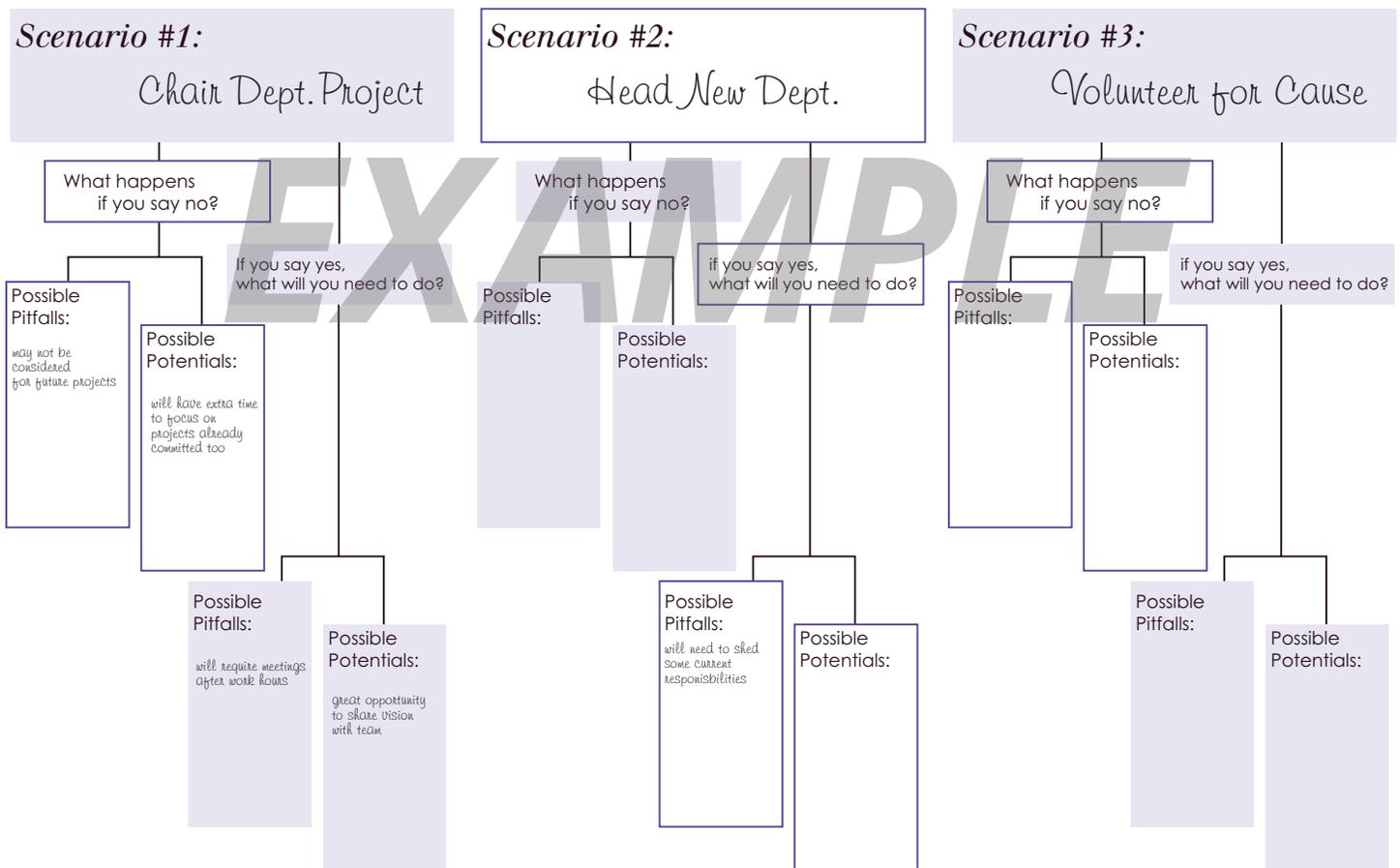
Saying no involves using tact, grace and a bit of savvy. When we do it wisely, we successfully protect our valuable time.

PROGRESSIVE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP EXTRAS: The Master *“Power of No”* Flowchart

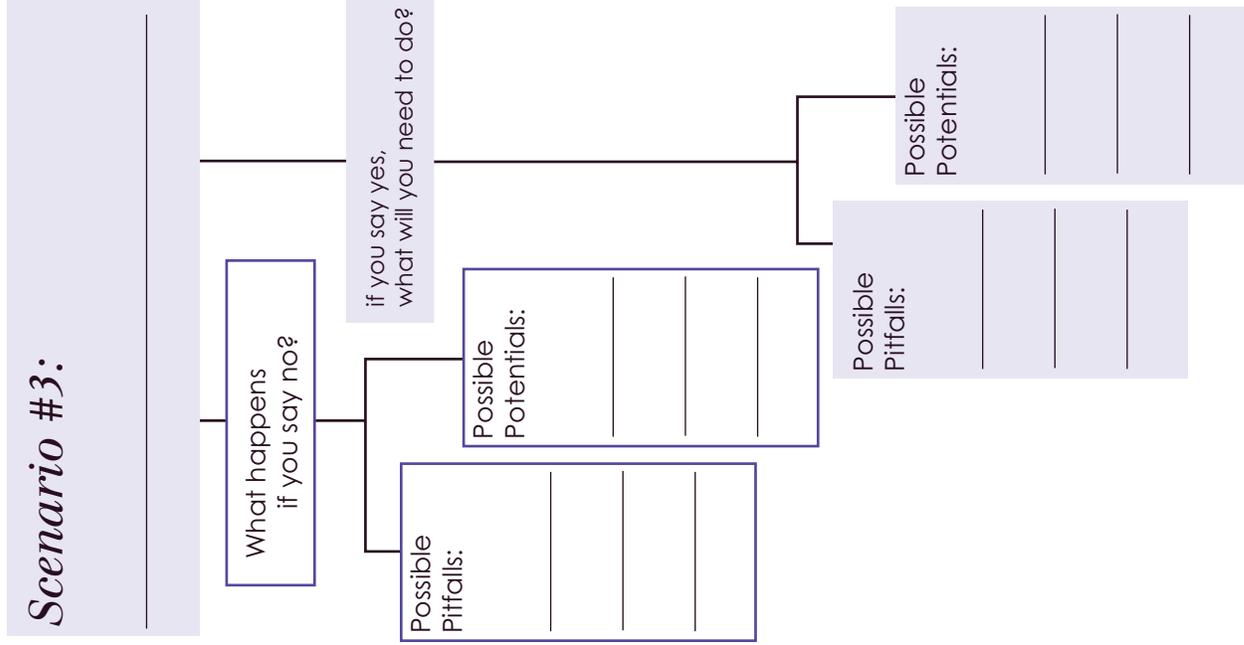
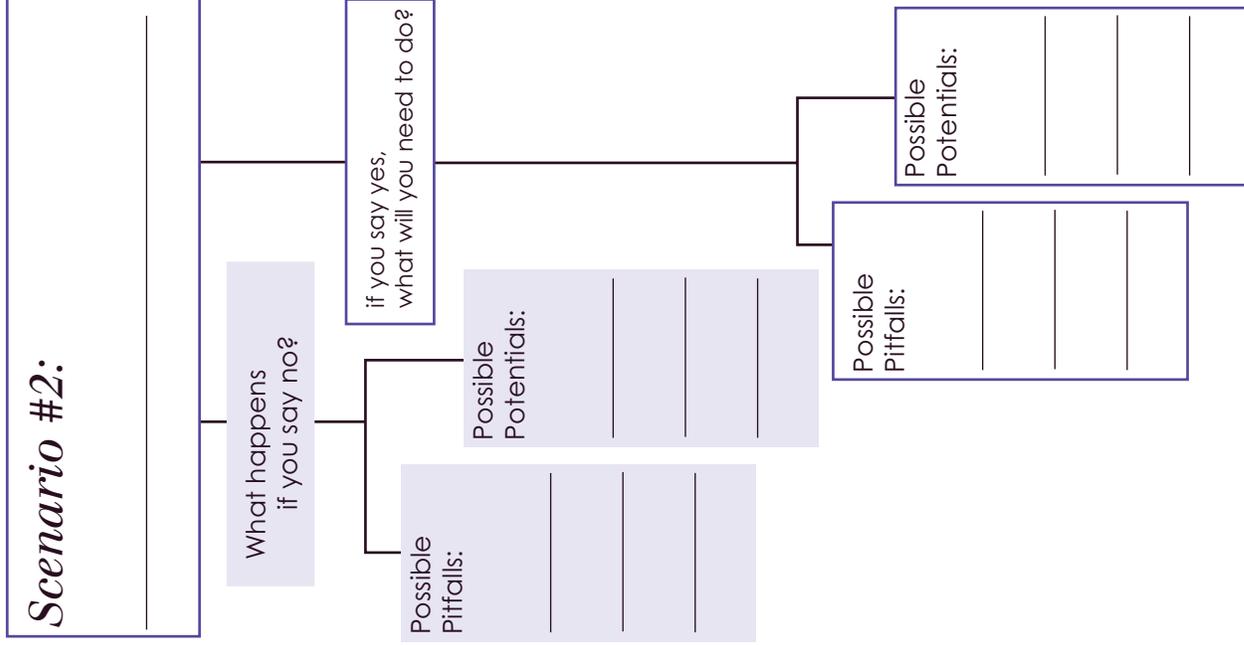
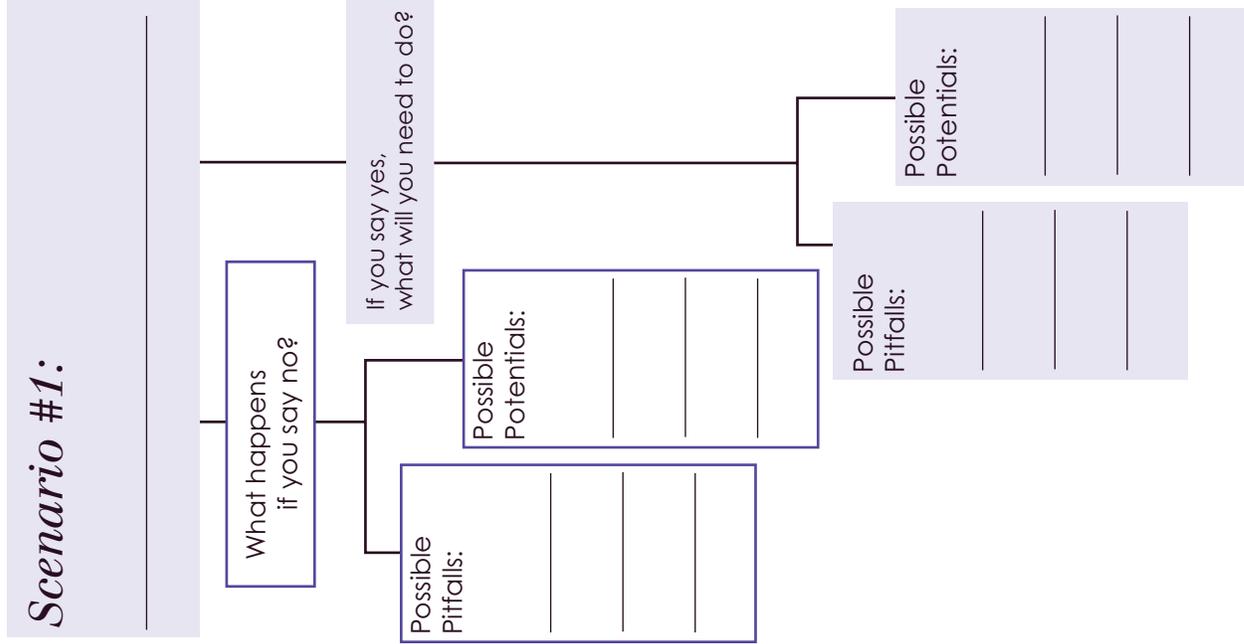
Put your Power of No abilities to the test with some help from Master Flowchart. Try the examples below, or use the fill-in-the-blank chart to help you budget and protect your time.

At the top: 3 scenarios of demands on your time. For example:

- You're asked to chair an in-depth project at work.
- You're asked to spearhead your team's budget plan.
- You're asked to volunteer for an office/school cause.



The Master *“Power of No”* Flowchart



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