



## Saying No to Power

presented to



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The Project Management Institute  
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by

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**Building State-of-the-Art Teamwork  
In Problem-Solving Organizations**

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### A note on format

- Underlined items are live links to articles on my Web site or elsewhere
- To get a copy with working links, download:

<http://www.ChacoCanyon.com/pdfs/pmi-nefl-slides-3-17.pdf>

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A 'No' uttered from deepest conviction  
is better and greater than  
a 'Yes' merely uttered to please,  
or what is worse, to avoid trouble.

Mohandas Gandhi

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## Core Message

- Saying “No” to power can be difficult — so we often say “Yes”
- Agreeing to the unworkable doesn't work
- Learn why saying no is hard for *you*
- Learn techniques for saying no
- For best results:

Move the discussion  
away from confrontation  
toward problem solving

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## How I relearned about saying no



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## Roadmap

- When is saying no difficult?
- The dynamics of saying no
- The perils of saying yes when you want to say no
- Traps and pitfalls when we say no
- Honest, direct ways to say no
- Homework
- A story about no

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## When is saying no difficult?

- When pleasing others is a primary goal
- When we believe we should say yes
- When we wish things were otherwise
- When other people want us to say yes
- When other people control things we want
- When other people trigger our emotions

The more tempting it is to say “Yes”  
the more difficult it is to say “No”

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## Example “no” scenarios

- Work life
  - Setting a meeting agenda
  - Inviting people to a meeting
- Project management
  - Slipping a date
  - Reducing resources
  - Changing requirements
  - Negotiating targets
- Everyday life
  - Introducing yourself
  - Checkout counter

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## The fundamental problem: Internal forces take over

- When our self-image is on the line
- When we don't see how to protect ourselves from consequences
- When others push our buttons



Central issue: how to cope with discomfort

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## How to understand the dynamics

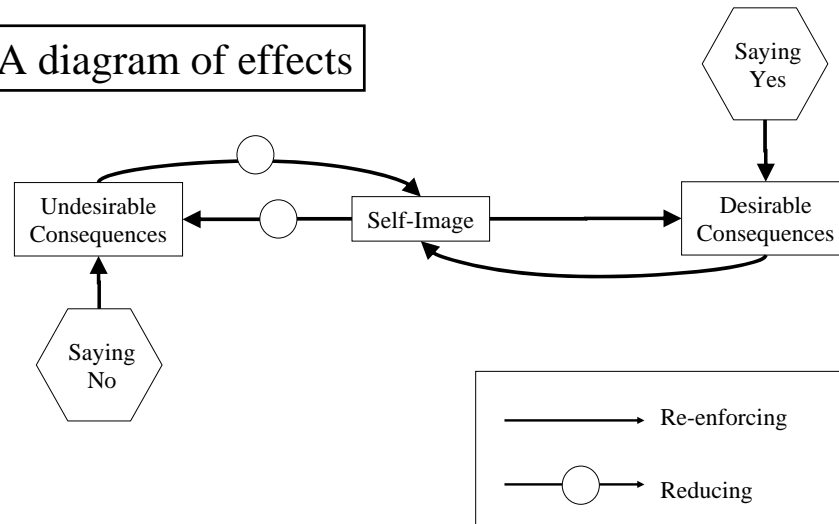
Understand:

- How self-image is involved
- How saying yes *seems* to protect self-image
- Partner's role

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## A simplistic view of the yes/no dynamic

A diagram of effects

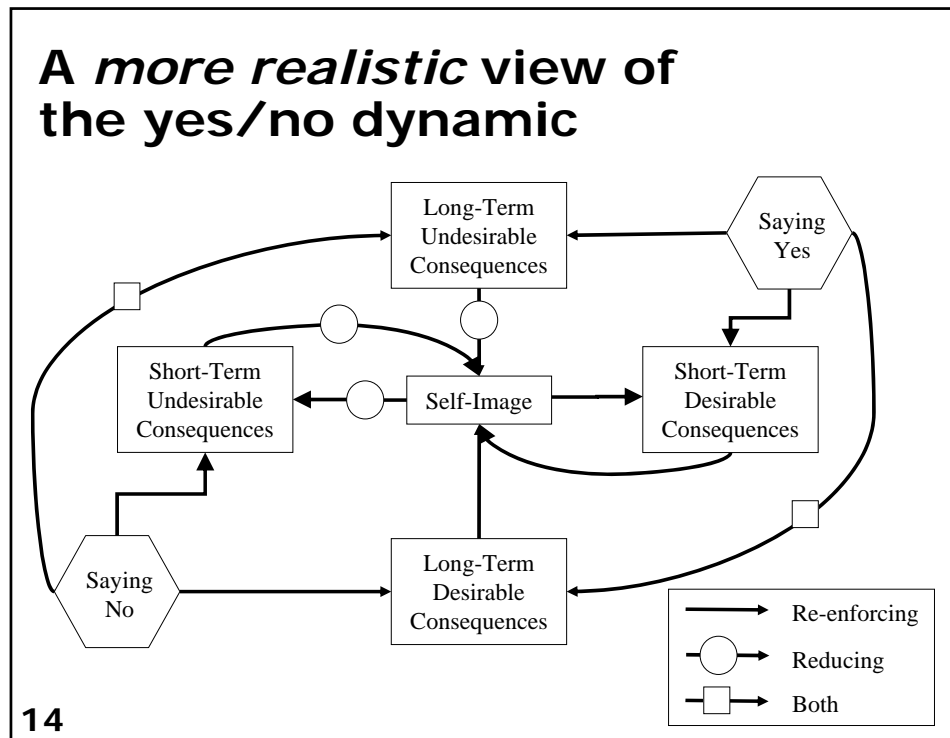


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## To learn to say no

- Adopt a more realistic view of the yes/no dynamic
  - Distinguish long-term and short-term consequences
  - Allow for both “positive” and “negative” effects of your actions
- Learn how to move the group toward problem solving

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## Where the pressure comes from

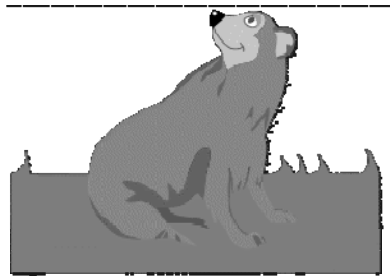
- Solving a problem with the wrong tool
- We invoke (nonexistent) engineering magic to:
  - Solve a financial problem
  - Solve a marketing problem
  - Conceal a strategic error
  - Cover over or address a political problem
- Solving a problem with the wrong tool is usually a doomed effort

Pressure is greatest when project teams  
have least political power

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## What can go wrong when we say yes but we want to say no

- Saying Yes doesn't make the impossible possible
- Undermines your credibility with your team
- When you can't deliver, you lose credibility with your pressuring partner
- Ground Hog Day
- Team burns out
- Work quality degrades
- Time passes
- Problems multiply



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## What about ethics?

- Saying yes introduces delay
  - Delay the confrontation with your pressuring partner
  - Delay the confrontation with reality
- Delay can foreclose alternative(s)
- We say we're "buying time"
- We're actually embezzling time:
  - We transfer time from the project's account to our own personal account



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## Unintended consequences of saying yes

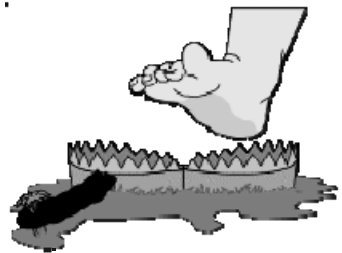
- We help people to continue to live a fantasy
- We deprive the group of the need to address the *real* problem
- We miss a chance to move toward problem solving

To move the group toward problem solving,  
*someone* must say no

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## Tactics to avoid

- Telegraphing ahead
- The cavalier “no”
- I told you so
- Putting the punch line last
- Pulling the punch
- We’re not to blame — they are
- Saying no when “no” is unacceptable



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## Tactics for saying no directly

- Start by feeling good about yourself
- Use ***I*** statements or ***We*** statements
- I don't know how to do that
- I don't know how to do that within these constraints
- I can't do that by then. Help me adjust priorities.
- Our supplier can't deliver what we need in time. Can you help with that?

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## More tactics for saying no directly

- What would happen if we were X weeks later?
- What if we add that to a later release instead?
- We could do that, but it will take X.
- We might be able to do that.  
I'd put the probability under X%.
- What can we tell them  
in the meantime?



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## Preparing to say no

- Know your tactics — they are your tools
- Practice with a live partner
- Expect that you won't succeed every time
- Keep a tactics collection; swap with colleagues
- Create contracts in advance
  - Schedule contract
  - Requirements contract
  - etc.

It takes two to say no —  
one to say it and another to hear it

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## Homework

- Observe the people around you as they say no
- Form a say-no circle
  - Exchange say-no tactics
  - Exchange info about pressure tactics
- Sponsors: give recognition to those who say no

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## Resources for you

- More at  
<http://www.ChacoCanyon.com/essays/sayingno.shtml>
- Your handout:  
<http://www.ChacoCanyon.com/pdfs/pmi-nefl-handout-3-17.pdf>
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