

Introducing F.O.O.D.

(Fixing the Out of Office Dilemma)

Using N.O.U.G.A.T. to help you say No!

The Hunger for the Topic

Over the last six months, I've seen an increase in the number of people having the need to reset some boundaries. Just because we're working from home it doesn't mean to say that we're available 24/7; a slight exaggeration I know, but it's not sustainable to be working such long hours. We need to have some healthy boundaries for starting and finishing work so that we can be more productive when we are in front of our screens.

I hear all sorts of reasons as to why my clients are working longer hours which typically boils down to saying yes to far too many things. This is dangerous. Research from the University of California shows the more difficulty you have in saying no, the more likely you are to suffer burnout.

There are a variety of reasons for why we say yes when we really mean no and this has grown during the pandemic as there is so much economic uncertainty. The thing is, if we hold onto limiting beliefs as truths, then we will never do anything to change until it's too late and this could lead to us falling out with colleagues, family and friends or in worst cases burnout and depression.

That's why we're using N.O.U.G.A.T. today to help you be more focused on saying yes and no to the right things. At the end of the day, we want to build you a strong reputation for being an excellent decision maker so that

when you say 'no', people respect you for taking that stance. They also know that when you say yes you are going to give it your 100% commitment. At the end of the day if you don't value your time, how can you expect anyone else to do the same.

The Ingredients for Success

- **No** increases the options, have clarity in what you say yes to.
- **Observe** others who are assertive. Some of the characteristics might be useful for you.
- **Understand** the triggers that make you want to say yes.
- **Gut-feel** don't ignore it. If you don't want to be there, no-one else will. I promise you!
- **Attitudes** breed behaviours for you and others. Make sure you are respectful.
- **Tone and body language** need to be congruent with your words.

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The Methods to Blend it Together

No increases options - Many years ago, I heard the quote from Tim Harford who said, 'Every time we say yes to a request, we are also saying no to anything else we might accomplish with the time.' This really resonated with me. In the past I have been a bit of a people pleaser. I'd often say yes to things that I thought I ought to be doing rather than wanting to do. In my personal life it might have been a party, in work it was usually saying yes to more work when I was already drowning in what was on my desk. Over time I have realised that the most important thing I can do each week is to schedule my priorities so that I am focusing on the right things. If someone then asks for additional stuff, I know what will be affected if I say yes. In his book, *From Good to Great*, Jim Collins said that 'if you have more than three priorities, you have no priorities'. I think this is a great way of helping you to keep focused.

Remember that you only have 168 hours in each week. If you sleep for 8 hours every night (I know a luxury, but bear with me), you're already down to 112 hours. Why don't you try carving up your week and scheduling your priorities into the time you have? It's an interesting exercise and it will help you become more conscious of where you want to spend your time and therefore be true to yourself when you receive those additional requests that will take you off course. Make sure you are stringent with your time so that you allocate according to the priority.

Our second nugget to help you say no is to start **observing others** who have successfully mastered the art. I don't mean the Teflon characters that bounce everything away from, but those who understand their commitments, can give alternative solutions even if it is a 'not now' response and are still respected by the person requesting the piece of work. You will find these people have certain characteristics in common. They are:

- confident in themselves. Not in a way that put others down, but in a way that recognises that their time is valuable and so needs focusing on the right stuff.
- listeners who work hard to understand the other person's point of view, respect their opinions and work with them to find a compromise to the solution.
- problem solvers who find alternatives to what can be done.

You will probably know someone who finds it easy to be assertive when responding to others? Why not see which of their characteristics you can try out. Tweak them to make them authentic to you. And remember if you've been a people pleaser, like I was, you will probably find it difficult to start off with. Don't give up because the more you practice, the easier it will become.

The third step is to become more self-aware. **Understand the triggers** that make you say yes when you really want to say no. They could be along the following lines:

- we don't want to disappoint others;
- we don't want others to think badly of us and question our loyalty;
- we want to show willing and able to do what is being asked of us;
- we have a fear of missing out this might be the next big thing!
- we feel we can add value to the specific task in question;

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- a belief has been embedded from a young age that when we say no to someone, we are being rude.
- what else have we to do whilst working from home in a pandemic?! If we say no, we could lose our job

It's really important to understand that these beliefs are not true. We're not being rude or selfish or unhelpful. We're valuing ourselves and understanding our worth ... and that is absolutely crucial. If you have already done your time audit and scheduled your priorities as in the exercises above, you'll be very aware of how much time you have available. This will make it easier to explain your current commitments in an authentic way and help the requester find alternative solutions. If the request is something you would like to be involved with, I have found doing some in-depth due diligence of expectations and requirements is especially useful. We all know that saying yes takes time and energy, so you need to be certain of what you're saying yes to! Something that one person might think will only take a couple of hours may take a couple of days, so don't get caught out. Get into the habit of asking what is required and how you will be able to add value to the task before you agree.

Another thing to understand about yourself is whether your response is usually 'yes' when you're under pressure. If this is the case, find ways to give yourself some time. Come back to the person once you've walked through your schedule. Which links us into the next step.

Step four is about **gut feel**. I'm a great believer that your gut is a very under-rated muscle and that's because it doesn't need to have all the facts to give us that gut feel. Of course, it doesn't mean you should ignore the evidence, but I definitely think we have a gut feel for a reason and we need

to strengthen its muscle by listening to it more. When your intuition is telling you to steer away from additional work, it is probably the time to chat with your manager or partner to let them know how you are feeling. When they have your best interests at heart, they will work with you to solve the problem and help you manage your priorities. Sometimes it just a matter of sharing that lightens the load.

Onto the next step which is all about your **attitude and behaviour**. You might be asking why we need to focus on this element when we're trying to be more assertive in our approach. If we're stressed and wound up about our workload, it can lead us to act and behave in ways that don't help us get the best results. And this is because our emotions have become hooked. Choosing our emotion each day is essential as it is the force behind our inner self talk and it's our self-talk that makes us act and behave in the way we do. The good thing is that it enables us to be more considered in our approach toward others which is always a better way to influence them.

A model called Betari's Box highlights that your attitude affects your behaviour which in turn affects the other person's attitude and behaviour. We all know that our attitudes are infectious whether they are positive or negative, so make sure you choose the right emotion to achieve the attitude and behaviours that will create the right results for you. And if you're not feeling it, remember to fake it until you make it.

Finally, the last step is all about our **tone and body language**. Words are only one piece of the communication! If our tone and body language aren't congruent with our words, we can give mixed messages to the people with

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whom we're communicating. It might sound a funny thing to do, but try practising saying 'no' out loud in front of the mirror. You will see whether you look confident. You can also record yourself using your phone. Have the conversation you think you are going to have when you say that you can't take on any more work. Play it back without the sound and see whether you look confident in the way you come across. Be critical on things that you can change Perhaps there are some things you can incorporate from the step when we were observing others.

The seasoning to make it your own

If saying no is tough for you, remember that you get stronger in the areas where you focus your effort. Keep trying your techniques to make them slicker each time. Think about the following:

- consider all the options open to you
- set yourself an assertiveness goal ie how do you want to be, by when
- create your assertive mindset – you know it's there!
- Keep practicing your positive self-talk

Having read all the above you have some great tools and techniques to help you stand your ground, but if necessary, repeat yourself to make sure you have been heard. If there is one thing you must always remember, it is that you can only control what you do and not the response of others!

And as a jokey element, if you can't trust yourself to say no, chew on a piece of nougat instead. It will be sure to stick your teeth together and you won't be able to give an answer!!

About Jane

Jane Hirst is an engaging and all-encompassing facilitator as well as pragmatic and results oriented coach. She has been in the business of helping people develop for more than 30 years and gets a real buzz from enabling them to become more self-aware, improve their emotional intelligence and achieve better results in both their personal and professional lives.



The F.O.O.D. series came to life during the pandemic. Jane was aware of how many people were finding it difficult to adapt and work remotely from their teams. She wanted to create bite-sized learning that would be easy to digest and put into use straight away. The whole programme demonstrates Jane's creativity and fun for what she does. The latter doesn't detract from the learning, it adds curiosity and makes it easier to absorb and remember. The theme really does run through every element – each technique is linked to a food acronym. Keep your eyes peeled for other ingredients in our FOOD series. We are running team sessions and one to one coaching sessions. Please do get in touch if any of these are of interest to you.

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