

The ABCs of Work: Yes

Career Development



Is there a formula for success at work? Are there simple rules that you can follow to increase your chances of getting what you want? Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau thinks the answer is yes. In this series of articles, *The ABCs of Work*, he shares the formula with you.

Greetings readers and congratulations! Simply by virtue of being here you are already on the path to increasing your odds of success. While luck plays a gigantic role in life, that does not mean you are helpless to control your fate. If you want to think of it this way, the tips we'll explore are ways to increase your odds that luck will find you.

Today we discuss why the word Yes is perhaps the most helpful to your in-house career and to your

success in life. The word Yes is the reason the ABCs of Work exists.

Last time we explored many ways to leverage being able to Xerox and perform other administrative functions, and discussed why this can make you stand out. Today we discuss the enduring power of the word "Yes."

Anyone can say no (and they frequently do)

If you compare the average in-house counsel to our business colleagues, we come up short in optimism. For every wildly optimistic business plan, we stand ready to point out obstacles and risks.

To be fair, this is our job. We are there to fulfil a role and often that is to keep the exuberance of the business in check. Plus, with experience we see just how many ways there are for things to go wrong. I'm not saying we're angels, but the proverb "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" exists for a reason.

Thus, our roles and our experience bend us toward seeing the dark cloud rather than the silver lining. It becomes second nature to say no as in "No, that way exposes us to unnecessary risk."

Have you ever noticed a trick some executives use to kill a project they don't support but nor do they wish to be responsible for stopping? "Send it to legal for review." Not only does this create delay, but often we do just as the business expects.

The best in-house counsel know how to avoid this trap. Never the naked no. No is always followed by an alternative suggestion as in "No, but …" My favorite book about negotiation is called Getting to Yes. There is always a way to achieve our goals and it starts with telling ourselves we will help the business get to yes.

If I always say yes, am I just giving in?

The question betrays the bias. Giving in to what? Your instinct to say no? Your wish to have others follow your advice? Or is saying yes your path to helping the business succeed? If so, that's not giving in so much as recognizing where your priorities really lie.

Remember, nothing you do at work should be personal. That is, take it personally in the sense you care about doing good work, but don't take the tussle itself personally. When management pushes you and you push back, you're both fulfilling your responsibilities.

What if I really want to say no?

Despite your problem-solving mindset, you must not let business pressure bend you to saying yes to inappropriate things. In fact, you will say no to many hairbrained schemes in helping guide your colleagues to a safe path. You will say no fifty times more often than you say yes. Just remember that your goal is to eventually find a yes for every legitimate business purpose.

In rare circumstances, your no will be absolute. That is when the desired conduct is improper on its face. The business may see nothing wrong in that friendly information exchange with a competitor, but you cannot bless it. A colleague may hold discriminatory views, but you will ensure they play no part in hiring or promotion.

> In rare circumstances, your no will be absolute. That is when the desired conduct is improper on its face.

I hope these circumstances are few in your career. When they arise, your reputation for always helping the business find a way to yes gives you credibility when you insist on your hard no.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

Honorable mentions

Leveraging a single tip to drive work success is a heavy lift, even a tip as important as using yes to anchor your mindset. Our formula will necessarily be incomplete. But the formula has impact, and all the more so because we've kept things simple. Here to finish are some honorable mentions to serve as food for thought.

Yellow — Observe traffic signals carefully within your company. Here I mean the signs that something has gone wrong but not caused a crisis. Many people ignore these flashing yellow lights. When you train yourself to spot the warning signs, you can adapt systems and update processes to avert major problems. You will become the most rare and effective in-house counsel there is: crisis-free.

Yesterday — Yesterday is already in the past and you must quickly move on. Learn from mistakes, both your and others' but don't dwell on them. I found it useful to maintain a mistake log. I wrote down more significant mistakes, describing the situation, why it went wrong, and what I learned from it. This helped me improve, and helped keep me humble.

Youth — Youth typically brings enthusiasm and a positive attitude to work. These are things that experience often wrings from us. When you're young, capitalize on your inherent advantage and make sure everyone sees your happy energy. And if you're experienced, remember your relatively higher cost and ask what you're doing to demonstrate your value proposition. You can borrow enthusiasm and attitude any time, and marrying that to your knowledge and experience is a powerful combination.

Disclaimer: The information in any resource in this website should not be construed as legal advice or as a legal opinion on specific facts, and should not be considered representing the views of its authors, its authors' employers, its sponsors, and/or ACC. These resources are not intended as a definitive statement on the subject addressed. Rather, they are intended to serve as a tool providing practical guidance and references for the busy in-house practitioner and other readers.

James Bellerjeau



Lecturer

University of Zurich

James Bellerjeau is a lecturer in the LLM program of the University of Zürich and for the Europa Institut of the University of Zürich.

Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.