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“No” is Nothing to Be Afraid Of

By Janet White

Recently, I sat with “Sue,” who was experiencing a career crisis. Sue wanted to sell commercial air time for a Hispanic radio station in town, but was convinced she could never get through to the station’s sales manager.

Sue said she knew he didn’t want to talk to her, and he was probably too busy to come to the phone anyway, and even if he did, she’d probably make a fool of herself, so what was the point in trying to reach him?

The point, I pointed out, was that she had made baseless assumptions with no evidence to back them up, had convinced herself these assumptions were fact instead of figments of her imagination, and was now stunting her own success because of her irrational fears.

I then reached for the phone to call the station and speak to the sales manager.

“You can’t do that!” Sue said, startled.

“Why not?” I said.

“They won’t let you talk to him,” she said.

“Of course they will,” I said. I dialed the number, asked for the sales manager, and then handed her the phone as he came on the line.

To Sue’s utter shock, she rose to the occasion, calmly and confidently telling him who she was, that she loved his station and that she’d like to sell commercial time for him.

He then invited her to send him her resume and call him in a week for a meeting. This exchange took all of four minutes, and when it over, Sue could hardly believe it.

“What just happened?” she said.

“You spoke to the station’s sales manager, got him interested in you and now you’ve begun a conversation with him. That’s what happened,” I said.

“But why did I think I couldn’t do it?” she said.

“No” is Just a Word

Why, indeed. Like Sue, the fear of getting a *“no”* may be the one thing that’s stopping you from reaching your goal. The problem is not your fear of “rejection” or disappointment; it’s the irrational emotions and the erroneous conclusions behind your fear that are the real issue.

Since the best way to deal with a fear is to face it dead on, let’s look at Sue’s fear of making a simple telephone call, and see what she was really afraid of:

- If I call, he’ll probably say *“no.”*
- A *“no”* means he doesn’t want to hire me.
- If he doesn’t want to hire me it’s because he knows I’m really not as good as I think I am, and I’m only fooling myself if I think I can get a decent job, much less at a radio station selling air time. If I don’t get a decent job, I’ll run out of money.
- If I run out of money, I’ll get behind on my bills and I’ll never get out of debt.
- If I can’t get out of debt, I’ll have to file bankruptcy.
- If I file bankruptcy, I’ll lose the house.
- If I lose the house, I’ll probably lose my family. My spouse and kids won’t like living in a trailer/apartment/with my parents/with his parents, and he’ll want a divorce.
- I can’t afford a good lawyer and with no income, the judge will think I’m a bad mother and give my husband full custody, and I’ll have to make child support payments I can’t afford.
- I’ll be lucky to get any job at all given my age/lack of a degree/downturn in the economy/heavy competition/nasty divorce in the works.
- Life stinks.

Sue had believed that if she heard *“no”* from the station manager, she would end up bankrupt, homeless, divorced and destitute with her children taken away from her. Clearly, she had decided it was better not to make the call at all than risk losing everything.

Her irrational fear of what might happen if everything went wrong in her life spun itself out to a ludicrous conclusion, which she then accepted as her fate.

But the truth is she had nothing to lose and everything to gain by making the call. When I refused to buy into her fears and put her on the phone with the sales manager, she proved to herself that her fears were groundless.

And without her fears, she had no “story” and no excuse for not succeeding anymore.

Getting the “Yes”

But what if the station manager had said “no” or the opportunity panned out? Well, like all human beings, he’s allowed to make choices, and sometimes that means saying “no”. But my experience is that most people, when asked, choose to say “yes.”

People like to say “yes,” because it makes them feel good, and in business, people will say “yes” when they perceive they will receive some sort of benefit and/or value from doing so.

With few exceptions, a “no” in business (assuming to you are speaking to the right person in authority) means:

- Not now, or
- I don’t have enough information to make a decision, or
- I don’t have enough of the right kind of information.

It never means:

- Go away, we hate you.
- Never apply for a job/call us again.
- You’re a failure.

Why You Get a “No”

If you’re a typical job seeker, chances are that you hear “no” in one way or another because you are:

- Talking to the wrong people
Since only your future boss has the authority to say “yes,” he/she should be the only person you should deal with.

Unfortunately, you may have been taught that intermediaries who have the ability to say “no” but no authority to say “yes,” such as Human Resources and recruiters, speak for your future boss. The truth is that HR and recruiters don’t hire anyone except other HR people and recruiters.

- Expecting a Callback

One of the great misconceptions of job hunting is that you should receive at least an acknowledgement that your material was received and/or evaluated, even if they're not interested.

Here is the hard truth: it is not your future boss's responsibility to contact you -- either to acknowledge receipt of your resume or to tell you they're not interested; it is your responsibility to follow-up with him if you want to get hired.

When the last time you called a company that sent you junk mail just to let them know you received their material and/or you're not interested? Well, chances are you're sending what your future boss perceives as junk mail, and he's going to treat it just the way you treat junk mail.

Junk mail is almost always a hard pitch that sells something; in this case, you are "selling yourself" to your future boss. But he doesn't want to be "sold;" he wants to buy.

- Selling Yourself

Nobody likes to be pitched to, and that includes senior level business people. If you talk and/or write to your future boss about what interests him – his company, his projects, his concerns – and not about what interests you, he'll be interested in you because you're interested in him.

- Being a Pest

Since your future boss is not going to call you, you have to call him, but you keep getting voice mail or leave messages with his secretary. So you keep calling, daily or weekly, because he has to call you back eventually, right?

Wrong. You can easily assume that he's gotten your messages but for whatever reason, chooses not to return them. It may be rude (in your opinion), but not returning your calls is his right.

Chances are that by your third message, he considers you a world-class pest and has no intention of ever returning your calls, much less interviewing or hiring you, no matter how good you think you are.

The Secret to Getting A "Yes"

You will get your "yes" – the meeting, the professional relationship, the job – if you focus on helping your future boss get what he wants. Help him get what he wants, and he will help you get what you want.

And you will discover that the only thing you had to fear was fear itself.