

How to Say No to Colleagues at Your Practice





It's an important but underdeveloped skill.

It's something professionals struggle to do with any reasonable amount of confidence. They're concerned about the consequences of their choice. When the topic comes up, many attorneys are filled with fear and dread.

I'm talking about saying **No**.

Saying No something most of us don't want to do. It's unpleasant, awkward and difficult.

Saying No is unpleasant, because you're a peach

It's scientific.

Psychologist Kurt Lewin found that our cultures can be broken down into two broad categories.

Peach or coconut.

These fruits are used to describe people and cultures in the world. It's a simplification to be sure but that's the point. This symbolism shows us our differences. The ones that exist at a deep and fundamental level.

Here's how he [described](#) people.

"Peach people are soft on the outside, but have a hard stone that protects their inner being. Coconuts have tougher exteriors, but get past that, and they're sweet inside. Americans, according to stereotype, *are peaches*; the French, like the Russians and Germans, are coconuts."

This is why it's so hard to say No.

Peach is synonymous with the personality trait [agreeableness](#). In American culture, you're expected to be warm, cooperative, considerate and kind.

Saying No isn't any of things.

This isn't *actually* true. Instead it's one of those implicit and unconscious assumptions we carry around with us.

It's easier for coconuts to say No

Coconuts seem to be tough on the outside. They're often viewed as cold and unfriendly. Calloused and frustratingly rude. Get past their tough exterior and they're incredibly sweet.

Honest, open, but still sweet.

And there it is. The secret to saying No to colleagues *safely*. Coconut cultures use an approach that's direct and open. Peaches rely primarily on subtlety and nuance. Suggestions and requests that are actually *orders* and *commands*.

[In a previous article] I covered different strategies for saying No. Here's a quick recap.

- **The deferral.** I'm swamped right now. Ask me again after 4:45 today?
- **The delay.** The deadline for this contract is today. Can I finish this first?
- **The introduction.** I'm in the dark on this. Can [Steve] take the lead on this?
- **The bridge.** Alison is already working on the brief. Should I reach out to her?
- **The relational account.** If I do this I'll let [client] down. He was counting on me to...

See how peachy these responses are?

What if you're dealing with a rotten peach?

Someone who isn't all that cooperative but still aware enough to be able to play the peach game. It seems like they're warm, caring and considerate to everyone else.

They haven't hurt you *explicitly*.

But you know they're not acting in your best interests. Maybe the approach is used to strong arm you in meetings. Maybe they're using email CC's (to company influencers) as a coercive force. Maybe they're asking you to do something you can't or don't want to do.

What do you do?

You use the structures in place to your advantage. Our culture relies on subtlety. We're expected to escalate our responses to problems proportionally. *First* a suggestion or request, *then* a gentle let down, *followed by* a firm No, *concluding with* an aggressive shutdown.

The usual first steps.

Here are some additional peach strategies you can use to counteract your colleague's requests before they escalate.

Strategy #1: Confirm the ask completely

You're on the clock.

You have to complete and file paperwork with the courthouse by a specific time. You've got a lot on your plate. And then it happens.

The request.

"Can you help me with a consult? I've got a problem with..."

Start by asking questions.

You: *"I'm in the middle of finishing a contract that's due today. Are you asking for help with something that **has** to be done today?"*

Asking questions is the one thing many attorneys forget to do. But asking questions gives you the tools you need to protect your boundaries. You can...

- Forward their request to another colleague with similar experience
- Point them to new, different or specialized resources
- Schedule a time to help, once you've finished your work

When colleagues make a request, make it a habit to ask questions. A *complete* understanding of their request gives you the ammunition you need to find the appropriate **No**/redirect.

Strategy #2: Confirm the consequences with terms and conditions

When colleagues make a request they're typically concerned with their side of things. It's natural and understandable. But their request comes with consequences. These consequences are hooks you can use to say no.

Like this:

- I'm supposed to be getting X done. Did you want me **to drop Y** and focus on Z?
- I can help you if I have X, Y and Z **by noon tomorrow**. Can you get it to me by then?
- I'll give this a shot. **X could be a major barrier** but I'd like to try and work around it.
- Would you **give me two days** to figure this out? There's a lot to unpack here.
- I'm willing to help you with X. Would you be **willing to take over Y** for me instead?
- **I can't help** with X but I know three people who can. **Give me a day** to reach out to them.

See what's happening? You've shown colleagues you're willing to try, open to helping them and struggling with real consequences of your own.

It legitimizes your No.

It's an important must-have in peach cultures.

Saying No, an important but underdeveloped skill

How you say No matters.

It's something most professionals struggle to do. They're concerned about the ramifications of their No. Saying No doesn't have to hurt the relationship between colleagues.

You just need the right No.

With the right approach and plenty of peachiness, you'll have the skills you need to improve your relationships, all while saying No.

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