

Well, hey leaders. In this training, I want to talk to you about one of the most difficult skills I know of to master in leadership, and that is the art of the clear no. How do you say no to people? I don't know. If you're like me, you want to make people happy. I don't like saying no. I don't like saying no when people want to meet me for coffee; I don't like saying no when people ask me to come and speak somewhere; I don't like saying no when someone asks me for my time. But what I discovered, there was about maybe six months in leadership where it was easy for me to say yes to everything. So when I started in leadership, finally graduating college, I led a very small church, three of them actually, and the smallest had six people. So when you have six people going to your church, you have a lot of time.

I had a lot of time, and if people said, "Hey, do you want to come over in the afternoon for coffee?" I'm like, "Let me see what I'm doing, nothing. Yes, I will come over." Then we started to grow. After about that first six month period when we started to grow, I have been struggling with saying no ever since. You know why I'm so passionate about this? It's because the wrong people end up paying a price when you don't know how to say no. Because what happens is you say no to good things, and the truly great things get ignored. Great things like maybe your marriage or your primary relationship at home or your kids, if you're a parent, or your best friend or you. You're not sleeping at night, you feel pulled in a million directions, you can't even relax to watch Netflix at night because you got 1,000 people tugging at you and you always feel guilty all the time.

So if you've ever struggled with any of that, welcome to the club. I have struggled with it for years. What I'm going to share with you is a discipline that I keep coming back to, not just year after year, but month after month and day after day because it seems that every time something grows, I've got to get a whole new set of criteria for figuring out how to say no, and I want to do it nicely. I don't want to be the guy who's just like a wall, it's like, "You'll never get to me." Nobody wants to be that person.

I'll tell you what's made it even more complicated over the last decade, is if you pull out your phone and you have a look at how many inboxes you actually have, I counted recently, I have 11 inboxes between different emails, different social media accounts. Then you know what, apps like Instagram and Facebook, they created something called message requests, so even people you're not connected with can ask you for things. So it just feels like you're playing whack-a-mole and every day people are coming at you and they got a million questions for you. It's like, well, you should be here and you should be there and you're like, "Ah, I don't even know what to do."

So I want to walk you through mastering the art of saying no clearly. This is still hard for me, but it's something that the better I get at it, the better it goes. The other reason, in addition to your family and the people who are closest to you and your own personal health, is that the inability to say no is actually a cap on your leadership and on your organization. Because you'll discover that people who say yes to everything and don't have a filter for saying, no, they cap out. For churches, it's about 200. Small businesses stay really small because what you're doing is you're running around like a chicken with your head cut off trying to please everybody. Meanwhile, there's a whole bunch of people you're trying to reach, a whole bunch of people you're disappointing anyway because you don't know how to say no to the right things and yes to the right things.

So, here's what I want to walk you through. So somebody asks you, "Hey, do you have time to meet with me? Hey, can you help me on this project." Or whatever the request is, whether it comes in in person, when you're meeting somebody face-to-face, or a phone call, or a text message, or something, one of your inboxes, you got to figure out because you know. There's already a whole bunch, and I'm going to walk through at the very end some ways to make categorical decisions that'll help you figure out what's important, what's not, but you know. I want to walk you through that situation where you already know you shouldn't meet with this person, you don't want to meet with this person, it's not strategic to meet

with this person, it's not helpful to meet with this person, but you feel guilty if you don't meet with this person. So how do you handle that?

So I want you to actually imagine somebody who's going to ask you for your time this week that you don't want to spend time with them, but you don't have the heart to say no. So what do you do? So number one, here's the first principle, tell them you'd love to meet with them. Now, maybe in a perfect world, don't lie. But the reality is, if I was back the way I was in those first few months of 1995, when I started in leadership, I would meet with just about anybody, I had time, I could do it. And unless you're going to rob me in the alley at gunpoint, I probably want to meet with you, so yeah, I'm open. If that's actually true and you can say it with integrity, and 99% of the time with me it's true, I would meet with anybody. So tell them, "Man, I would love to meet with you." And just start there.

Then the second point is this, affirm their intention. Just say, "I can totally understand why you'd want to get together, and I'm really grateful for that. Thank you so much." So tell them, "Man, I would love to meet with you, I'm so grateful that you want to meet with me." And then, you can do it a little bit further, express some empathy. "Oh, I see you're dealing with a difficult situation." Or, "Yeah, that sounds really hard." Or, "Yeah, that's a puzzle and we should talk about it." Or say, "Oh yeah, it would be really fun to get together and grab a meal or grab lunch." So what you've done right now is you haven't put up a wall, you've told them it's something you would love to do. If that's true, you can say it. You've affirmed their intention, you've expressed some empathy, but then you're going to get into the art of saying no. So you've already been...

What I call this first part is just emotional intelligence. And you don't want to be that stonewall person, you don't want to ignore or delete the message or ghost somebody, but then you want to get into redirection. So maybe there's somebody else who can help them more. So if that's the case, and if you're in a senior leadership position, you might say, "Oh, we have a director who cares for that, or perhaps you'd love to meet with so-and-so because I think they're better at it." What I've discovered too, as my organization has grown and my leadership has grown, is in the beginning I knew a little bit about everything, and now I just stick to my lane, I'm not the best person to answer all the questions. And if that's true, you can easily redirect them to somebody else, and most people will handle that.

So if you can do that, do a redirect and say, "You should meet with this person or you should meet with your group leader or you should meet with our customer service person or you should meet with this person." So you can do a redirection. Then sometimes that's not always possible, so then what do you do? You get firm, that's what you do, and you say, "Hey, as much as I would love to, I'm afraid it's not going to work out." Now you want to be firm, you want to be clear. What does no sound like? It sounds like this, and I'm going to give you some examples, "In order to honor my other commitments, I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to meet with you." That's clear, and in my case it's true.

If I'm going to produce a good video, if I'm going to write a great article, if I'm going to get my book manuscript in on time, if I'm going to honor my team that I work closely with, I only have so many hours in the week. So in order to honor my other commitments, I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to. So you can say that. Here's another way of expressing it firmly, you can say, "As much as I'd love to, I'm afraid I'm not in." You don't have to give a long explanation. You can, you can say, "Hey, things are really intense right now, something happened." But you can just be firm or you can say something like, "I'm sorry, it's just not going to work." You've heard that before and you haven't totally freaked out. "I'm sorry, it's just not going to work." Then you can say, "I'm not available." There's another way of saying I'm not available, a third way, "Thank you, but no." Sometimes you can do that as well.

Now, listen, this sounds a lot easier than it is and emotionally, I still go through it every time because I'm like, "Maybe I can squeeze that in and maybe I can squeeze this person in." The reality is, I know as soon as I start to do that, my marriage is going to get neglected, my kids are going to get neglected, my best

friends are going to get neglected, my inner team is going to get neglected, the mission is going to get neglected. So all those things get neglected, so I've had to develop a number of different ways just to say no. The bigger things get, the more you will find that the opportunities available exceed the time available for you to do them in. So this will be a daily discipline for you the larger things get.

Now, what's nice about a firm no is there's no false hope. If it truly is, I can't do it right now, but I'd love to do it later, then tell them that. Say, "Hey, circle back in a month or two months or so and we'll see if we can make it work." But don't give them false hope if you have no intention of meeting with them. Then the final thing is thank them. So you've already said, "Man, I'd love to meet with you. Totally understand why you'd want to get together, really appreciate you. Maybe you can meet with this person." Or you just say, "You know what, unfortunately, I'm not available." Or, "Unfortunately that's not going to work for me." Then you say, "But thank you so much. I really appreciate it, really appreciate all you're doing, Carey." Something like that, you see, and that's nice. So you start at the beginning kind, you're honest, you're empathetic, you give a firm direction, and then you finish with a really grateful tone.

I have found that to be very, very effective, and I also found it works with emotionally intelligent people, so if you have a relatively healthy person that's going to work. You will get some people who get really angry with you, they're probably 1% or 2%. Now, if you're resetting your culture, it might be much higher than that, and you may want to explain why a little bit more. As our churches grew, and when you have six people there's no excuse not to meet with everybody, but as we got to 200 and then 1,000 and then more, it was like, "Here's why it's not going to work." You just let people know. Again, the emotionally intelligent people understand that, and then the ones who don't, well, you probably didn't want to meet with them anyway and you can't help them. That some other issue going on in their life that they're going to have to figure out without you. So, you're going to find that this works most of the time with healthy people.

Now, I want to introduce you the seventh point in mastering the art of the clear no. Is a super power because you can do this all day long every day, but I've found this really helps, and I call it categorical decision-making. So the seventh point is start making categorical decisions. What do I mean by that? Well, seeing the scenarios as I painted it so far, you're taking everything on a case by case basis. Do I meet with Max? Do I meet with Jacinta? Do I meet with Sam? Do I meet with Sarah? It's all the same. But what I've discovered as things grow, and things have grown significantly beyond those initial handful of people, is that I've had to start thinking in categories.

So when our churches were small, I would meet with everybody. Then eventually it's like, "Well, everybody, it doesn't work anymore because there's just too many people." So I said, "You know what, I'm going to meet with volunteers. If you volunteer, I'll meet with you." Then we started getting hundreds of volunteers and soon over 1,000 volunteers. And I'm like, "Oh yeah, well, that doesn't work anymore. I'll meet with volunteer leaders." And then that didn't really work anymore because we had a lot of volunteer leaders, so I thought I'll meet with staff. Then we got a lot of staff and so I'm like, "I'm going to meet with the executive team." But you see what those are is categories. See, the reason that worked for us is because if the staff were doing their job, the volunteers reported to the staff not directly to me. So they should properly meet with the staff, and that allowed us to grow and scale.

Similarly, in my work as an author and speaker, we get lots and lots of requests for podcast, interviews, we get requests to speak in places. Again, there's only so much time available. So we've developed categories that help us sort through those. Like, are you talking to people or talking to leaders? If you're talking to leaders, oh, I know that those conversations have a bigger impact, so that's different. Then we talk about what kind of leaders they are and so on. So those categorical decisions are really helpful. Here's some other categories that might assist you in clearing out your calendar. A lot of people ask you

to pick your brain or whatever. Well, you might just decide that you're not going to do meetings where people just want to pick your brain. Like you might say, "What is the meeting about? And can you give me an idea of what you want to accomplish?" Because what you might discover there is you couldn't answer the question anyway or there's someone better positioned or you could answer it in an email.

I had somebody, actually before I recorded this video, they said, "Hey, we just need some time on Zoom. I need you and one of my senior directional team, can we do it?" I thought, "It's just a really busy season." Friend of mine, had my cell phone number, didn't want to disappoint him. But we're doing a lot of filming, we're doing a lot of stuff, and I got to be faithful to my team, faithful to my wife. I thought, "What can I do to help him?" So what I did was I just pulled up my phone, recorded a couple of bullet points on my voice memos, and just texted them to him and he was really grateful for it. So I accomplished in 60 seconds what would have taken closer to 60 minutes to set it all up and do it. So sometimes you can do that.

So you can also eliminate things like breakfast meetings, I used to do a ton of breakfast meetings. You might say, "I don't do breakfast meetings anymore." And people go like, "Okay, well that's not personal." Or maybe you do two a month or maybe you do one a week. Then you can look at your calendar and say, "I'd love to have breakfast with you." And maybe you would. "This month is full, but I've got the Tuesday next month where we could do breakfast, do you want to meet then?" See, that way. Otherwise, you're going to have five days a week filled up with breakfast meetings. So either you don't do breakfast meetings or you limit the time available. You can do that with any kind of meeting where you're like, "I got five meetings available this week and they're all booked, but we can talk about next week or the week after or the week after." So that's another way of doing it.

Another thing is the type of meeting you will take. So personally, one of my team members, when she was a new mom, so busy. A lot of her girlfriends were doing these parties where they sell candles or cookware, that kind of thing. She just decided for a season, I don't attend those kinds of events. She would just tell her friends, "It's not personal, I just don't go to those kinds of parties." Again, healthy people understand that. So start thinking in terms of categories. In senior leadership, maybe you make yourself available to your executive team and you meet with your executive team, and then you have a slot in your calendar where you meet with other staff or other people in the organization. But again, it's got a limit to it because here's what happens, you neglect your most important relationships when you're trying to please everybody.

So here's what you'll discover, that this actually helps you lead much more effectively, it helps your organization scale, it makes you a better human, a better parent, a better spouse, and a better boss, and a better leader. So I really hope this helps you master the art of the clear no. Then we've got some fun things in the team application guide, you're actually going to do some role-play. I want you to make it a little bit hard on each other and get good at saying no, I promise you it's not easy. But it's a whole lot easier to learn how to say no nicely than it is to live unavailable to the people and the things that matter most to you.