

A portrait of Cindy Tonkin, a woman with short, curly brown hair, wearing a black top, orange earrings, and a necklace with an orange pendant. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is blurred with warm, bokeh lights.

**MAKE NO  
SOUND LIKE YES  
SOME IDEAS**

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## Why we need no

People hate to say no, and they also hate to hear no. And yet we need no.

We need no to:

- make sure we do the important work, not the urgent work
- focus ourselves and our stakeholders
- live better because we're not trying to fit 20 hours work into 10 hours.

## Saying no is hard

Saying no to someone is difficult.

We worry about the effects of no.

We fear that it may cause a rift in the relationship, may lower trust, create anger, resentment, disappointment or sadness.

## Saying yes can be dumb

If you're low on resources, time, or expertise in comparison to the potential workload, saying yes can be dumb.

When we say "yes" when we should say "no", it:

- devolves to a hard no eventually
- doesn't get delivered
- exhausts the team that said yes (see generosity burnout on page 9).

In most of these cases we can end up in the same place: rifts in the relationship, anger, resentment, disappointment and sadness. Exactly what we feared saying "no" would do.

## Stories of people who advocate "no" in the right places

I collect stories about how people say no and why they say no, and you can find them at <https://consultantsconsultant.com.au/tag/make-no-sound-like-yes/>.

For right now, here are some bits of useful content.

## Make No sound like Yes

To say no and keep the relationship, you need to finesse the words that you use. The more you are adept at making a no sound like a yes, the easier this will be to negotiate with a client.

### Saying no is hard

Here are some “no” answers which do not work

- No, my boss says I can't
- No, it's not on my to do list
- No, it's not a priority
- No, it's not important
- No, I just don't care about it
- No, it's a silly idea
- No, why would we?
- No it's not in my KPIs
- No it doesn't help me get my bonus

Among other things, these “No” answers are all about you and your priorities. You need to frame the “No” from the client's perspective.

### Saying no encouragingly

Part of saying no encouragingly (make no sound like yes) is to make it clear that you are on the client's side, that you are looking out for them. The “no” needs to come from a “yes”-like place. You do this by first making sure the client gets that you know what they want and need. When they feel this is true, then it becomes clear that any answer you give will be in their best interests.

There is a **formula for saying “No” nicely.**

This is it: **pace + pace + pace + lead**

## It's all in the framing

The first 3 steps are Paces.

A pace is something which is true for the client from their model of the world.

It doesn't have to be true for you. It needs to be about them and their world.

Put yourself in their shoes for a moment and say 3 things that are true for them. Then follow it up with what you want to say (the Lead). The more resistant they are, the more paces you need. The better the relationship between you, the less you need to pace before saying what you want to say.

Over time you will notice people naturally pacing before saying anything. It's a normal human way to show people that you are listening to them and that you want to help them.

This table gives you some examples of saying no encouragingly.

Pace +	Pace +	Pace +	Lead
You want to increase sales and keep costs at the same level.	Your business is under a lot of pressure.	We both need to make this project work.	And I think the best way to do that is to bring in a contractor.
Your boss wants this done.	You want to make sure everything's tied up properly before your holiday.	We've been working together for a long time.	I'm concerned that the other projects will suffer if we do this right now. Let's put it on hold till April.
You are very busy.	You have 1000 priorities right now.	You want to get this off your plate.	We need to get Jill from Marketing in here to make sure this is done properly.

## Some useful paces

There are 2 types of paces, which you can always use in a pinch. I call them “freebie” paces.

- Universals – things which are true for everyone
- Truisms – things which are true here and now and verifiable by the senses

Both universals and truisms are very useful if the room is difficult, if you are opening a meeting with a lot of disparate people or when you want to make sure your message is heard.

You will find out more about universals and truisms on page 35.

One of my clients calls pacing “stating the obvious”. My friend Chris calls pacing and leading “suck, suck, stab”.

Its function is much more than that. And it takes so little time and effort; you will be surprised to notice how often you hear people doing it!

## Where to lead to when making no sound like yes

Once you have the paces in place, you need to choose carefully where to lead.

A smaller step is always better. And a reframe, where you seem to be saying yes, but shift the client’s focus is an even more elegant solution.

Try these 7 ways to redirect their attention.

These sentences have only one pace. The more difficult it is to say “no” the more paces you add (no more than 5 please, or you sound indecisive)

## DEPARTS helps you remember

The way to remember the 7 ways to rephrase a nice no is the word DEPARTS

- Delay
- Expertise
- Priority
- Advice
- Resources
- Time Frame
- Scope

## **Delay: Delay it**

- Because this is so important (pace) we can certainly get it done - let's schedule it for a (6 months from now) start

## **Expertise: Not our expertise: Direct their attention to the right place (not our department)**

- This is clearly preoccupying you (pace) and I'll organise for us to meet with Molly in Research, since this is more their expertise (no, sounds like yes)

## **Priority: Not high priority: Focus on priorities**

- Clearly this needs attention (pace) and I'm wondering whether it's more important than the current project? (no, sounds like yes)

## **Advice: Bring in some advice (escalate)**

- The fact that you want this to happen makes it important (pace) - I think it will help to have more expertise in the room - let's nail this down with Anne the Expert.

## **Resources: Add resources**

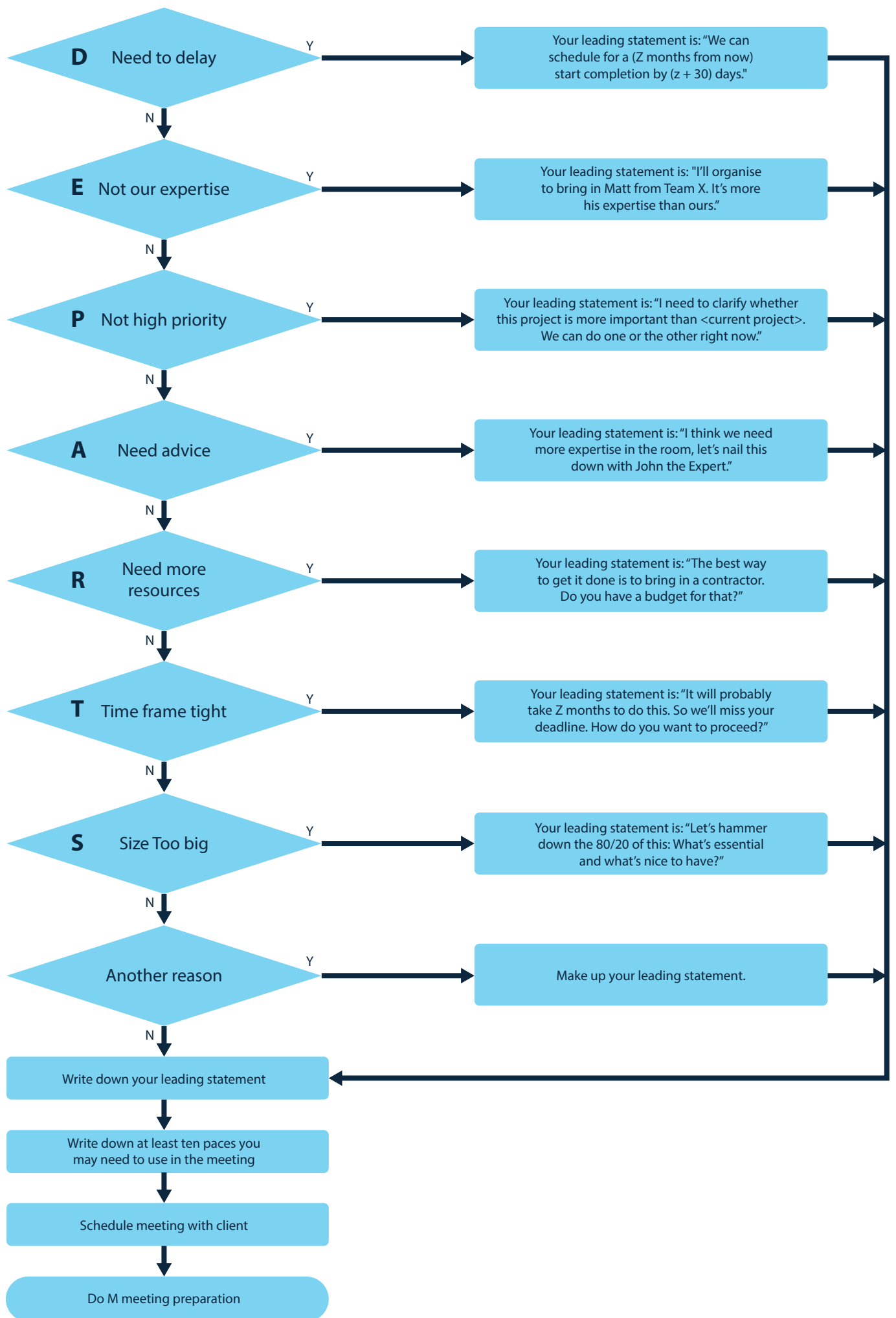
- It's obvious that this is a big issue (pace), and let me think about it - we may need a contractor to deal with this (no, sounds like yes)

## **Time frame tight: Change time frame**

- I know that this an important priority for you (pace), and it will probably take more like 12 months than 3 months (no, sounds like yes)

## **Scope: Too big: Change scope**

- Since this is important to you, (pace) let's hammer down the 80/20 of it - what's essential and what's nice to have (no sounds like yes)





## Universals and truisms - "Freebie" paces

People hate to say no, and they also hate to hear no. And yet we need no.

We need no to:

- Everyone wants less work
- Everyone wants to work smarter
- Lots of people love (footy, beer, wine, sport, theatre, books, TV, quality programming)
- Some of us are motivated by money, success
- Some of us went to university
- Some of us were born in (city/country)
- We all had hair (at one point in our lives)
- We all hate traffic
- We all have parents, or had parents at one point in our lives
- We all like going home, good food, hanging with friends
- We all look forward to holidays
- We all need to be loved
- We all need to eat (we're all hungry if it's just before lunch)
- We all value our family time
- We all want a healthy, safe, high-morale working environment
- We all want hassle-free days
- We all want job satisfaction, security and direction, rewarding work
- We all want more time in our day
- We all want more time to do our own thing
- We all want the business to succeed
- We all want to do our jobs well
- We all want to get along with our colleagues
- We all want to have our say and be heard
- We all went to school
- We all work (Monday to Friday, or on the same shift, or shift work)
- We all work at (location Z)
- We all work for (Company X)
- We're all getting older
- We're all men (or women or people - choose one)
- We're all supposed to pay tax

Choose any of these paces, and then add your lead - and you're on the way to influencing. Three or four of these paces, and you'll find leading even easier.

If the person is highly resistant, they need more paces (remember, resistance is a sign of insufficient pacing). If they aren't, just one will do.

## Generosity Burnout

These are my notes from the Harvard Business Review article **Generosity Burnout** by Adam Grant and Reb Rebele. Please go read the original article if you can. There's an explainer video which may help you too.

<https://hbr.org/2017/01/beat-generosity-burnout>

Their research was focused on school teachers, and it applies to most corporates I know. They distinguished people on a spectrum from Givers to Takers.

Here are the important take outs:

- Time and energy are limited resources and people end up short on both when they say yes to every individual request
- Effective givers recognise every "no" frees you up to say yes when it matters most
- Those who offer the most direct support, take the most initiative and make the best suggestions protect their time so that they can work on their own goals too
- Reactive helping is exhausting but proactive giving can be energising
- Generosity is just as critical for rising as doing your job well

## Ways to give help

Here are some ways to give help:

- Establish your wheelhouse (see below)
- Chunk it (e.g. generosity Wednesdays)
- Get them to help each other (webinar, meeting)
- FAQs / personal resource Centre you can share
- Office Hours

## What's your wheelhouse?

So what is your wheelhouse?

- experts share knowledge
- coaches teach skills
- mentors give advice and guidance
- connectors make introductions
- extra-milers show up early stay late and volunteer for extra work
- helpers provide hands-on task support and emotional support

## Recognise a taker

It's important that you recognise takers in your workplace:

- They act entitled to people's help
- They claim the credit for success while blaming others for failure
- They kiss up and kick down
- They are nice to your face and stab you in the back
- They are nice only when they need a favour
- They over-promise and under-deliver
- Ask yourself did they
- Make it easy for you to help
  - or
  - want you to meet and play on their terms
  - express gratitude, Pay It Forward and follow up cautiously
    - or
    - ask for more so that one-off becomes ongoing

## How to deal with takers

Sometimes you just have to deal with takers.

Here are some ways to deal with them:

- ask them to help others in return
- set your limits (hours, people, events per day, week or month)
- Say this is not a good use of my time (a nice no)
- Ask pointed questions before helping
- Ask does it benefit the whole team
- give them homework (“you must be this tall to ride”)

## Guidelines for giving

Keep these guidelines in mind:

Remember you don't owe anyone an interaction

- Prioritise
- Screen out takers
- Act like a triage nurse, decide how or whether to help them
- Tell people when you will be overloaded and unavailable
- It's ok to not respond and go recharge.

## About the author - Cindy Tonkin

Cindy Tonkin is the Consultants' Consultant.

She is a management consultant with more than 20 years experience.

She specialises in soft skills for clever people, and has a niche with data analysts. She runs several consulting brands, improvises, creates visual art and hangs out with her cats in Newtown, NSW Australia.

Cindy's first book, the **Australian Consultants' Guide** helped more than 6000 consultants set up their business.

Cindy gives consultants and managers tools to make doing business with people easy. She is one of the best-educated NLP-trained consultants operating in the business environment, with masters-level qualifications from the Université de Paris VIII and a First-Class Honours Degree from Sydney University. Cindy has worked for big consultancies such as Accenture and KPMG and boutique consultancies like her own. She has truckloads of practical, on-the-floor experience implementing organisational change from Chief Executive to Supervisor Level.

Her clients include major consultancy firms, public service organisations and Financial Services companies with internal consulting forces. She has written a fleet of books on how to make consulting businesses work more effectively, and how to be a better consultant.



In this century all of Cindy's clients have been repeat or referral business, a testament to her good work.

Cindy writes regularly for publications like Mortgage Professional Australia and Executive Excellence magazines. She has been featured on Radio 2GB and ABC Radio, in the Sydney Morning Herald and the Sun-Herald. She is a sought-after keynote speaker on a range of soft skills topics.

### Visit Cindy's Blog:

[consultantsconsultant.com.au/blog/](https://consultantsconsultant.com.au/blog/)

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