

This is how the most productive people protect their time

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We all have the same number of hours in the day, but some people just seem to get more done than others. While hacks are helpful, the real key is being vigilant about what makes it onto your calendar.

“Many of us are not fully conscious about the decision-making process to accept work relative to what’s on their plate,” he says. “We also don’t like to say ‘no.’ I like to flip that on its head. Instead of knowing when to say ‘no,’ learn how to decide when to say ‘yes.’”

To protect your time, Khouri suggests asking yourself these five questions when someone makes a request:

DOES THIS ALIGN WITH MY ROADMAP?

To know what is worthy of your time, you need to know where you’re headed with your life and career over set periods of time, such as one, two, and three years. Khouri likens it to taking a road trip.

“If you were driving from Nashville to San Francisco, you would need to figure out where to stop and spend the night,” he says. “It’s the same concept for reaching your professional goals. Ask yourself if the request aligns with your roadmap.”

Take time to define set outcomes with interim milestones so you know where you’re going. “Each item on the roadmap should align with one of your goals,” says Khouri. “Once you lay this out, you can get clear about whether you should take on something new, move it to another time, or say ‘no’ to the request.”

IS THE REQUESTER HIGH ON MY RELATIONSHIP HIERARCHY?

You’re more likely to say “yes” to certain people, and it helps to identify them. For example, you may put your boss, clients, spouse, and family higher on the list than others. Khouri calls this the relationship hierarchy, and says the key is that people must be ranked with no duplicates.

“You don’t want to have three number-one relationships or two number-five relationships,” he says. “Think of it as a flat list from one to n. For some, this ranking is conscious and clear. For others, it is more subconscious.”

The higher someone is on your relationship hierarchy, the more important it will be to say “yes” to their request. And the most productive people put themselves on the list, too.

IS IT A QUALITY REQUEST?

The most productive people expect requests for their time to be thought through and crystal clear. If it misses the mark, they will refuse the request.

To be considered a quality request, the ask should be respectful of your time, necessary, and concise, says Khouri. It should also include solutions, such as “Here’s the problem we’re having, and some possible recommendations.”

DOES IT FIT ON MY PRIORITY LIST?

Chances are your plate is already full and taking on any new request will require you to shuffle things around or renegotiate deadlines. This step requires being conscious about what is not going to get done.

“Effective leaders think about it as reprioritizing,” says Khouri. “And if you’re being asked to do something by your boss, you can have them decide by saying, ‘I’m happy to take this on. Where does it fit on my priority list?’”

COULD THIS BE DELEGATED?

Productive people are masters at delegation for two reasons, says Khouri. “First, it gets the item off of their list,” he says. “And second, it provides a more appropriate development opportunity for someone else. Helping grow someone’s skills helps them be better and ultimately take on more. People want to work for leaders who have a development mindset.”

Delegation is like a muscle; the more you do it, the better you become at it, says Khouri. “To successfully delegate you need to be crystal clear about the purpose or reason to complete the project and what an outstanding result looks like,” he says.

Remember, saying “yes” ultimately means saying “no” to something else. If you can answer “yes” to the first four questions, you can say confidently “yes” to the request. And if you can say “yes” to the fifth, delegate it.

“If it doesn’t match your roadmap, you should say ‘no,’ but you can do it in an encouraging way,” says Khouri. “You could say, ‘I’d love to help, but right now my schedule includes other priorities I need to focus on.’”

When you adopt a mindset of evaluating each request for time, you’ll be more likely to say “yes” to the things that really matter.