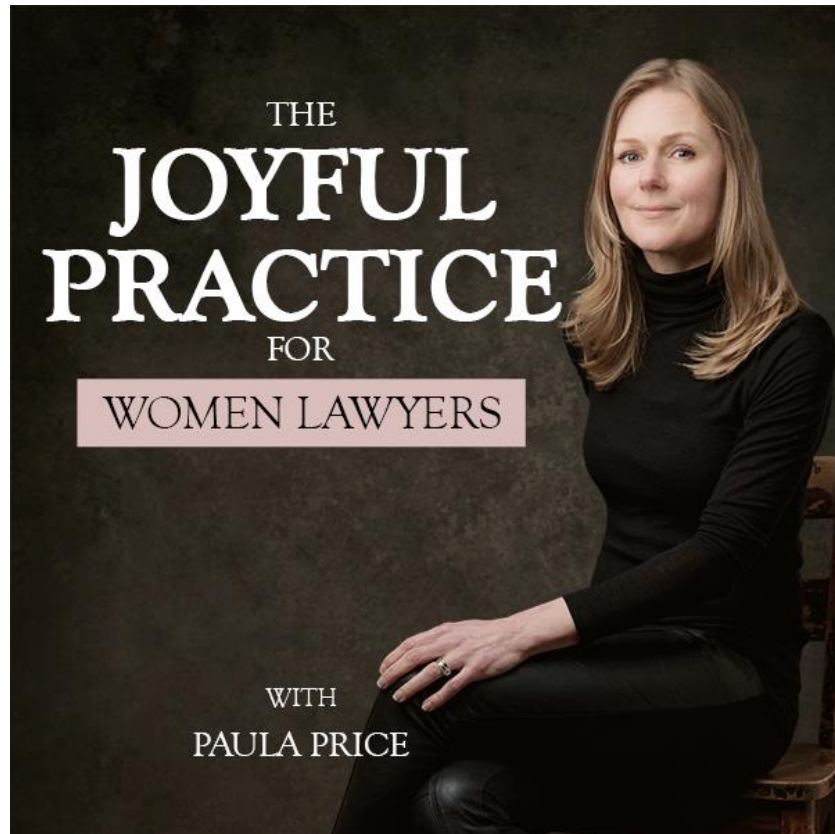


Ep #62: How to Say No (Without Burning Bridges)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Paula Price

[The Joyful Practice for Women Lawyers](#) with Paula Price

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You're listening to *The Joyful Practice for Women Lawyers* Podcast episode number 62.

Welcome to *The Joyful Practice for Women Lawyers* Podcast. I'm your host Paula Price, lawyer turned certified executive coach. This podcast was created to empower women lawyers just like you to create a life and practice you love. Join me every week for a break from the hustle so we can focus on you, what you truly want, and how you can create it.

If you're over the overwhelm, done with putting out fires, and ready to create a life and practice that brings you more joy, you're in the right place. Ready for today's episode? Let's dive in.

Hello, my friend. Welcome back to the podcast. It's Paula here. I'm so excited that you joined me here this week. Thank you for being here. I hope you are having a fabulous week. For me, it's the middle of summer. It is a gorgeous summer day. I just picked my kids up from summer camp. Gotta say, they like their summer camps this season, this week, I should say, which is a big, big deal.

For any of you who have your kids in camps, you may have had the experience of the camp that they don't like. You go to pick them up, and there's a lot of complaining in the car ride home. There's a lot of resistance in the morning when you try to take them back. So I'm delighted to let you know that this week's camps have been a relative success. So touch wood, fingers crossed, we've a couple more days to go. I'm really enjoying it. Mostly I'm enjoying that they are enjoying it. So hope you're having a good summer if you happen to be listening to this episode during the summer.

Now today, we are talking about how to say no without burning bridges. This really is a subset of a broader topic, which of course, is setting boundaries. In the work that I do with lawyers, boundaries is a topic that

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often comes up. So I'm excited to dive a bit deeper into the specific area of saying no.

As we go through today's podcast episode, I would invite you to think about a time whether it's in your professional work or if it's in your personal life where you said yes to something and then regretted it. Whether it was because you became resentful of all the time you were committing to something that you weren't truly attached to. Maybe you were truly overworked and then started not being able to perform in other areas because you were so burdened in a sense by this thing that you committed to.

As we talk about the problem, as we talk about some of the solutions I'm going to offer, I'd like you to imagine how you can apply these tools, maybe not all of these tools, maybe it's just some of these tools. But how you can apply them in your practice going forward next time you're invited to take part in something that you really would prefer to say no to.

So with that, we're gonna dive right into what this might look like in your practice. The issue here is you want to say no to something, but you don't because you're afraid of burning a bridge. This might show up in a number of ways. It could be that you take on a client matter where you know that the client is not a particularly good fit for you. It may be that you take on files that are not in your area of expertise.

It might be that one of your colleagues comes to you, and they've got this nonbillable project. They are really persuasive, but you really don't have time for it. Or maybe you've got a colleague who invites you to a networking event, and they really want you to go. They don't want to have to go all by themselves. So you kind of feel like you're being influenced by them to go even though you don't really have the time, and it's not really an event that you're particularly interested in going to.

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It may be that you are asked to give a talk or a speech at an industry event, and maybe it's just not something that you have time for or it's not an industry that you're particularly interested in developing a relationship with. It might be a favor that somebody is asking you to do for them. It just is not in alignment with the other projects that you have going on at the moment. It could be someone who's asking you to work at a discounted rate. Finally, maybe it's just your general availability outside of business hours for matters that are not urgent.

As I go through this list, I would invite you to think about what applies to you in your own practice. I'd also just like to mention that as you become more senior, you will have more control and more discretion over where you say yes and where you say no.

So if you're first starting out in your practice, you may not be able to say no. You may truly be in a position where the answer is yes. But even if you're at the beginning, I would like you to start thinking about where you would be saying no because that is a skill that you're going to want to develop over time. We're going to get into why over the course of this podcast.

So for all of you who have the discretion to say no, and yet you are choosing to say yes, you may ask yourself why this has become a problem for you. The truth is you're all very smart. You got to where you are now because you're smart, because you're hardworking, because you're great at problem solving and figuring things out. So you might ask yourself how it is that you keep finding yourself in this situation where you've said yes where what you really want is to have said no. Often it's because you're scared of burning a bridge.

So what does burning a bridge look like to you? There are a couple of examples that come to mind for me when I think about what burning a bridge might mean for you. The first is burning a bridge with another

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person. It could be that that person is a friend. It could be a colleague. It could be a boss. It could be a client.

When they ask you to get involved on a project, you want to do one of three things. One is you want to help them, right? They've asked you for your help with a specific mandate, problem, file, and you do not want to see them suffer. You genuinely want to help them out. So you take on that work.

Or it may be that you have somebody in your life, whether it's in your professional life or outside of that, someone who you really respect and admire. Maybe it's a mentor who is somebody that you work with closely in your office. Maybe it's a mentor who you don't necessarily work with, but who is a significant figure in your life.

They may ask you to do something, and it isn't something that you really want to do, but you really don't want to let that person down. You really want to honor them. You want to show that you appreciate the opportunity that they are giving to you. So you feel compelled to say yes. You don't want to burn that bridge.

Another area where you may feel like you're burning a bridge with respect to another person is the fear of consequences, right? If it's a client, in particular, if you say no to them, what will happen? Will they leave you and find another lawyer? So just to summarize, the bridge might be with another person where you're motivated by a desire to help, you're motivated by the desire to not let somebody down, or motivated by that fear of not wanting to lose that person as a client for example.

Another type of bridge might be a bridge in the nature have an opportunity. So you might think of the shiny penny syndrome. So I think we've all experienced that where you are going about your work, and this opportunity comes out of left field. It's a brand new, shiny opportunity. It seems so

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exciting, even though it's completely not aligned with anything else that you're doing. Because it's come out of left field, you might think to yourself this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. If I don't take this opportunity now, it will never come back. So you say yes to not wanting to lose the bridge with that opportunity.

Or it may also be that an opportunity comes up. Maybe it's not super, super shiny, but it's something that you wonder if you take it on what will happen? What motivates you is the classic FOMO, fear of missing out. So you take the opportunity, not so much because you think that the opportunity itself is amazing, but because you're in fear of what will happen if you don't take it on.

So how do we try to solve this problem? Again, you're smart, capable. You are capable of solving very complex problems. So this is not a question of capacity. But what ends up happening is the opportunity presents, and you don't want to burn the bridge, whatever that bridge looks like for you. So you say yes to it. Maybe you tell yourself that you'll make it work this time. That this is the last time you're going to take on a project that you haven't already got on your calendar. You maybe make excuses to yourself for why this time is different.

The trouble is that it doesn't work. Because you say yes to avoid saying no and burning a bridge, and you end up suffering through the consequences of having overextended yourself. So you get things done, but you feel stressed. You feel resentful. You tell yourself that you're never going to do it again. Then you forget all about it the next time an opportunity presents itself, and you do it again.

So what is created is almost like this cycle, this cycle that continues. You say yes to avoid burning bridges. It leaves you feeling drained, resentful, overworked, unfocused, maybe even burned out. But when the situation presents itself, you fall into it again.

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So what we're going to talk about today is how to break that cycle, how to say no in the moment, if that's what you choose to do. I'm going to offer three different ideas to help you do that. Then I'm going to offer you some suggested language that you can use next time you want to say no.

So the first thing I'd like to offer to you is that what is actually happening when you say yes is that you try to avoid burning the bridge, but what actually ends up happening is that you end up burning the bridge. Yes, you heard me correctly. You say yes to avoid burning the bridge, but in saying yes, you actually end up burning the bridge. So really, how does that work?

Again, I'd invite you to think back to an example of a time where you said yes, and you wish that you had said no. Going back to some of the examples that I mentioned earlier, let's say that you're trying to avoid burning a bridge with another person.

Let's say it's that example where a colleague has asked you to help them out on a project. Maybe it's a last minute deadline, and they just really couldn't have predicted it. They need your help. So you genuinely want to help them. You do not want to see them suffer. So you agree to help them out even though you don't have capacity. You don't have the desire. You aren't truly equipped to do it.

Ironically, what ends up happening is you go to help them out. If your heart's not really in it, you may be resentful. You may not actually have the capacity to help them out. You may not have the capability to help them out. Ironically, because you're not actually helping them out in the way that they need to be helped, they end up suffering.

Another way that they can end up suffering is when you save them if that's the nature of what that relationship looks like. By saving them, you're actually taking from them or preventing them from figuring out how to solve something on their own. Of course, is coming from a really, really good

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place. But you may ask yourself whether that person would have been better served having to figure out on their own how to solve the problem. They may, in fact, end up suffering less if you were to say no to them than if you were to say yes.

Another way that that can show up with another person is let's say your mentor asks you to get involved on a project that is so meaningful to them, and to you is something that you're kind of lukewarm about. So your mentor is there. They're super excited. They've got you involved. They think you're just as excited as they are, and you're not. Instead of putting in 110%, you're putting in 10%.

Over time you can tell there's a bit of attrition in terms of that relationship. It's not quite working out the way that they probably hoped would work out. It's not working out from your end the way that you hoped it would work out. So you may have started out saying yes because you didn't want to let them down. In the end, you end up letting them down.

Another example we talked about was fear of the consequences. Saying no to a client, for example, and then losing that client. So ironically, if you find yourself in a position where a client comes to you, they ask you to help out on a matter. You truly do not have time to do that matter, or you don't have the skill set, or you're really just not interested, and you say yes then what you may find is, again, you're not putting your heart and soul into it. You're not 100% behind it. You may end up eroding that relationship, and ironically, losing the client.

Now, the same thing can happen when you say yes to an opportunity, even though you're not totally into it. So that shiny penny syndrome, the opportunity that comes from out of nowhere, and you take it on even though you can't. You may find that you end up not having the time, the interest, the skill set, the capacity to really put your all into that project. So your fear may have been that you'll never have an opportunity like this

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again. The result is you never do get an opportunity like that again because it just didn't work out the way that you had wanted, the way that person who had offered that opportunity had wanted.

Fear Of Missing Out is another one where you may take on that project because you're scared. What happens if you don't take it on? What are you going to miss out on? Ironically, to the extent you're spending time committed to that project, you may be missing out on other projects. Things that were higher on your priority list before this project came along. So you end up missing out even though what you were trying to avoid in the first place was FOMO.

So you need to be really careful here in terms of thinking about how saying yes is a benefit. You see yourself as stepping in and fixing a problem or avoiding burning a bridge. Yet the opposite happens.

We didn't talk about this other category. I'm going to talk about another category of bridge that gets burned because it's not something that immediately comes to mind. But when you say yes to something when you really want to say no, there's another bridge that is very important that you are potentially burning. That is the bridge that you have with yourself.

So when you say yes to a project that you don't truly want to say yes to, and you find yourself getting resentful and frustrated and overworked chances are you're going to start undermining the relationship that you have with yourself. That can go to the integrity you have with yourself, the trust you have with yourself. That relationship is just as important, if not more so, than the relationship you have with other people and with other opportunities.

So just want to highlight that as well that when you are not true to yourself, there are a number of bridges that you, in fact, end up burning, when you say yes. So this hopefully will help you contextualize. This is idea or

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suggestion number one is to be honest with yourself about what's really happening when you say yes. That might make it easier for you to say no because now you're not seeing no as necessarily the route to a burned bridge. You're also seeing that there are potential risks when you say yes to an opportunity that you're not truly committed to.

Before we move on to the next topic, there's one last piece I'd invite you to consider. That is this. If you run the risk of burning a bridge, whether you say yes or whether you say no, I would invite you to think about whether you would rather get ahead of it, and deliver your note at an early stage. Or if you'd prefer to say yes and then run the risk that things are not going to unfold the way that you would like them to.

If you use the example of your mentor, let's say your mentor requests that you join them in working on a particular project. You know your heart's not in it. You do not have capacity. If you say no initially and explain your reasons, have that difficult, honest conversation, you're giving your mentor the opportunity and a space to find somebody else to help them. Versus if you say yes to them, and then you're not necessarily engaged. There's a breakdown of perhaps the project, perhaps or the relationship. What can end up happening is you lose control over that process.

So I'd invite you to bear that in mind when you're making your decision is are you better off controlling that process from an earlier stage? Or are you better off allowing to say yes and then to allow things to unfold? I think what you will likely find is that giving that no at an earlier stage ultimately gives you more control, gives the other person a more of an opportunity to find a solution, and ultimately, is the preferable way for you to move forward.

So the second suggestion that I would like to offer to you is to get really clear about when you're going to say yes and when you're going to say no.

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So let's go back to the example of your colleague who approaches you and your colleague is in a total jam. They are late. They are desperate. They need someone to help them. Maybe it's late at the office, and nobody else is there to do it.

So here's what I would offer to you is when somebody asks you to do something, and your instinct or your desire is to say no. Then the next question is can you get yourself to a yes? The point I'm trying to emphasize here is that you do not want the compelling reason for you to say yes to be that you are afraid of burning a bridge.

If you're making your decision based on fear, you are in a reactive mode. You are going to have a lot of difficulty if and when the going gets tough because you're going to enter into that resentful I don't want to be here kind of energy. That's when you risk the relationship that you have with somebody else. That's when you risk kind of giving up on those projects.

So what you can do is if somebody comes to you, and you think about that bridge building exercise. You may be able to move yourself into a place where you're not making a decision from a position of fear, but you're actually making your decision from a place of service. In language that I will sometimes use as my clients is you're moving from a reactive state to a more creative state.

So what I would recommend doing there is to sit with that decision for a minute and see if you can move yourself from this yes because I don't want to burn my bridge, so I guess I'll do it to a hell yes. Because from that place you are responding, not reacting. You're coming from a place of service, not fear. You're removing the resentment and the questioning, and you're being really decisive and really clear about what it is that you are doing, and you are helping. You are doing it from a place of love, from a place of service, not from a place of fear and scarcity.

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If you can think about examples where you've done this, where you've helped somebody, and you're doing it from a really genuine, strong, intentional place, it's a very, very different feeling from when you feel like you're kind of just doing it because you want to make somebody else happy.

When you own that decision, when you own it as a hell yes, when you see the purpose, the meaning behind it, then you're so much less likely to fall into that trap of feeling resentful, of feeling burnt out because now you see yourself as really being a contributor and somebody who has exercised their choice. You are choosing that.

If you cannot bring yourself to that point, if you try and you try to see how this is coming from a place of service, you try to move there, but you really just can't get behind it. Then I would recommend that you do say no. That you let this be an opportunity for you to practice doing that.

So that moves us to the third point. So first point is to recognize what is actually happening when you say yes. That it's not always preventing you from burning a bridge. The second is to get really clear about when you're saying yes and when you're saying no. If you do choose to say yes, then let's say yes from a place of service, not a place of scarcity. The third point is if you decide to say no, be prepared for disappointment, and please hold the person that you're saying no to capable.

So what do I mean by that? Number one is you may need to acknowledge the feelings of disappointment. For this, I will draw from a personal example that I experienced very recently. Just a few facts. I signed up for a program, and there was another program that was kind of related to the main program. So I asked the service provider if I could have access to the second program in addition to the first program. The answer that came back was no.

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I got the email, and I was noticing how I was feeling about it. I felt disappointed. I felt a bit embarrassed that I had even asked in the first place. I confess, I even felt a little bit of shame. I thought oh, who might be asking for this. I felt a little twinge of resentment. Then I just kind of let it mellow.

From there, I actually started to feel a lot of respect for the service provider for setting a boundary with me. I also started to admire this as an example of how I might set boundaries for myself in the future in relation to services that I offer. If somebody asked me for a product or service in addition to something I'm offering, do I want to say yes? Do I want to say no?

So what I'm trying to share here is that when you say no to somebody, they may experience a similar range of emotions. They may be disappointed that you're not there to help them. They may feel embarrassed or ashamed that they asked you in the first place.

I mean you think back to that example. If your colleague is desperate, and they have run out of time, and it's the result of poor time management on their part, they might be embarrassed that they got into that situation in the first place. They might be disappointed if you say no to them. They might get a little bit angry.

Yet at the same time, they might find that they respect your decision. They might find that you have modeled for them how to say no. Next time they find themselves in a position where they are taking on too many projects, where they're saying yes without really giving it thought, they now have somebody that they can follow in terms of a model.

So what I invite you to do here is just to be prepared for that, and to know that you may need to acknowledge how that other person is feeling and to be sensitive to that. But to recognize that just because they're disappointed doesn't mean that you should say yes. They're grownups. They are able to

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manage the disappointment of you saying no. You're showing that you respect yourself. You're showing that you respect your own boundaries, and that, in turn, will help them with their own boundaries.

The second part of this. So the first part is to acknowledge their feelings of disappointment. The second part is to hold that person capable. This stems from a pet peeve of mine. I don't know if you've ever had that experience where you've asked for something and then the person says no. Then they almost treat you as though you're not going to be able to handle it. There's a certain vibe that comes along with this.

What it can look like is you may be anticipate that that person is not resourceful enough to take care of themselves or to figure out another solution, and that might inadvertently send a message to that person that you don't think they're resourceful and capable. That can make people feel I know, for me, it can make me feel kind of annoyed almost. Like, why are you doubting my ability to bounce back and figure out the solution?

So I invite you to hold that person capable. This is something I do in my coaching practice when I'm working with lawyers, and they're talking about challenges they're having, problems that they're having. Part of my role is to see them in their best light, is to see them as capable of solving their own problems. I never want to look at a client and say that they would not be able to figure that out because I know that they can.

So when you're saying no to somebody, I think you need to strike a balance between being sensitive to the fact that they might be disappointed, but also holding them capable of being able to resolve this problem for themselves. So that's the third element is to be prepared for disappointment and to hold the person capable.

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So let's say you've now decided that you're going to say no. You do not want to burn a bridge. You're not able to bring yourself to that point of it being a hell yes. What are some of the words that you can use to say no?

The number one thing I would recommend is to see if there's a way to build in a little bit of time for yourself. If somebody knocks on your door and they come to your office, and they asked you to do something, is it possible for you to say, "Hey, listen. I totally hear what you're saying. I'd love a little bit of time to think about this. I can look at my calendar. I can see if I can move things around." Buy yourself a little bit of time because that number one allows you to seriously consider whether this is a yes or no. It also allows you time to prepare for how you're going to respond.

Now, if the answer is no, a flat full-out no, some language you might use is I'm honored that you would ask me to take on this project, to work with you, to take on this file, but I'm at capacity right now. Or I need to focus on my current commitments, and I won't be able to give your project the time it deserves. These are some options for you when you want to say no full stop.

Now, if you don't want to give a full 100% no. You want to give a partial yes then it might look something like this. I can help you if you're okay with a different timeline. Then you get to propose a timeline that would work for you.

Another option might be I'm unable to help you with this, but would you like me to recommend somebody? In which case you can then go on to make recommendations of others who may be able to help out. Another option might be, I would be happy to take on this project, attend your seminar, but I'll need to limit my input to, and then you get to tell them what it is that you are capable of doing within the time and capacity that you have. So those are some options.

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If you would like some ideas about how to have difficult conversations, I have a podcast episode all about that. It's episode number 15. If you have questions about how to engage in conversations where you set boundaries, then I recommend you go back and listen to episode 37. I've got lots of ideas and suggestions there on how you can prepare for those types of conversations.

So just to recap, next time somebody comes to you with an invitation and you're not really sure if it's a yes or no, and the thing that's really driving you is that you don't want to burn a bridge. Number one, I invite you to consider whether saying yes is not in fact going to burn the bridge more than if you were to just simply say no.

The second thing is to get clear about where it's a yes and where it's a no. If you can bring yourself to a hell yes that this is something that absolutely you see the value in doing, go ahead, give them the yes. If you can't get yourself there, then you're going to be moving into the land of saying no.

If that's the case, you want to be prepared for disappointment, and you want to make sure you hold that person capable. You want to be respectful. You want to hold them as capable of dealing with no. If you do say no, I've offered some suggestions on language that you can use to say no.

Now they reason why this is going to work for you is that it allows you to show up authentically. Authentically with respect to others and authentically with yourself. People will learn that they can count on you that you're going to say yes when you mean yes, and that if you're not into it, you're not going to say yes just to please somebody else or put people at ease.

What will happen is you will respect yourself more, and others in turn will also respect you more. You will increasingly reap the benefits of being more focused on the work that you choose to do, the projects that you

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choose to take on because you're no longer distracted by these other projects that you've taken on because you've been scared to say no.

You will be able to go deeper on the projects that you are truly passionate about. The quality of your work will increase an excellence because you're able to focus on it, and you've chosen your work on purpose. The relationships that you have with your colleagues, with your clients, with yourself, those relationships will improve because you're increasingly in integrity with yourself and with others.

Now, this is all simple in a sense. The steps are not complicated. However, in order to execute, you will require the exercise of certain skills. Number one, you are going to have to learn to put your long term goals ahead of short term gratification.

In the moment, it will feel so much easier for you to say yes when the request comes your way because you're going to want to please somebody you're going to want to say yes so you can help them. So you can be part of the project, part of the team. But if saying yes is not in alignment with your longer term goals, you are going to need to learn to put those long term goals as a priority.

I've talked before about the four quadrants. I believe they're Stephen Covey's quadrants of important and urgent, important and not urgent, not important and not urgent, and not important and urgent. These types of goals, the long term goals, are often in the category of important and not urgent.

So you're going to really need to be mindful of the idea that you've got goals that are important to you. They're not going to be screaming at you loudly the way that a more urgent, perhaps less important item will call to you. So you may need a reminder that your long term objective is X, and that by saying no, you are increasing the chances that you're going to

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reach that long term goal. So that's number one. You're going to need to develop that skill of putting your long term objectives ahead of the short term benefit or gratification of saying yes.

Another skill that you will need, and this is one that comes up often in my coaching practice, is to develop the skill of being uncomfortable. The discomfort here will come from potentially disappointing people or missing out on opportunities. So you'll want to develop increased comfort. You will say no. You may really regret it. You may have those waves of regret, and oh what have I done here? Guilt maybe, FOMO, all of it. The skill that you'll need to develop is to be able to weather through it without caving and saying yes.

Another skill you'll need is confidence, in yourself and in your decisions. Confidence, believe it or not, is a huge part of being able to say no and to feel like you own this decision. That you have your own back. That if somebody is disappointed that you're going to be able to handle it. So confidence.

When you learn the art of saying no where you aren't truly behind it and saying yes when you really truly believe that it is the best thing. It's not motivated by fear. It's motivated by a desire to serve. Then you will no longer find yourself burning bridges because you'll be able to say no in an elegant way. You won't be saying yes then ending up in that spiral of resentment, overwork, burnout, etc.

You will also find that when you say yes, you're doing it because you truly want to. When you aren't aligned, you can say no, which of course will ironically spare you from burning a bridge in the first place.

So I'd invite you to think back to the beginning of this episode to the examples in your practice, in your personal life where you have said yes when you wanted to say no. Think about how you might have approached

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that conversation differently. Maybe you still would have said yes, but you would have been really intentional about saying yes from a place of generosity instead of coming at that conversation from a place of fear. Or maybe you would have said no, and that would have preserved the integrity of your relationship.

So next time somebody comes and asks you to get involved on a project, I would invite you to think about this podcast episode and to apply some of the lessons that we covered today so that you are increasingly saying yes when you mean it and saying no when you don't. If this is something that you would like more help with, I continue to work one on one with clients. I would be absolutely honored to hear from you if this is something that you'd like to talk about, that you would like some support in. You can reach me on LinkedIn, by email. There's a form on my website that you can submit. I'd absolutely invite you to do that.

For all of you who are tuning in, I just wanted to say thank you. I totally appreciate tuning in and connecting with you every week. If you find this podcast to be helpful, please share it with your friends, with your colleagues. I just love the idea of the community that we're building and to be able to share some of these ideas with professional women just like you so that we can all collectively create greater impact in our work, create more joy in our work, and to be decisive and intentional about where we choose to go. So with that, my friends, I wish you a beautiful week. Thank you again, and I'll look forward to catching up with you again soon. Bye for now.

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