



Have you lost your „No“?

Stephen Harrison, August 2017

When did you last say „No“ to an important opportunity? And what were you saying „Yes“ to? I would love to read your answer to that question in a comment.

„Inside this envelope is the most valuable thing that I will ever give you“. That is what I said during a coaching session with a young team member. They opened it and read out loud from a small piece of paper „a ‚No‘... is that it, just ‚No‘?“. !Yes“ I said... „you seem to have lost your ‚No‘, I found it and I am returning it to you“. Simply, they had got a bit carried away with the pressures of corporate life and had forgotten that we also need to be human beings in the office. We talked some more about reasonable boundaries, fair stretch, identifying turning points, taking control of choices, work life balance and more. I know they got the point... they thanked me for re-empowering them. By the way, this might seem a bit paradoxical,

because only a few years earlier whilst coaching another your team member, I said to them „Never take ‘No’ for an answer“. What a bust-up we might have had if these two young people had met each other and both had followed their coaching learnings, ouch! Well... the common message was to encourage them each to stay authentic to their passions and agenda in life, but I felt that they each needed slightly different coaching to get there.

In our LinkedIn profiles, we make transparent all of the times that we have said „Yes“ to career opportunities. What we do not talk so much about are all the times we have said „No“. Here is my „No“ story...

When I graduated, I had two job offers on the table. I said „No“ to one of them at a small Engineering consultancy which was intensively engaged in solving the mysteries of the Piper Alpha disaster. Why? Because I said „Yes“ to the chance to work for a big blue chip in a role that combined commercial and technical aspects... I could not yet decide in which direction to take my career, so that was the better option. At a later turning point in my career in that company, I said „No“ to our UK managing director when he offered me a role working for one of his general managers. I was to implement computers in

delivery trucks so that drivers could print documents at customer sites. After a few network discussions around the company and careful consideration, I humbly told him that I did not see a business case in the idea and that the technology was not yet robust enough to do what was proposed (it was a long, long time ago... Sir Clive Sinclair was still making computers!) and I turned down the role. He later confided that he was also not fully sold on the idea. And, I think that my honesty and rejection of what might have been a great role for me was key to what happened a few months later.... he invited me to work directly for him and our UK HR director as „Business Change Manager“. Remaining authentic, and saying „No“ a few months earlier had been the right thing for me to do.

When I was doing a lot of work out in South East Asia, a few years back, I did not always see eye to eye with my direct line manager back in the UK. Was it me, was it them? Well, it was a relationship... we were both responsible. Anyhow, our business unit head in South East Asia offered me a parachute and they said I would be welcome to take a job in their team. I said „No“. Why? Well, because I knew in my heart that the issues I was having with my direct boss were actually good for my personal development... I was toughening up. Life is simply not a bunch of roses... I was changing and I needed to finish the journey. I was saying „Yes“ to personal growth. Anyhow, our BU head in Asia gave me free reign to work in his geography so, it was actually the best of both worlds. Again, my „No“ had paid off.

About 5 years ago, I was offered a role as MD of a JV business that we have here in Europe. To be honest, I was very tempted. I had been doing my job for a while and my CV was screaming for a change. But my heart was not. I absolutely love the job that I have, the team that I lead, the international brand and culture that we had built and above all, I love the meaning that my role brings to my life (we work a lot on environmental emissions

control, clean energy, drug discovery, health and safety topics etc). I said „No“ to the JV MD job... and I said „Yes“ to my passion, my sense of loyalty and my people.

About 2 years ago, my company offered me an all-expense-paid place on the a short course MBA training programme at the SAID Business School at the University of Oxford. I was on cloud nine! But, what did I do? I said „No“. What a fool?? Well, I knew that I was planning some paternity leave later that year... which would have been right in the middle of the team assignment... So, I told my boss's boss that I must sadly turn down the place. He said that he would have assumed most people would have taken the place, just to get it on their CV and then disappeared half way through and said nothing about it. That's not me. He said he would remember my transparency. What was I saying „Yes“ to? Well, firstly to a promise that I had made to my family and my personal desire to spend time with them. And secondly to my sense of honesty and fairness.

And did that one pay off? Well, kind of. My boss's boss recently put me forward for my dream job... I think that he remembered our conversation of a few years back. This job would be the most natural and appropriate next step in my career. Everything was perfect... the fairy tale coming true. But... the job was in England. Now, I am English, so many might have thought they were doing me a favour with a paid ticket home. But, after serious thought I said „No“. Doh? What? I almost cried as I made the decision... as I really truly realised that I was rooted here in Bavaria and that I was probably cutting off any chance of ever returning to the UK. Well... I was saying „Yes“ to keeping our family roots growing, to stability for my young children and „Yes“ to the wonderful friends that we have made since moving to a beautiful village south of Munich a few years ago. It was a tough decision, but a clear one. Anyhow, I was flattered that he considered me for the position... it fuelled my hope batteries!

Only a few weeks after that, I decided to start looking externally for jobs. And very quickly I had a phone call with a Head Hunter who I had known through work some years back. Great job... wrong location, yes you guessed it, I said „No“. Then soon after, came the interview with another head Hunter who wanted to put me forward for a terrific job here in Munich with a company who I have admired for years... eye watering products and international acclaim for their work. But, again, I said „No“ during that interview... the role was too small, but he said he would call me back if the CEO decided to leave! I was sad, but delighted at the same time. I felt hope, my CV was getting some traction in the local jobs market.

But what is that all about, looking externally? I love my job... isn't that what I said above? Well yes, I do... but now that the 10 year milestone has come and gone and I am looking forward to my birthday later this week, the time has come to say „No“ to another 5 or 10 years at Linde. I am still young and agile enough (I hope!!) to start out in a new direction. So, in saying „No“ to another few years at Linde what am I saying „Yes“ to? A great new job outside Linde? Well, hopefully it is somewhere out there on the horizon, but it is not in the bag just yet.

What I am saying „Yes“ to is hope, change, growth, learning and my curiosity for something new. And I also look forward to feeling passionate about it. Courageous? Foolhardy? Well, have a look at my LinkedIn profile a few months from now and we'll all know.... or perhaps it might take a few years... but hey... I'll enjoy the time out with my family, if that's how things run. So... next time you recognize a crossroads in your life. Here's the advice I humbly offer to you from my heart, and from what I have learned in my life... have hope, have the courage to say „No“. Above all... remember what you are saying „Yes“ to... stay positive!

Thanks for reading... and I would love to read your story.

Steve H