How I Became a *Yes-Man*

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I never wanted to be a *yes-man*. To me, being a *yes-man* implied being a weaselly, self-serving, opportunist. I couldn't imagine anyone aspiring to be a *yes-man* and it certainly was never something I aspired to. However, becoming a *yes-man*—not the weaselly, self-serving, opportunist kind, but a *yes-man* still the same—has revolutionized my work more than any behavioral changes I've made in the past few years.

My passion at work is to ensure the front-line Coast Guard women and men receive the exact training and resources necessary to perform on the job, at a savings of time and money that would embarrass the other armed services, while mollifying the conscientious taxpayer. I can do this best by applying the tenets of Human Performance Technology (HPT). As a certified performance technologist (CPT), I have pledged to follow a code of ethics, and 10 professional standards.

The problem was my application of these standards in the workplace had turned me into a *no-way-is that-going-to-work* man. As an HPT team, we like to describe ourselves as *ill-defined problem solvers*, *system thinkers*, *performance consultants*, *performance investigators,* and the like. We pride ourselves on getting to root causes, understanding the accomplishments the organization is looking for, and designing systems to help individuals and teams accomplish them. These systems usually include training in some form—classroom, online, blended, on-the-job, etc.—and they always include other elements like policy, pro-cedures, tools, feedback loops, clear expectations, and so forth.

In some circles we *HPT-ers* became known more for saying *no* to good ideas than for solving problems. There was never ill intent, meaning we weren't against trying to implement new ideas and procedures. It's just over time we got good at keeping the end in mind. We knew which programs had resources to do new things and which didn't. Our *no* resulted from looking to the end and seeing little chance of success, and making that determination before expending a lot time on the proposed project. It was our way of allocating our precious HPT resources to projects that could provide a payoff to the Coast Guard.

Additionally, we "*HPT-ers*" pride ourselves on repeatable transparent processes. Unfortunately, over time these processes felt more like shackles to our customers who *just want their training*. In the context of saying *no,* important questions like, "What new thing are we trying to accomplish?" or "Tell me more about the problem?" or "Describe what success looks like?" were seen as clever ways to say *no* instead of professional queries to help diagnose and solve a human performance problem.

And then we got a new leader to our team. He didn't like saying *no*. He started by saying *yes,* and made me very nervous. I've sat in meetings, and about bit my tongue off when he said things like, "Of course we could do that" and "We train people who have never flown a paper airplane to fly helicopters – we

can do that." It turns out what he knew and I have come to learn, wasn't that we had committed to stand up a new course, but instead we had kept the door open to solve the *problem* together.

Not being one to resist change, I gave it a shot. One of the first times I implemented my new *yes-man* approach went something like this: I was in a meeting at Headquarters. We were reviewing the stats on part of our workforce, things like retention, promotions, bonuses, etc. The head of that workforce announced to all in the room that we needed to completely revamp our entry-level training for them. So instead of graduating novices, ready to learn on the job, we needed to graduate journeymen. A rough comparison would be to upgrade a high school driver's education course into a course on how to be a commercial semi-truck hazardous material transporter. It could be done. But in order to do it correctly would require new equipment, new facilities, new instructors, and much more time. Since we had been discussing all elements of that workforce, I knew there was likely no money to support the extra time, instructors, and equipment, and I knew our own data didn't show a compelling need to make the change. Suppressing my strong desire to point all these limiting factors out, and effectively say *no*, I said, "Of course we can do that. Let's talk afterwards and see how much it's going to cost and how long it will take."

Two things happened. One – the room was shocked. I was the senior representative of the training function and I was expected to say *no*. Two – no one ever followed up concerning how much it would cost and how long it would take, but still I kept the door open for future interaction.

Since that day, I've been a *Yes-man*. Surprising people with, "Of course we can do that. Let's talk afterwards about how much it will cost and how long it will take." What follows is wonderful. About 70% of the time there is no follow-up. Sometimes they are merely thinking out loud, sometimes our *yes* causes them to more carefully weigh the cost/benefit on their program, and on rare occasions, it appears they are really hoping we will say *no*. With the 30% who do follow up, we start at a place of open communication that makes our consulting work both easier and more effective. Our customers are more open to questions about the accomplishments they're shooting for, the data they have, and performance support options that include more than training. As an added benefit, being a *yes -man* makes me enjoy work more.

Do you find yourself being labeled a *no-man/woman*? I challenge all of us in the human performance support, training, and instruction design business to start with *yes*. Take it from me, your work relationships will be more rewarding when you make this simple, but remarkably effective, change.

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