

WORKING MOTHER

The Working Mom Complex: How To Say No—and Smile While You Do

Each month, Katherine Wintsch, founder and CEO of The Mom Complex, answers your most vexing workplace conundrums.

By Katherine Wintsch

The Complex: “I’m so good at saying no at home, how do I get better at saying no at work?”

The Solution: This is a little nontraditional, but I find it easy and entertaining to say no by imagining the person asking me to do something as a teenage boy trying to make out with me. This keeps me smiling on the inside and outside. My former business partner taught me this trick years ago and it works every time. “Your job,” he explained, “is going to take everything you’ll give it and still want more. And it’s up to you to draw boundaries regarding what you are and are not willing to do.” Brilliant.

Perhaps it’s been a while since you were being charmed by a teenager, so here’s what you can take from that experience and apply to putting your foot down and saying no today.

Set boundaries. Decide what you’re willing to do and what you’re not. For example, you may be willing to do a conference call on the weekend, but only if it’s between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. or after 8 p.m. (Whether you admit that those windows represent naptime and bedtime is up to you.) Don’t wait until the heat of the moment

to say no. It’s harder to say no when emotions are running high, so plan ahead. Say no in advance (before you’re ever asked) in order to avoid caving and saying yes. If you want to spend 6:30 to 8 p.m. with your family every night and not on email, make that known. Block out sacred time on the office calendar as far in advance as possible. Designate parent/teacher conferences, class plays and spring break as “out of office” times as soon as you receive the school calendar.

Say it out loud. Thinking about saying no and actually saying no are two very different things. Articulating (either verbally or in writing) what you’re comfortable doing and what you’re not is helpful for both you and your boss.

Start the way you intend to finish. If you agree to something once, it’s harder to object to it in the future. Stick to your guns from the get-go. Don’t agree to weekend travel “just this once” if you eventually intend to say that you can only do client visits during the week.

Don’t worry about what people will think of you. It isn’t about you, it’s about the thing they want. Focus on how you’ll feel tomorrow morning if you agree to something you don’t really want to do today. When I run workshops for working mothers I often ask, “What boundaries would you draw if you weren’t afraid of being judged?” That should be your starting point. The teenage boy metaphor has worked wonders for me and it makes me smile every time I use it. What strategies do you use to help you say no at work?

Katherine Wintsch is a working mother of two and intimately familiar with the highs and lows of trying to keep it all together. As the CEO of The Mom Complex, she studies mothers around the world and helps businesses develop better products and services to meet their needs. For more information follow @kwintsch or visit The Mom Complex. And see her TEDx talk on motherhood here.