

# Vanessa Patrick Saying No

**Vanessa Patrick:** [00:00:00] So in *Powered Refuser*, I describe as a super skill of saying no in a way that is persuasive and does not invite pushback from others. And the reason it works is threefold. First, it reflects your identity and gives voice to your values, priorities, preferences, and beliefs.

Second, , it conveys conviction and determination. And third, it is persuasive and does not invite pushback from others, which is essentially a successful refusal.

That was Vanessa Patrick on psychologists off. The clock

**Yael Schonbrun:** we are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, [00:01:00] practicing in Mile high Denver, Colorado, author of *Act Daily Journal*, the *Act Daily Card Deck*, and the upcoming book *Act for Burnout*.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book *Work Parent Thrive*.

**Jill Stoddard:** And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of *Be Mighty*, the big book of Act metaphors and the *Upcoming Imposter*. No more.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Jill Stoddard:** Thank you for listening to *Psychologists Off the Clock*.

I'm here with you, Elle, to introduce today's episode with Vanessa Patrick, who I was so excited to talk about because we talk about her book, the *Power of Saying No*, which I think is something we can probably all benefit from, uh, learning how to do better and yell.

I know you and I have talked about how you were looking forward to this episode and learning from this episode. So what were your thoughts after listening?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Well, I'm just so grateful for much of the conversation that you have, but I have more questions still, so I'll definitely have to pick up the book. [00:02:00] Um, but it, it's sort of a longstanding, , the, the challenge of saying no is a longstanding issue for me, and I think for me, you and Debbie, because , I was remembering back to, , a comic that Debbie had sent us both way back when. It was this really funny decision tree that Adam Grant had tweeted about, and it was, it starts out as, okay, this the perfect decision tree for every optimist and people pleaser. So you're posed with this question of decision to take on a new project.

You're supposed to ask the question, do you have enough time to do this? If no, don't do it. So that's one tree and then the second tree. Yes. No, don't do it. So basically say no more, more often, which I think is really good advice, but so hard to put into practice. And it brought me to thinking about a recent experience that I had that I'm gonna share with you because I need help and I'm still struggling with in the aftermath with it, which is I was taking my three little boys to buy a birthday gift for my husband on a [00:03:00] Saturday morning and we weren't in a rush and we.

We, we were going to an area that had kind of tight parking, but I found a spot and joyfully and pretty skillfully I might add parallel parked. So I was feeling all good about myself and I had, you know, pulled the key out of the ignition and a big car rolls up. Beside me and she has, this woman has her window down and she's sort of pointing for me to roll my window down.

So I do. And she says, I saw that spot and I had gone down the road to turn around to get it, and you took it from me. And I was kind of taken aback. And with my kids, and I was just sort of deer in the headlights moment, but I just kind of slowly put my key back in the ignition, turned the car on and got out of the spot.

And then I spent the rest of the morning. And I have to admit, it still irks me thinking about. Was that the right choice? And it's so funny because I shared this story with my husband. He's, he was kind of like, absolutely, that was the wrong choice. You just roll that window back up [00:04:00] and you say, sorry. You know, sometimes, you know, fortune favors me and sometimes fortune favors you.

, But for me it felt more complicated because I go to this place of wondering, you know, was she having a hard morning and did she have little kids in the car? You know, I was having a fine morning and we found parking just a few minutes later. So was I acting on a value of kindness or was I doing what?

I worry I do too much, which is saying yes when I should say no. . So, so here's my question cuz I think sometimes a no. Response is more clear like when you don't have time, when the ask is too big, but what do you do?

How do you make the choice about whether to say no when you can accommodate or when it's just really unclear about what the gain is gonna be for the other person. If you do them, the service or the gain is gonna be for you if you say no.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. Yeah, so So what you're alluding to is something Vanessa and I talk about in terms of how to go about [00:05:00] making the decision whether to say yes or no. And she has this two by two kind of high and low cost, high and low benefit, and we talk about that. In detail, but we talk about it where those elements are very clear.

And you're saying sometimes maybe those elements aren't clear. And if I had to guess, and I will ask her this question, but if I had to guess, I think she would say that's when we go back to values. And so she puts a lot of, um, she emphasizes the importance of being clear about your values when it comes to making decisions about saying yes or no.

And so I think she would guide you to think about. In this particular moment, because it may be different when you park the car today versus when you park the car next week in this particular moment, is the value that you want to put forth, . I wanna be someone who's kind, generous.

Thoughtful, you know, whatever that may, may be. Um, because I have the time and, and it's not a huge cost to me. Or is the value [00:06:00] that you wanna focus on something more along the lines of assertiveness or self-respect or, or self-preservation or, I don't know, reasonableness because it. It seems to me it was totally unreasonable for that woman to do that in the first place and that, you know, what you choose today.

Like I said, like could be different next time depending on, , what's going on, you know?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, I like that. It helps me to attach it. I think I was just being kind. I think I can let it go and that next time I could choose to do something different. But it does bring me to another point that is something that I'm working on which is that it's okay for people to ask you, in other words, It would be unreasonable for us to expect people to stop asking.

And I think as somebody who struggles a lot with saying no, I sometimes wish people just wouldn't ask me because it feels like they're putting this burden, but they're allowed to ask and I'm allowed to say no. And it's okay for that process to be uncomfortable. That's just [00:07:00] part of the way it works.

And getting more comfortable with the discomfort is, is part of the work.

**Jill Stoddard:** A hundred percent. And the other thing I think about too is. This assumption that, so let's say, okay, my value is to be kind, but then there's an assumption that saying no is unkind. And I don't think that's quite right either. And that that's part of where the obstacle comes from is, you know, if I see myself as someone who wants to be thoughtful or kind or generous, that I must say yes all the time.

, and I think that can become a little bit of a trap as well.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. So what are your thoughts on what a kind no would have looked like in the parking situation?

**Jill Stoddard:** Well, it's funny when you asked that, I got a little stuck because one of the things I talk about with Vanessa is like not using excuses, you know, having what she calls a personal policy. But the first thing that popped into my head in that moment is I'm, I didn't see you, I guess isn't. It's not an excuse, but [00:08:00] it's, I don't know.

It's like a, it's a reason, but it's a truth. It's kind of a fact. You genuinely didn't see. The woman. , but, , I feel like I would, I would say, oh, I'm sorry I didn't see you and roll up my window and get out of the car. And that would be sort of the, the no. How Vanessa would say to do it as specifically as an empowered, no, I feel like we might need to ask her that question.

It's a really good point. Yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Emails dilemmas. You know, 1 0 1 will let you know what Vanessa says.

**Jill Stoddard:** Definitely. Well, we hope you enjoy this episode with Vanessa Patrick.

Hey everybody, it's Jill here and I'm really excited about my guest today. I have Dr. Vanessa Patrick here, who's going to talk to us about her book, the Power of Saying No. Vanessa Patrick is the associate dean for research, the Bauer Professor of Marketing and Lead faculty of the Executive Women and Leadership Program at the Bauer School of Business at the University of Houston.[00:09:00] She has a PhD in business from the University of Southern California and an M MBA in marketing and a BS degree in microbiology and biochemistry from Bombay University in India. Vanessa Patrick is a regular speaker at both academic and practitioner conferences, and she lives in Houston, Texas.

Vanessa, welcome to Psychologists Off the Clock.

**Vanessa Patrick:** Thanks, Jill. I'm thrilled to be here and excited to share insights from my book.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yes, I, well, I've been really excited to talk to you too, because I think this topic is so critically important and you know, I don't know many people who would say, they find it easy to say no. So you're gonna help us understand how to do this more effectively. But I thought before we got into that, , you start the book with a pretty compelling story about how you missed your own 24th birthday celebration because you found it difficult to say no to a work request. So I thought maybe we could start, , with you sharing a little bit [00:10:00] about what led you to research and write about this topic and why it's so important to you.

**Vanessa Patrick:** Absolutely. I find it so fascinating that such a tiny two letter word n o is so difficult for people to say. As I narrate in the book this 24th birthday incident where I missed, , my own birthday party because I was stuck at work doing something that would be called for all practical purposes, a very trivial, even bullshit job, , made me realize the number of times that we all get trapped into doing things that we don't wanna do, just because we don't feel empowered to say no more effectively.

And so, even though we know we need to say no, sometimes we just don't know how. And that is why I wrote this book, and that is what my researcher is about. How do you say no more effectively to the things that you don't wanna do?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, and so we're gonna jump into [00:11:00] that piece in a little bit. But before we do that, maybe you could talk a little bit about why it is so hard for us to say no.

**Vanessa Patrick:** It is very hard for people to say no. People struggle a great deal with it, and they very often say yes when they mean to say no or they want to say no. In fact, I was talking to someone recently who said that I often feel that I spend half my time doing stuff I don't wanna do, and the other half resenting my choices.

And unfortunately, that is how we a lot of us feel, because we don't know how to say no. And the reason why we don't know how to say no is because no is what I describe in the book as a socially dis preferred response. And what do I mean by that? What I mean is that when people ask us to do something, invite us to go somewhere, ask us to participate in something.

Essentially what they [00:12:00] want us to do is say yes, and saying no is going against what is socially acceptable in that situation. And being social creatures, it is extremely hard for us to go against what is expected of us in a social situation.

**Jill Stoddard:** And you talk a little bit about how, kind of taking that, a step further that. , that really, there's sort of a fear here that if I say no, it may harm the relationship with the person who's asking me and, and part of wanting to respond in a socially preferred way is that we want people to see us in a positive light.

**Vanessa Patrick:** Yes. So the two main drivers of saying yes when we wanna say no is a concern for relationships. And we wanna be seen, have friends, and have a social circle that we can belong to. And our concern for reputation, which is people we want, when we leave the room, [00:13:00] we want people to say good things about us. And so in both those situations, those two drivers make us more likely to say yes when we wanna say no.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah, I, you talk about something called the acquaintance trap that I thought was really interesting. , do you wanna talk a little bit about that, what that is?

**Vanessa Patrick:** Yes. So the acquaint in my research, I find that the acquaintance trap is this trap we often find ourselves in. If you think about the range of relationships we have, they range from very close relationships with our family and close friends. And then of course, just passing relationships,

which are transactional, which say the groceries clerk, store clerk, or the bank teller.

, so those are very distant, socially distant relationships. So in those two cases, very close relationships where we are very secure with the other people and relationships , which are [00:14:00] transactional. And we are never gonna see those people again. For all practical purposes, , in those relationships, it is easier for us to say no. The acquaintance trap is about , our ability to say no to the whole bunch of people with whom we have weak ties or tenuous relationships. And that is the majority of people, the people we work with, the people we see on , buses and trains regularly.

People we, we would like to maybe have closer relationships with. And so our reputation and our relationships with them matters a great deal.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, it makes so much sense because you know, if somebody's asking me to sign a petition at the grocery store who I don't know, I don't care what they think about me, right? I'm not concerned about them thinking about me in a positive light. I'm also not concerned about protecting my relationship with them because I don't have one.

So that's an easy no. And then if you know, my dad or my brother, or my best friend [00:15:00] asks for a favor, , I know that our relationship can withstand me saying, no, that security means you worry a little bit less about that. About the impact that it will have or about the way they'll see you.

**Vanessa Patrick:** right. Uh, I can tell you an interesting story about the acquaintance trap. So I have, uh, I have a 12 year old, and when she was around eight, we had gone for a birthday party, uh, uh, you know, one of those Saturday morning birthday parties where, you know, the kids go through play video games and stuff, and then they're given lunch and then you take them home.

And so she ha she did that all morning and then she ordered her favorite meal, which was chicken nuggets and fries, and she ate it. And then we were driving back home and she says, mom, I'm hungry. And I turned around and I said, you just had lunch. And uh, she said, well, , the girl sitting next to me asked me if I could have, , my chicken nuggets.

And so [00:16:00] I gave my chicken nuggets and fries to her and I look back and I said, what? Why did you do that? She said, mom, it's the acquaintance trap.

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh my gosh. I love that she knew the name of it. She actually listens to you when you talk about your work. That's impressive. Oh, that is too cute. I love that. That's my somewhat related to that. We had a parent-teacher conference with my son when he was in second grade and the teacher was talking about how he has a really good vocabulary and she said, and I knew exactly what you did for a living without needing to ask. And he was actually with us at the, at this conference and he said, why?

Because I say the word habituation and we all burst out laughing. And she said, yes, pretty much. Which, because you know, I do exposure therapy and we talk about how people habituate when they face their fear. And you know, he's eight years [00:17:00] old talking about habituation. I'm like, oh my God, you actually listen to me sometimes.

That's amazing. Oh, that's too cute. Right. Exactly. Yeah. I love, that's so cute. Well, talk to me a little bit about how, kind of along the same line, the acquaintance trap and these, the, the way that we're trying to protect our reputation, our relationship, talk to us a little bit about saying yes can actually backfire like we do it, thinking it will save the relationships and our reputation, but that isn't always the case.

**Vanessa Patrick:** Right. So in the, in the book, I talk about many different traps that you can fall into when you say yes, when you wanna say no, and one of them is called the house of card strap. And that is our belief that if we say yes in the moment, we are securing our relationship and our reputation with the other person.

Because in the moment it feels like, sure, I can do it, and I'm [00:18:00] making this other PE person feel happy. The reality is, is that every request that comes our way that we say yes to is another card in an increasingly tall and fra. House of cards and the more stuff that we keep adding to that house of cards, the more likely that that house of cards will collapse.

And so when adding a card, we need to think about whether we are able to deliver on what we promised. And our reputation relies not on us saying yes to the request, but in fact delivering on what we promised we would do. And so that house of card strap is a useful metaphor to think about your calendar and think about am I adding stuff that I can actually deliver or am I doing it just to please the person in the moment?



**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm. And, and do I run the risk? I think what you're saying is like, do I run the risk of being a jack of all [00:19:00] trades, master of none, or in my case, a Jill of all trades, master of none.

**Vanessa Patrick:** That's,

**Jill Stoddard:** And I think, you know, the, the other piece that I think about with this is the assumption that you'll be seen in a negative light if you say no. And, and you know, when I think about the people I know who are pretty good at having boundaries and setting limits and saying, no, I don't actually think poorly of them.

I'm kind of in awe of them. You know, I sort of think like that's how I want to be. I really respect that they have the self-respect and the courage to be able to say, say no when it, when, when they should be saying no.

**Vanessa Patrick:** Yes. A lot of famous people have advocated the need to say no to the things that are not aligned with your purpose. You know, Oprah famously said that no is a complete sentence, and she strongly advocates, , that people say no to the things that are not aligned with what their goals [00:20:00] are. And that's very much in line with, , you know, the, the message in the book, which is, number one, identify based on your values, what are the things you wanna say yes to, and what are the things you wanna say no to?

And, and then learn how to communicate that no, based on who you are, your authentic self. And that is what, , I call empowered refusal.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah. And, and I, the other thing that comes to mind in this, this piece of what we're talking about here, is sometimes a person will feel disappointed by a no. But that's not a reason to not say no. Right? Like I, I just, I needed some help with my kids this weekend and asked some of their 'em up there, friends', parents, and, you know, these kids are incredibly busy these days with sports and birthday parties and everything else they had going on. And so, you know, all of them with my daughter's friends, they all had to say no.

And I could tell from their text [00:21:00] messages, they felt so bad. They were like so apologetic and I was disappointed that I was unable to. Logistically get things squared away, but I wasn't upset at them. I completely understood. And I can handle being disappointed, right? Like they don't need to protect me from being disappointed.

They don't have to sacrifice, , their own Saturday or schedule or whatever it is to take care of my disappointment, right? Like people can be disappointed. We don't need to prevent that from happening,

**Vanessa Patrick:** Right, and, and I think it's really important for us to remember that when we say no, especially when it's based on a real, , constraint or something that matters to you and you just simply, , Unable to accommodate the request that no is about you. It is not a rejection of the other person. And it becomes easier to say no once we [00:22:00] realize that and we use ourselves as the platform.

And, and that is why, , I've developed these competencies associated with empowered refusal that all stem from who we are and, , and communicating a no based on who we are and not a rejection of the other person.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. One of the other ways you talk about where it's especially difficult to say no is if we're put on the spot, you know, kind of in the moment, like text has kind of taken care of that a little bit, but you know, if we're put on the spot, but especially if we're put on the s spot when we're in a group and you call that the spotlight effect.

, can you talk a little bit about that and like how we maybe can better manage the spotlight effect?

**Vanessa Patrick:** Absolutely. So it's interesting that when we are asked to do something that we don't wanna do, it's like this imaginary spotlight that shines on you. So imagine [00:23:00] you're at a Monday morning meeting and, , someone turns to you and says, oh, Jill, you organized x y Z's retirement party last year. There's a retirement party coming up.

Will you just. Organize it this year as well, and everybody's eyes are on you, right? And it's really hard at that moment to say no, because the spotlight is shining on you and you are expected to say, sure, I'll do it. And that is what most people do. if it, if planning the retirement party is something you don't wanna do, you need to do.

A few things. One is it's always good to have intelligence and be prepared. So if someone could have given you the heads up, or you had a heads up that there was going to be a retirement party and you were not going to be the one planning it, you could plan a response. So being prepared is great. [00:24:00] Of course, it also helps to have allies in the room who can kind of diffuse the spotlight and say, Jill did it last year.

Let someone else do it this year. That's super effective. And sometimes you just gotta stand your ground and just, you know, say, well, I can't commit to it right now, but let me think about it and get back to you. So do not commit in the moment. So there are all these different strategies that you can employ to avoid that spotlight and that uncomfortable feeling of everybody's eyes on you.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. I love that last one because it's, you don't have to say yes or no in the moment. You can say, let me think about it and get back to you, and then you give yourself that time to come up with an empowered no,

**Vanessa Patrick:** yes. , in fact, I all, in the book, I talk about the fact , that I have a visual reminder of that in my office. So in my line of sight, I have a book. It's a little book, it's a little red book, [00:25:00] which says, if it's not a hell yes, it's a hell no. And in my line of sight, every time I, as someone to ask me something, I, that's a reminder , to not commit in the moment, to always take the time because empowered refusal, as we are going to discuss, is something that requires some reflection.

And until we kinda master that art of being able to spot what we wanna say yes to in the moment, we should take the time to reflect and get better at saying yes to the things we wanna do. Those resounding yeses, , and then say no to the things that we don't wanna do, and do not kind of make our lives better and happier.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, that's great.

Okay. So let's talk about the real meat of your work, which is what you call Empowered Refusal. And I love in the book , you say Empowered Refusal begins with you. So what do you mean by that? And tell us a little bit about [00:26:00] what Empowered Refusal entails.

**Vanessa Patrick:** So in Powered Refuser, I describe as a super skill of saying no in a way that is persuasive and does not invite pushback from others. And the reason it works is threefold. First, it reflects your identity and gives voice to your values, priorities, preferences, and beliefs. In other words, you'll know or your empowered refusal is about you and not the other person.

Second, because it stems from your identity, it conveys conviction and determination. You come across as empower and confident in your stance. And third, it is persuasive and does not invite pushback from others, which is essentially a successful refusal. If someone doesn't argue back, you have succeeded in communicating.

You are know effectively.

**Jill Stoddard:** [00:27:00] So what, let's, maybe we could walk through a couple examples of this. Would that work? So let, so what would be, maybe we can take like a specific situation or you know, example where you could tell us like, this is an example of what not to do and this is what that would look like if it was an empowered refusal.

**Vanessa Patrick:** So say that someone asks you to take on a, a new project. You are not very interested in that new project. , and you also have a ton of things to do. What I recommend is that you communicate your. No, using standing upwards, which is empowered language. And the specific language would be words like, I don't, I never, I always, so for instance, you might respond saying, I don't take on another project till I finished the [00:28:00] ones I have on my plate.

Right. And a disempowered response in contrast would be something where you came up with an excuse, oh, you know, I really can't do it right now because I've gotta take my dog to the vet. , or, uh, I, I, I can't do it right now because I have a vacation planned. The problem with using disempowered language and leaning on excuses is that they are in a sense, Temporary.

As soon as you finished your tasks and you've gone on your vacation and you've, , done what you said you were going to do, which is why you can't do the thing that they're asking, you're free again to do the thing that was asked of you. So what I show in my research is that using empowered language that is based on your own priorities, preferences, beliefs, and conviction, communicates a no response more effectively.[00:29:00]

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm. I love that. That makes, that makes so much sense. And the way that it, , it states something clearly and leaves much less room for pushback. You have an acronym for the Art of Powered Refusal and the ART is the acronym.

Do you wanna talk a little bit about what those letters stand for and kind of walk us through them?

**Vanessa Patrick:** So in the book, I teach how to develop the three competencies you need to become better at Empowered Refusal, and the acronym is art. A R T A stands for awareness, so the awareness of yourself, self-knowledge, understanding your purpose, understanding what you care about, what your values are. R stands for rules not Decisions, which is making rules about how

you wanna live your life, what you care about, and giving [00:30:00] voice to those values.

And finally, T, which is totality of self, that even though refusal is about speaking and verbalizing a no response, there is an immense role for body language. And so I talk about empowered refusal as a whole body response to the other person.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. And so can I, I, before I read your book, I had my own way of, you know, this is something I've been working on personally for years. Like, I, I, I call myself a recovered people pleaser. I mean, I literally went to therapy in graduate school specifically to stop being such a people pleaser. And part of that was because it was exactly what you were saying around, , well becoming a Jill of all trades in Master of Ben, you know, saying yes to so many things.

I was really burning out. I had like debilitating migraines. , and it just felt really hard to say no. And so it's taken me a long time, but I kind [00:31:00] of came up with my own formula. So then when I was reading your book, I thought, oh, I think my formula maybe sort of fits in here. So can I run it by you and you can critique it for me, like whether I need to tweak it or whether it fits in this framework of art and empowered refusal.

**Vanessa Patrick:** I'd love to.

**Jill Stoddard:** Okay. So, um, I have four categories that a request has to fit. Not all four, but at least like. Two or preferably three. And so the first is that it, , it if it's something where I'm learning something, so it's like promoting my own kind of professional or personal development in some way. , the other is that it's not only benefiting the asker, but it's also benefiting me.

So, for example, that kind of came out of realizing specifically in grad school, I was saying yes to a lot of things that I wasn't getting a whole lot out of, but my hours and hours of menial labor was very helpful to someone else. [00:32:00] The third is, it's a networking opportunity. So I'll actually, you know, I love people, so not just networking, like, oh, they'll be able to do something for me, but it'll promote connection with other human beings.

I should put it that way, more than networking. And then the last is, does it light me up? Like, do I feel passionate and excited about, about doing this? So I feel like the, that, that last one is maybe around values. , so I don't know. What do you think? Does that feel like it

fits?

**Vanessa Patrick:** I think those are great and I think that they reflect what you uniquely care about. Social connection, learning, , engagement with others, but you also are protecting yourself and don't wanna feel drained by the experience, and you want it to be something that lights you up. So I think it definitely reflects who Jill is, which is great.

And I suppose that is what the , empowered refusal is about. It stems from that self-awareness. So you know what lights you up, you [00:33:00] know, what , rocks your boat, what keeps you excited, and that self-awareness, and then you're given voice to it by setting this criteria. So these criteria are essentially your personal policy.

Your personal policy is I say yes if, and you've got the four boxes to check and say, you know, at least three need to go or need, need to be ticked. And sometimes, you know, one is, and sometimes some people wait them, so sometimes one is overwhelming if it doesn't light you up, let's say it's a no. Right? , so one might be a little bit more important than others since you can kind of, can do a waiting.

But just the knowledge a and and the fact that you have a process in place or a system in place is super helpful.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, it's been really helpful for me. It's, it's worked really well for me. And you actually have, um, like a two by two diagram, right? That's in the [00:34:00] book to help people, , make a decision about whether they should say yes or no. Do you wanna talk a little bit about that? Cuz I found that really helpful too.

**Vanessa Patrick:** Right. Uh, so, so the two by two is a, is a framework that helps people decipher the ask. So when an ask comes your way, categorizing the ask is very helpful in determining kind of the general direction of whether that ask should be a yes or a no. So, the two axis on the two by two are the benefit to others.

Is this going to be very beneficial to the person who's gonna A, who's asking so high versus low on the benefit to others and high versus low to the cost to yourself. So, low cost to you. And a high benefit to others is what I call, , past the salt ask, right? [00:35:00] So past the salt ask is something that is easy for you to do.

Super easy takes five minutes, but the effect or the impact it can have on someone else is tremendous. So let's say like as a professor, I get asked to write recommendation letters a lot. And of course I have a process of writing recommendation letters. I've done it for years and it's relatively easy for me to write a recommendation letter, but I know it can be a game changer for my students.

They get to get into law school or , the mba. And so for them, that's super important. So for me, this is a. Pass the salt ask because when someone asks you to pass the salt and the salt shaker is sitting right in front of you, it's super easy for you to pass the salt and it might make a huge difference to the quality of their meal experience.

And so those kind of asks tend to be yeses, right? [00:36:00] Because high benefit to the other person, very low cost to you. The ask that you have to probably be the most careful of is what I call the bake Your famous lasagna asks, because those are extremely high cost to you. So if anyone's ever baked a lasagna, you know that it's a pretty tedious process.

And maybe you are really, really good at baking lasagna, but you don't wanna do it every day. And for everyone it has to be a special occasion. But if someone says, Hey, you know, we are having a potluck, just bring, may Bake your favorite lasagna, should you? I would argue that maybe you need to ju decide that that might be a no.

You might be better off stopping at the grocery store and buying a party tray rather than slaving over the stove and baking yourself, baking a lasagna for a party that you are not hosting. And so thinking about, is this a huge cost to me? [00:37:00] And then assessing will there, is this gonna make a dent in the other person's life?

Is it that important that I should invest so much effort? And kind of really thinking through that. Um, so, so I would say for Bake Your famous Lasagna, ask, it should be a resounding no.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm. And so then those other two categories are probably the ones that are a little more challenging. And so what came to mind for me actually was when you were talking about the recommendation letter, what I get asked a lot to do, I used to write recommendation letters when I was a professor. And now I, I don't do that anymore, but I get asked to write a lot of book blurbs.

And so, that requires you to read an entire book. Certainly some people write blurbs without reading the book. But for me, in my own values, I really feel like if I'm gonna agree to an endorsement, I want to be. Actually reading the book and I'm, I love to read, but I'm a very slow reader.

So for me [00:38:00] to read an entire book is a, is a large time cost to write the blurb. That part isn't too time consuming. That's pretty easy. And then if I think about the benefit to the other person, I guess that sort of depends on how I think about my, well, one of the things you talk about is how, is the question of are you the only person who can do this?

So like with the write le writing a letter of recommendation, if you're this person's direct supervisor, you know, but like it really has to be from you. They don't have a lot of other people that they can. Ask, so maybe with the book blurb, there are other people that I'm not sure how to even work out that yes or no.

Does that make sense? You can tell from the way I'm bumbling over it. I'm not sure how to make sense of that, because I could say, oh, you can get a bunch of other people to write that, but maybe not if they're a first time author or if they're not super connected.

**Vanessa Patrick:** I, I think the best way to deal with that is having a conversation. And that is what I suggest [00:39:00] with Hero's Journey asks, as well as lasagna Bake Your famous lasagna Ask, because in many ways you have to understand what the benefit to the other person is. Let's say this person has written a book that is based entirely on your own work and you, your ca commenting it is going to be the deciding factor on whether that book gets, popular or not.

Makes it or not. It is, the onus is on the asker to state that, to kind of say, Hey, you know, it's gonna be super important because of all these reasons. And if they don't, I think it's perfectly fine to go back and say, why did you ask me?

**Jill Stoddard:** mm.

**Vanessa Patrick:** Is it a rationale for why you asked me? And if you can say, well, you know, one, I'm a, I'm a, I'm a, the person says, I'm a huge fan of your work.

Your work inspired me to write this book. You have a huge [00:40:00] following and that's the audience and trying to reach, so your blurb can be a game changer



for my book. Then you know that this is not a baker famous lasagna as this is actually a hero's journey ask, and then a hero's journey ask is high cost to you, but huge benefit to the other person.

And we do need to take on those heroes journey, ask when they are right, understanding that they are time consuming and effortful. But you do it because it's gonna benefit the other person in the long run.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. And I think that goes back to what you were saying about values. I mean, what, when I think about that for myself, it really does, you know, it, it's what I get in touch with really is kind of less about my time or the cost and more about like, why does this feel important in my heart? You know, why is this something that matters to me or that I care about?

And [00:41:00] so far I've never said no to a blurb for that reason. So, you know, even when I'm feeling really busy or taxed as a writer myself, you know, I know how hard it is for me to ask other people for blurbs.

And how appreciative I am when they're willing to do something that's so time consuming for my benefit. And so for me it's become also kind of a pay it forward sort of

**Vanessa Patrick:** I was just about to say that I think that when you experience the goodness of others and you see people going on heroes journeys on your behalf, you are motivated to pass it on to do those things for others.

**Jill Stoddard:** So what are we missing? We have past the Salt, which is the low cost, high benefit. We have Hero's journey, which is high cost, high benefit. We have homemade lasagna, which is high cost, low benefit. What's the fourth category? What did you nickname it?

**Vanessa Patrick:** email, tweet, post, [00:42:00] these are low benefit to others, low cost to you, but they are just useless. You know, drop in the bucket ass. That can be time consuming and they just don't make it. Don't make a difference at all in the world. And when you get asked something which you think is just not worth doing at all for anyone, it's worth pointing out to to people and say, D, is this really needed?

Like, what is the rationale for even asking someone to do something like that? And very often people are asking those things because they've always done it or they've not really thought about, is this really required? And so I

**Jill Stoddard:** would be an example of that?

**Vanessa Patrick:** So, so, so the title of this ask actually came from a conversation I had with a, a young lady on a flight and she was telling me that she lives in a small [00:43:00] town in Texas where small, meaning there's just one traffic light in the entire town.

And she works at a, uh, company where, you know, it's a service company. They do, uh, laundry and gift services and stuff, and her boss told her that she needs read somewhere that she needs to tweet four times a day. And that is a huge source of stress for her because there isn't that much happening, that you have something to tweet about four times a day. And so sh I, I told her that, why are you doing that? So she said, my boss said that that is something that's really important for me to do because that's how tweets get viral. And I said, well, you know, if you, it's better not to tweet if you have nothing unique and important to say. And I can say that as a marketing professor, so please tell your boss that.

But it also struck me that this is the kind of tasks that a [00:44:00] lot of people get trapped into. You spend your day doing tasks because you're told to do them that have no real meaning and don't create value. There's a great book called Bullshit Jobs, and honestly, the tweet email post asks are very often can be categorized as just bullshit jobs.

They shouldn't be done by you. They shouldn't be done by anyone.

**Jill Stoddard:** Or in your case, being asked to sit and wait for a fax to come in, which was the, the reason that you had missed your 24th birthday, that is a bullshit job right there, right? Yeah. Didn't need to be received by a human.

**Vanessa Patrick:** exactly.

**Jill Stoddard:** So if we are skillfully using an empowered no, then theoretically there, there sh Well, it should minimize the amount of pushback we get, but you know, we've all [00:45:00] encountered that person. That just doesn't take no an answer. So do you have any tips for how to manage pushback when we get it?

**Vanessa Patrick:** I call the people who don't take no for an answer. Walnut trees, and the reason I use the word walnut tree is because the black walnut tree is this tree that flourishes and it's got this really luxurious canopy and it kind of dominates the landscape. But what it also does is it exudes into the soil a toxin called juglong.

And what that toxin does is that it stunts the growth of everything else. So all of us might think about people in our lives who are like those walnut trees, unfortunately, who kind of, it's all about them and what they want. And you saying no is something they don't hear. It's as long as they want it [00:46:00] done.

They are the ones in charge and it doesn't matter what your values are and what you care about. And so there are several strategies that walnut trees employ to get you to say yes when you might wanna say no. One is that they will demand an immediate response from you. The second is that they tend to ha create like a home court advantage where they have power in the situation.

So they might call you to their office or invite you to their home or take you to lunch where they are footing the bill, creating an artificial or real power dynamic, which puts you in a point where you know that spotlight effect is shining really bright on you. They also are more likely to ask you to do stuff face to face, you know?

So there's some research which says that. We are [00:47:00] 34 times more likely to say yes to a face-to-face request. And so walnut trees tend to use these kind of very dominant, um, persuasion techniques to get you to say yes, even if you wanna say no. So I document the walnut affair, Walnut tree effect, but I also come up with strategies to help avoid you coming under the shade of that walnut tree.

And so the two main strategies are, , essentially, , strategies that reinforce your position. So you've got reinforcer strategies and distancing strategies. So if you wanna, , deal with a walnut tree, the reinforcer strategies are strategies like reiterating your no repeating it. You know, it's like, uh, rinse three times.

Just, you just have to keep saying no and not [00:48:00] pull away. You have to spell out your no in three different ways if needed. You just have to stand your ground and, confront the walnut tree with your own empowered refusal if needed again and again. That's pretty hard sometimes. And so there are other strategies which are kind of more passive strategies or maybe more effective, , which is.

Creating a distance. So sometimes you just wanna distance yourself. You can buy time, which is, which goes back to our never say yes in the moment. Uh, principle, you can delegate your, no, you can have someone else say no to you, no for you. So if you are, let's say, uh, you know, have a, have an assistant, your assistant can be the one who says no instead of using no.

So that it's kind of an indirect way. The other indirect way, which is really effective and we all have access to is technology, to [00:49:00] use technology as a buffer. So instead of having that face-to-face meeting, have a phone meeting or communicate via email, it's much easier to manage, you know, the toxin of the walnut tree, , when it is not hitting you directly.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm. We, um, this just occurred to me one strategy too would be after you've said no once. So let's say this is over email, not in person. If you've already said no once and they push back, you don't have to respond. So that's happened with us, with our podcast a number of times , where someone will reach out to us To pitch themselves, and we'll always offer a very kind response that it's, , not right for our podcast. And , we'll sometimes get that pushback. And in that case, , we've already said what we came to say, so we just don't respond to that email and that, , I know we all worry a little bit like, oh, I hope I'm not being rude.

I wanna be kind, , but, you know, sort of like that, that acquaintance trap, these are people we really don't know at all. And, , so it, [00:50:00] it becomes a little bit easier to say like, there's just way too many emails to keep up with all of them. So at that point we just don't respond a second time.

**Vanessa Patrick:** absolutely.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

Is there a difference between, Excuses and reasons. So what I'm thinking about is, I have two examples in my mind where I said what I think was an empowered no at the time. And the pushback I got was, oh, I, you must have misunderstood my request. Like, they couldn't believe that I would say no. And it was one of those things that was very low benefit to me and others, someone else could have done this and pretty high cost.

, oh, I just, you just must not understand my request. And, you know, so I responded saying, no, I understand. But then I felt sort of compelled to explain further than I had the first time. I said no. And it was essentially something to the effect of, if I get, I get so many of these requests that if I said yes to all of them, it would like literally be the only thing [00:51:00] that I do.

And so I limit the amount of unpaid work I do, you know, some, something to that effect. I donate a certain number of pro bono hours and I've already, um, used those up for this year.

**Vanessa Patrick:** Right. So, if you, when most people are asked to do something, their default response is to kinda grab the first excuse that comes to mind. And excuses by definition are short term. So what I've shown in some research is that, if you respond to a request giving an excuse, which is temporary, versus invoke a personal policy, which is your longstanding stance, in the short run, both the, excuse and the personal policy work equally well.

But in the long run, let's say five years down the line, The excuse is no longer valid, but the personal's policy still holds

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm. Right. Right. That okay? Yes, [00:52:00] that, that makes complete sense. Yeah.

**Vanessa Patrick:** to redo it in the context of, uh, loaning money. Now, loaning money and being asked for money is one of the most uncomfortable situations because your default is, I don't wanna get into the money situation with that other person, but let's say you, you don't wanna loan the money, but you give an excuse, say that, oh, you know, I have this debt that I need to pay off, and so I'm sorry I can't give you the \$2,000 you are asking me for.

So that's an excuse versus a personal policy, which is based on your values and reflects, your priorities, which is I do not lend money .

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**Vanessa Patrick:** So just saying that, you know, you don't engage in lend loan money to friends and that's how your stance is. That's what your stance is. Five years down the line, [00:53:00] the loan is probably paid off. So that person would come back to you and say, Hey, you know, I need \$5,000 and you don't have that, loan to debt that you probably paid off already. Compare that to a situation where you've invoked a personal policy. I don't loan money to friends.

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm,

**Vanessa Patrick:** That matters now and is relevant now and five years from now and 10 years from now. And for all perpetually.

**Jill Stoddard:** you just nip it in the bud in perpetuity. That's so great. That's really useful. Yeah. And it's, it's, it's like a, it's a fairly subtle tweak that has such a dramatic impact,

**Vanessa Patrick:** and so, and that's why we need to buy time because our default response when we are in the spotlight is to reach for the closest excuse. But if we do buy time and we take the time to articulate [00:54:00] a response that that's based on a personal policy, we are more likely to come across as, uh, determined and have a much more long standing stance on a particular matter.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right, right. What do you think about, so I've read this in, in other books and I, I can't give credit properly cuz I, I'm not remembering right now, but I think it's in a bunch of different places and I'm sure you've run into it in, in marketing, , is kind of the sandwich, yes or no? Or the Yes no. Yes. So I say, you know, uh, Oh yes.

I think it's wonderful that you have, that you're applying to graduate school and you need a letter of recommendation. No, I'm unable to write this for you, but yes, I can suggest this other person who might be able to do it for you or, yes, I would love to come to your party. No, I'm not gonna make my famous lasagna.

Yes, I'll run to the store and grab something pre-made. What do you, what have you, do you know what I'm talking about? What do you think

**Vanessa Patrick:** [00:55:00] yes. The sandwich response, I mean, the response works, uh, and it, and it helps buffer. The harshness of a no response, but as long as the no response is one that is an empowered no, you know, the meat of the sandwich is like, it's super clear that you are saying no, and it is not a wishy-washy No. And it is not a reluctant, yes, it is a clear no.

Then by all means, you know, buffer it with the bread of the sandwich.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. Yeah. Don't, don't let the, don't let the meat be an excuse that then invites them to come back and give pushback. So I have one last question, and that has to do with, , you know, you've done some research about how women have a harder time saying no than men. , and. , there is evidence out there that part of that is because women actually suffer a likability [00:56:00] penalty.

You know, , there are fewer consequences when people in power say no than there are when people who are not in para say, no. So I'm thinking about women, I'm thinking of people of color, you know, anyone who's from a marginalized group, but I'm also thinking of like, graduate students or, you know, an administrative assistant versus a C E O.

So is there, is there a different way or how do we need to think about yeses and nos when there really may be a power differential or a negative consequence for certain people saying no versus other people saying no.

**Vanessa Patrick:** So I think that there are two ways to think about this. The first thing is I think having clarity on what is your job. , if it is part of your job and you have agreed to do a certain set of tasks, then you really don't have leeway to say no to those tasks after you've agreed to them. So in the case of a graduate student or you know, the, , [00:57:00] administrative assistant, sometimes doing not such fun task might be actually part of their job description.

And so having knowledge about that and knowing that, you know, like I was a grad student, I did a whole bunch of really crappy tasks, but it was the stage of my career where I was expected to do those tasks. And, , I did not have the opportunity to say no to those tasks because that was where my stipend was coming from. There are other tasks which are entirely voluntary, and those are tasks that we need to be thoughtful about when we say yes to them, they are tasks that are not tied to our work and what some researchers have called non-pro promotable task, which means that you do them and you don't get real credit for them in the

**Jill Stoddard:** Like the retirement party example.

**Vanessa Patrick:** the retirement party? You're cleaning out the break room or bringing the coffee and muffins for for a [00:58:00] meeting. Those are tasks that you are not going to get a raise for and are not gonna be part of your annual performance review. Those non-pro promotable tasks should be tasks that you take on with real thought.

And women are 44% more likely to be asked to perform non-pro promotable tasks, and they're 76% more likely to say yes to those tasks when they are asked. So the research essentially shows that, you know, all these invisible tasks that keep the organization going that nobody gets credit for are predominantly done by women and marginalized groups.

And you know, that is something that we need to identify what those tasks are and stop [00:59:00] doing them, or at least take turns doing them if those tasks need to be done. So in the book I talk about, you know, coming up with strategies to deal with non-pro promotable tasks. You can say no. With a personal policy, or you can come up with a, a, a way to handle them that is equitable, like everybody takes turns doing it. , or you can think about ways in

which you can delegate those tasks and outsource them to someone , , who needs the money and, and can get the task done. And it's not a task that, you know, someone in the organization has to do.

**Jill Stoddard:** I'm trying to think of what would be a, a, a personal policy. So you could say, um, oh, I, I, I've made it a point to no longer take on non-promotable tasks and just, just thinking about that makes me feel very anxious. Like that would be a really hard thing to do. But I wonder, [01:00:00] and I don't know if there's any research about this, like my assumption would be, Women or people of color saying that are, are going to be dinged somehow.

No one's gonna say you're not getting promoted cuz you refuse to plan the party. But those things really do happen subtly. They're still bias. Right.

**Vanessa Patrick:** So I, I was, I was remembering this one in incident that this woman, she was a high, uh, a top level executive with a really demanding job and she also cared deeply about her community. And she was, the president of her community association and she had been there and done it for two terms. And she was up for a third term, and she was feeling under so much pressure from the community because yes, she was doing a fantastic job.

And yes, she cared deeply about it, so she was very conflicted, but it was taking a toll on her. [01:01:00] She was just finding it so hard to manage the increasing responsibilities of her real job with the responsibilities of this volunteer opportunity. And so we talked through the importance of giving other people the chance to take on that responsibility.

It's not that she is. You know, not doing, she has done, she has paid her due to the community. She has done two terms. Now it is an opportunity for her to give another person a chance to take it on. Maybe she, that other person could shadow her and learn from her, but sometimes you just have to pass the button on to other people so that they can grow and flourish in those roles.

And thinking about that can be quite liberating. Thinking about the fact that, you know, other people would benefit from the opportunity of learning how to plan a [01:02:00] retirement party or, you know, take on a responsible role in the community. I don't have to be the one to always do that.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. , we assume sometimes, oh, well if not me, then who? But there are other people that, that can do this. And when I think about organizational and systemic change, I mean it often comes from the bottom up



with grassroots kinds of efforts. And if we, if we all keep saying yes when we really want to say no, nothing is ever gonna change.

And I even wonder about, you know, maybe women or, or people of color, you know, kind of having conversations in the office saying, Hey, let's all agree that maybe we're gonna start saying empowered nos when we are the ones always being asked to engage in non-pro promotable tasks or something like that.

**Vanessa Patrick:** So one of the things that I end the book on is, A request and a call to respect the empowered knows of others. [01:03:00] Because to me, I feel that leadership is about finding people to occupy the right seats that work for them in a bus that's going in the right direction. And so in so many ways, what we want is to be able to identify what is it that excites people, what lights them up, and, and give people those kind of tasks.

If the task lights sit you up, then it's not a task. That's a huge burden. But you have to talk to people and really understand what their values are and find people who, , and find a fit between the task and the person who, , needs to do that task. And so, and when someone says, and empowered no. And it's based on values, then find the task that works better for them.

I am all for contributing to the organization, but I think we should all contribute in a way [01:04:00] that brings out the best in us that leverages our strengths. I think it makes for a much stronger and much more EM empowered environment, but also for a much more successful workplace.

**Jill Stoddard:** Absolutely. Well said. I think that is a perfect place for us to wrap up the interview. So Vanessa, thank you so much for being here. This was such a helpful conversation. I think people are gonna get so much out of this. Where can listeners find you if they want to learn more or connect with you?

**Vanessa Patrick:** So the first spot would be my website, Vanessa patrick.net. I'm also on LinkedIn, , Twitter. Instagram and Facebook. So I look forward to connecting with the listeners.

**Jill Stoddard:** Fabulous. Well, thank you so much.

**Vanessa Patrick:** Thanks, Jill. It was a great pleasure.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Hey, psychologists, off the clock listeners, I'm gonna guess that if you got to the end of this episode that you [01:05:00] also love to geek out about books in psychology.

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