

# When to Say “Yes” to Opportunity

By Sue Dahling Sullivan

If you asked my colleagues, many would describe me as the “no” person on the management team. I am the realist, the number cruncher, the general skeptic who is more inclined to ask you “why” instead of “why not?”

So you might be surprised to learn that I think of myself as more of a “yes” person. I believe that organizations *should* say yes when it strategically supports both their missions and business models. And the same goes for individuals—especially when it supports personal and/or professional growth.

Looking back on my own career, I’ve realized that saying yes to key opportunities has become a kind of living lab for my own professional development. And it is the accumulation of those experiences that has shaped my career path.

So what kinds of opportunities have I said yes to? There have been many—both small and large.

- **I’ve had the privilege to be the volunteer chair of a major city cultural council.** When the Mayor’s office offered me this position, I was honored and said yes. This leadership role allowed me to work with an inspiring group of new people, learn about the rich diversity within my city and the arts sector, and appreciate the needs and impacts of grant applicants. It also taught me how time consuming it is to fairly evaluate 170-plus funding applications!
- **I helped facilitate some unfortunately disappointing nonprofit merger conversations.** At one point my organization received a generous foundation grant to explore merger options with a variety of other arts nonprofits. I facilitated many of the conversations, including a number that hit different roadblocks: resistance from nonprofit management teams, reluctance from nonprofit boards, conflicting organizational strategies, etc. As a result, we abandoned the effort and returned most of the grant monies. Despite the

disappointing result, the process taught me important lessons. I learned to appreciate the complexity of organizational dynamics. I also learned that change can be hard—very hard, and in some cases impossible—for both individuals and organizations despite the potential benefits.

- **I project managed a record-breaking free outdoor arts event that made national headlines.** After a signature event was nearly cancelled, a colleague and I approached our executive director with an alternative concept and volunteered to implement it. It became a project filled with stretch goals. For starters, we created a new outdoor performance model in a public park and developed new frameworks for marketing and community partnerships to help build audiences. I also learned how to organize complex projects involving many diverse stakeholders, and how a shared vision can inspire an entire community. I also learned the power of teamwork and of luck in achieving success, especially when it comes to things you don't/can't control, like the weather.
- **I've lectured in graduate level classes, taught inner-city teens the art of the handshake, and published articles that share what I've learned.** I've also served on countless committees and advisory groups. While these types of opportunities present themselves in different ways, they all continue to expand my networks and more importantly, my thinking.

Today, at a later stage in my career, I am inclined to say yes to different opportunities that build on what I've learned. I now know that I like big challenges and working with diverse teams, and that I thrive on developing new paradigm-shifting models. And I know myself better. I discovered that I want to explore my creative side. I also know that I can be demanding and impatient, with a relentless

### My Go-For-It Guide

You can't (and shouldn't) say "yes" to every opportunity. But when do you know which ones to go for? I often ask myself the following questions to help me determine whether to explore an opportunity:

**Networking:** Will I meet new people? If so, are they people I will enjoy spending time with, learning from, and/or working with?

**Leadership:** Will I develop leadership skills that are new or different from my usual role? Can I learn from an inspirational leader? Can I inspire others to follow?

**Risk:** Is this outside of my personal or professional comfort zone? What happens if the project, group, or I fail? What is the probability of success, potential for failure, and what can I learn from it?

**Trade-offs:** What are the possible rewards and benefits to saying yes? What is the impact on my time and other commitments? Will I be spread too thin?

**Purpose:** Am I passionate about the opportunity or just casually interested? Why am I saying yes: to learn, experience, drive change, problem solve, create, or be part of a group? Or should I stop over-thinking it and simply embrace the joys of serendipity?

work ethic. I like leading but also following; I like to teach but I love learning much more. And most importantly, I've recognized that my greatest inspiration comes from the people I work with and for.

I've also learned that saying yes isn't always easy. In fact, it can be downright frightening. I remember a time in my mid-thirties as I contemplated two job offers. One was in a large corporation with security, benefits, a good salary, interesting work, and room to grow. Another was to join a fledging four-person nonprofit arts group. I knew nothing about opera or the new organization, which was the result of a three-way merger. But what I did recognize was that the board and executive director were a dynamic combo. I surprised myself when I decided to join the nonprofit as the fifth full-time employee.

Who knew that it would become a pivotal moment that changed my life and my career? I've never looked back—and never been more convinced about the power of the word “yes.”



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