Saying ‘No’ To An Employee Request Around The Holidays



At this time of year, with festive celebrations, good will and cheer it is easy to say yes to an employee request.

Employees may request a day off, to leave work early, to bring their dog into the office and more relatively small and immediate items. They may also request items with longer-term implications such as a promotion, change in shift, new duties and more. Sometimes when you say yes it works out fine but other times you may wish you had stopped and thought just a little more. At this time of year in particular it can pay to take a few moments to consider how you want to manage employee requests.

Responding To A Request

When receiving an employee request you want the flexibility to assess each request and situation individually, but it can be useful to have a process in place to facilitate decision-making. Research tells us that our decision-making is not always optimal. Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman, author of the best seller ‘Thinking, Fast and Slow’ discusses the many facets of perception and perspective and the havoc they play on thinking. In his work he discusses the slow and fast thinking aspects of our thinking and decision-making (System 1 and System 2 thinking). The fast thinking, System 1 brain is generally our default. It allows us to make quick, even snap decisions based on limited data and generalizations. It is the system that historically enabled our survival by quickly telling us to run or fight to survive.

However, it is our system 2 brain that allows us to weigh options and make decisions based on more criterion. Unfortunately our brain tends to be lazy and defaults to system 1 thinking much of the time. Generally our system 1, fast thinking brain, is more likely to get caught up in a moment when responding to a request and at this time of year it is often easier to yes.

If you put in place a process that allows you to engage your system 2 brain you increase your odds of more informed decision. Regardless of the type of request if you have a defined process and criterion you can increase your chances of making the decision you mean.

Employee Request Ground Rules

Saying yes or no to an employee request can be easier if you first establish a few

ground rules:

1. ***Set a process for any requests:*** this process could involve a submission of a written request, even if only an email and not necessarily a submissions form. Your process may involve the employee first determining viability of the request based on established criterion, then speaking verbally to a supervisor and then an email or written document as an official request. Not all request or responses may require a written note but consider that the process that is more formal and includes written documentation can help avoid the appearance of favouritism or discrimination.
2. ***Establish guidelines for what requests are feasible and reasonable:*** Indicate as part of your guidelines that certain types of requests will not be considered without a formal process and others may be managed by a supervisor with only a verbal request. For certain types of requests related to the structure and timing of work, for example a request for a vacation, change in hours on a given day, even a change in shift or working location and so on you can establish guidelines for request and a response.

   Requests that are immediate in nature, such as leaving work 30 minutes early on that day, may be acceptable within your organization to be responded to verbally and immediately by a supervisor, whereas a request with longer lasting implications may require a more formal process.

   Note: Be very aware of requirements under legislation to accommodate individuals for issues such as medical or disability and family care requests (such as child or elder care). If a parent approaches you and indicates that for reasons of child care he/she must leave early that day or needs to request a change in schedule it is a good idea to have a policy to follow in response.

3. ***Do not accept or discuss request in public view:*** Have as part of your process a guideline that indicates that you will not respond or discuss requests in public, this includes a private workspace where others such as co-workers are present. If a request is received in public indicate that the conversation needs to be moved to another location

4. ***Establish a process for a response and follow up:*** If the request is made verbally directly to a supervisor the natural inclination can be to respond verbally with a decision. If there are clear guidelines in place that allow a supervisor to make an immediate decision then a verbal response may be appropriate. However, it can be good practice to follow up with a note indicating the request and response. For example if a verbal request was made to leave one hour early and it was denied by a supervisor, the supervisor may want to respond in an email with a note summarizing and confirming the conversation.
5. ***Include an option for reconsideration***: Once a yes is offered it is difficult for a supervisor to turn back. However, when no is the response if is useful to have a process whereby an employee can amend and resubmit a request.

Yes, No or Maybe?

Generally in response to requests your options are pretty straightforward. You can say, yes, no or maybe.

‘**Yes’:** It can be useful to include clarification and why even when ‘Yes’s is offered so there is a clear meeting of the minds.

‘Yes, you may leave 30 minutes early today please ensure you note this on your time sheet and indicate to me in writing how you will make this time back up’.

“Maybe”: Should be tied the reason for the maybe, such as

“ I cannot provide you with a response yet, I need to refer to the guidelines and will get back to you soon’ or ‘I need additional information before I can offer a decision’.

‘No”: is often a very valid response, one of the challenges is that No can mean maybe and even yes once more information becomes available. Before saying ‘No’, consider if there are options you are not exploring. You may choose to say

“ I do not think that request will work, can you please explain how you see it working’.

When a ‘No’ is a ‘No’ it can be useful to briefly offer a reason, such as

“Unfortunately I am not able to accommodate your request at this time for this reason . . . .”.

Saying yes, no or maybe are best managed when there is a process in place.