

The “Okay” Zone

“Say, are you going to the big company picnic this weekend? Would you like go together?”
(You’re unsure. You hesitate. If you say no, what will happen? If you say yes, what will happen?)
So you reply with “Okay.”

This simple interaction reveals a world of information.

Someone has asked you if you would like to go to a large work-related event together. It could be a co-worker you know, a new client, someone from a different department, or a supervisor. Your uncertainty is tinged with worry. Does a “no” carry consequences? Will someone be upset? Hurt? Angry? Will you lose the chance for that promotion at work?

And let’s think about the “yes”. Will you be giving up something *you* want? Will this person act appropriately? Is there any reason to wonder about the supervisors’ real intention? Does your co-worker want something more than what’s being asked? Is your client trying to “seal the deal”?

Your worry leads you to where we all often go: “Okay” you reply, but in your heart, there’s a little voice saying “I don’t really want to.” Welcome to the “Okay” zone.

Most of us live a large part of our social and professional lives in the “Okay zone”. Too often, we aren’t sure *what* we want or don’t want. We worry about negative consequences whether we reply with a yes or a no. “Okay” becomes our safe, default reply. We keep doing this, and it becomes a well-worn habit. We forget what choice is, and we forget how to say “no”.

To be sure, we often say okay with real ambivalence because sometimes it really *doesn’t* matter, the choices are, well, *mundane*: “Would you like your change in ones or fives?” “Would you like to sit near this window or the other one?” “Would you like bottled or tap water?” This kind of daily interaction is nearly automatic and usually is of no real consequence in our life. What it *does* do, though, is subtly reinforce the ease with which we use “okay” as a default response. Therein lies a tale.

How do we know when it matters? Can this pattern be changed? As the responder, can we learn to take the time and “conversational white space” needed to consider a reply? As the requestor, can we learn to recognize how our request might be creating a problem or a power imbalance that we *don’t* want?

We begin to know when it matters when we sense something is out-of-whack, when we feel some vague sense of unease that is just out of reach, or our body is reacting in subtle but noticeable ways. We know it’s not quite right when there’s this little voice in our head saying “but I would rather...” or “but I don’t really like...” or “but I’m not sure it’s safe.” and our inclination toward what we *do* want is washed away.

Both requestors and responders can change this pattern. As responders, we can begin to get back in touch with what we want, what we choose, and what makes us uncomfortable. As requestors, we can start to examine how we make a request, how the *context* of a request matters, and why it might make things worse, not better. It takes time and practice, and a willingness, sometimes, to be a bit vulnerable. Let’s look at how we can do this.

First, let's be sure we understand what I mean by the terms "request", "offer" and "invitation".

- A *request* is when someone is asking for something they want.
- An *offer* is when someone presents to you something they are willing to give to you.
- An *invitation* is when one person wants something and they want to discover if *you* want that too.

You may quickly notice in each of these that in many contexts, there is a potential for some *very* subtle underlying dynamics, and, that often, all is not as it might appear to be!

To better understand the dynamic of the "Okay" zone, it helps to see it as a kind of spectrum. Take a look at the illustration below.

On the left, we have the enthusiastic "Yes!". This is the ideal when we *know* we want this: a definitive "YES" to the request, offer or invitation.

On the right, we have the clear "No!". This is our ideal answer when we are sure that we do *not* want something and need to say a clear "no" to a request, offer or invitation.

That entire area in between "yes" and "no"? *That's* the "Okay" zone. The whole thing looks like this:



This visual presentation offers a perspective on what "okay" can mean in practice. Notice the sheer size of the "Okay" zone in relation to "yes" and "no". This happens for many reasons: the number of different contexts where we are given an opportunity or required to respond to a request, invitation or offer and the extent and power of our socialization and enculturation.

The first part – different contexts – is the entire mix ranging from the mundane (where our decision doesn't really have consequences) to the significant (where we may want or need to make an active choice that *does* matter to someone – us, or the person making the request, or both).

The second part – socialization and enculturation – is that subtle but pervasive force that every single one of us experiences from the moment we are born. It's almost completely *involuntary*: we simply do not have a full say in how this influences our life. Think for a moment of any of the larger institutional frameworks that are integral to our lives: family, school or work are perhaps most notable.

In family, we learn social protocols – eat nicely, don't steal, play well with others and so forth. Family is often where we discover that others "expect" us to respond and behave in specific ways. We learn to "go along to get along".

In school, everything we learned in our family comes with us, but now students, teachers and administrators also provide "input" to our lives and psyches. It's part of being in school: do your homework, listen to the teacher, behave in the lunchroom. There's much more, of course, as anyone who has been bullied will attest to: subtle (and not so subtle) expectations about how to be, how to play, who to know, who to stay away from and so forth.

When we get a job, we face a new level of social interaction, with expectations, norms and more. Any interaction might require a response to a request, offer or invitation. We become well practiced in the “right” response. For half the population – women – these expectations, these “right” responses – are a fraught reflection of the larger society.

We’re social creatures. Our tendency to “go along to get along” can overrule our better judgement and leave us feeling vaguely (or a lot) uncomfortable.

So, what can we *do*? Quite a lot, actually!

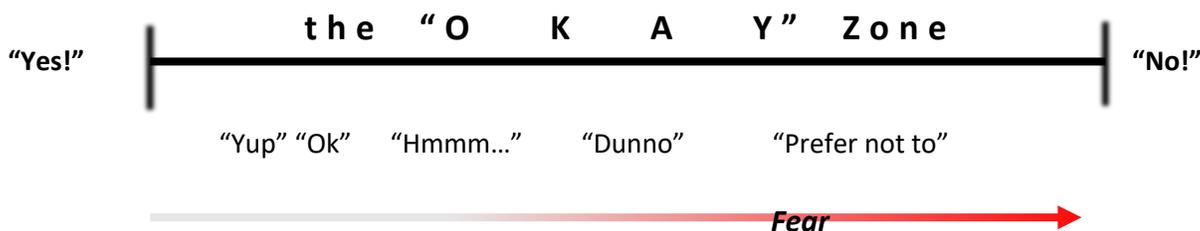
We can understand that *unlearning* “okay” is a lifelong process. It’s not going to disappear. We need to practice, a lot!

If we are being asked, we can learn how to think about what we really *do* want and need. When we don’t know, our replies are obscure, hidden from others as well as ourselves. How can we give a reply when *we* don’t know what we want or don’t want? If we are doing the asking, we can learn to think it through completely *before* we ask for something from someone else. Is what we are asking really what we want or need?

We can learn to say clearly and out loud the word “no” and eventually make it stick to our vocabulary. This is not the mundane “no”, but the no that comes from a *clear choice* borne out of both clarity and self-interest. When we stop “going along to get along”, when we get clear in our own minds about just what it is we want that would be wonderful and what would be uncomfortable, our “no” is a powerful thing. When asking, we can learn to stop and listen, respectfully, to the other person, and manage their “no” response appropriately.

We can learn to get in touch with our needs and desires and know when we honestly are a “YES!” Sometimes this involves getting (back) in touch with our body, gently and carefully unpacking the ways that we experience feelings and emotions. And this “yes” also needs practice. Discovering ways that we can be (and thrive) in situations that invite the “yes” is a powerful way to relearn choice and unlearn “okay” as our default response. We can begin to recognize that learning to honor and trust someone’s “no” means that we can deeply trust their “yes”.

We can learn to *find our willing heart* in our responses, choices, requests and offers. Our willing heart is a way to think through a difficult decision, and we can understand it a bit better if we expand our diagram. Here again is our lovely “Okay” zone, with some added elements that can help us understand how we feel about something and what we want.



Consider this simple example. You’re invited to the annual office party. You’d sort of like to go, but don’t want to stay late, and you want to be independent in your arrival and departure. A friend asks if they can carpool with you. What to do? You can look at the spectrum of choices and “try them on” in your thinking. “Am I willing to carpool and give up my

independence?” might be a good starting point. Then, try on a few answers. Is it just “Ok”? How does “Prefer not to” feel? If we imagine that the “tipping point” of our willing heart is somewhere in the middle, then, ideally, we want to be closer to our “yes” than to our “no”. Our willing heart needs to be in the right place to arrive at a choice that is about *what we want* to arrive at an answer. If we lean too far into the “no”, then our willing heart is likely not there, and saying “yes” or “okay” is more about going along to get along or, worse, *enduring* a choice we *know* we do not want. If we lean into the “yes” side, then we’re more likely to enjoy the result and can feel fine about having made a choice that we own. You might also notice that as you get closer to the “no” side of the spectrum, the potential for fear to be a dominant part of how you decide increases.

This might seem overly complicated at first glance. But as you look it over, think of the times in the past when *you* have responded to a request, offer or invitation. Were you fine with your answer, even if it wasn’t exactly what you wanted? Did you feel uncomfortable with the outcome and spend time pushing back or ignoring your own discomfort? Did you justify your answer to avoid conflict or fear? Here, practice makes perfect, and over time it gets easier. It can be helpful in trying to figure out what to do in some situations. It’s not something that you can or should try and apply to all situations – that’s more than most of us need. But with partners, friends and co-workers, it can be powerful.

Who is it for?

Often, in trying to figure out what we want or need, how to respond to a request or offer, or how to make a request or extend an offer, it can be useful to ask ourselves a simple question: “who is it for?” When we ask this question, the underlying motivation of the request and our response can often come into sharp focus. Of course, not every request, offer or invitation is suspect, nor should we try and see them that way. Many times, the person *making* the request is not even aware that there *is* anything wrong with the request. To them, it may be “par for the course” or how they move through the world, or how their learned experience of work protocols “feels right”. It’s important, I think, to do our best to initially give the other person the benefit of any doubt, to presume good intentions. And even then, asking this question is a useful starting point in figuring out what we want and need and where our willing heart is.

It’s also helpful to add this to the “who is it for?” question: who is getting what and why? Who is getting the gift? This might seem obvious in a lot of cases, but it can be quite subtle. In considering who is getting the gift, we open the door to a common human characteristic (that shows up as a question): “what’s in it for me?” There’s nothing inherently wrong with this – it is part of human nature. But giving and receiving are complicated, and simply asking this question of who is getting the gift may help us understand what we want or don’t want, Similarly, if we are doing the asking, *why* we are making this particular request. When we learn to make choices or make requests that that are completely our own, our interactions with others improve and we are better equipped to live, work and play with the many different people in our lives.