# How Coaching Empowered a Senior Project Manager to Say No For Better Business Results

Kartik started his career in the IT industry as a software engineer. In his 13 years of experience, Kartik has successfully overseen dozens of big-ticket projects. His acumen and enthusiasm towards his work and getting results helped him climb up the ladder and follow his passion for helping people by becoming a project manager.

For the last three years, Kartik has been an integral part of Axelerant's project delivery. He was recently promoted as Senior Project Manager at Axelerant.
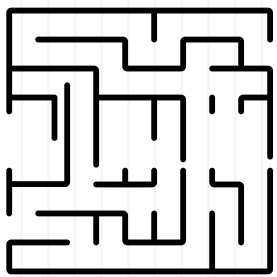
Business Challenge

Despite his extensive experience and passion for project management, Kartik struggled with a deeply ingrained habit that prevented him from saying "no" to work requests from clients and internal stakeholders.

This habit often led to taking on tasks that exceeded his and his team's capacity, negatively impacting other in-progress deliverables. The consequences of this behavior included:

· **Ineffective Decisions:** The compulsion to agree with customers' and supervisors' for work requests that were unfeasible with the available resources and time often led to rushed decisions. This often left the team's workflow in disarray.

· **Decline in Productivity and Burnout:** Agreeing to every work request that came his way led to an overwhelming workload. It reduced his overall productivity and effectiveness. Kartik's work-life balance also saw a steady decline as he invested a disproportionate amount of time at work. Although he saw this as a natural part of one's work life initially, it started taking a toll on his wellbeing. He was on the verge of having a severe burnout.

- **Delayed Project Delivery:** The inability to say a calculated and informed "no" to tasks that weren't a priority led to overcommitting, which inevitably resulted in missed deadlines and delayed projects. It also increased project costs as more time was needed to accomplish tasks.

- **Frayed Relationships with Clients:** Delayed project deliveries and juggling multiple deadlines often strained professional relationships with clients who expected his team to deliver on time.

- **Team Wellbeing:** Kartik gave his 100% to ensure that his team members found a safe space in him, and always went out of his way to support his team members. But his behavior, often staying back in office till late evening set the wrong precedent. His team felt compelled to follow suit, creating an unproductive team culture.
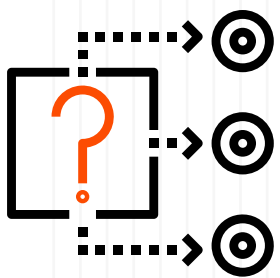
Cause

Kartik's challenge stemmed from several factors rooted in his previous work environments:

- **Cultural Conditioning:** In his past roles working in authoritative cultures, saying "no" was not an option. Most office cultures he experienced equated relentless agreement with commitment and value.

- **Initial Success:** Early in his career, Kartik found that saying "yes" to every request brought promotions and rewards, reinforcing this behavior. In a hierarchical organizational structure, blindly accepting and delivering on work requests enabled him to climb the corporate ladder.

- **Hostile Experiences:** On the rare occasion when Kartik attempted to set boundaries, he faced hostility from his supervisor in some of his previous work experiences, which discouraged him from doing so again.

- **Mental Framework:** Over time, Kartik developed a mental framework where saying "yes" was linked to professional growth, while saying "no" was seen as detrimental to his career. His eagerness to prove himself led him to accept every work request as a way to show his commitment to his career growth.
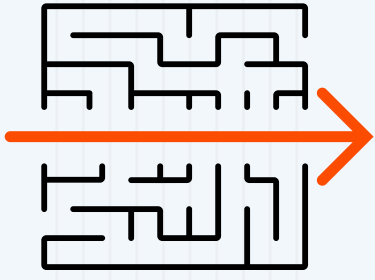
Solution

After Kartik joined Axelerant, it became clear to the People Transformation team that his inability to say "no" was affecting his performance and well-being.

To address this, they introduced Kartik to a six-month 1-on-1 coaching program, focused on helping him develop the skills and confidence to set boundaries effectively.

How

Some of the strategies that the People Transformation team applied in their work with Kartik.

- **Pinning the Root Cause:** Our coaches worked closely with Kartik to identify the deep-seated mental pattern and experiences that contributed to his inability to say "no." Understanding these origins was key to creating effective strategies that would allow for a permanent shift in his behavior.

- **Providing a Psychologically Safe Space:** In the coaching sessions, Kartik was provided a safe, non-judgmental space to express his concerns, fears, and challenges for the first time in his career. This environment was crucial for him to open up and confront the issues he had long avoided.

- **Analysis Frameworks:** The coaches introduced him to analysis and questioning frameworks that empowered Kartik to assess his and his team's delivery capacity before agreeing to new tasks. It also allowed him to assess the overall impact of tasks and projects on his productivity and well-being.

  These frameworks qualified him to make informed, calculated decisions that were in the best interest of the organization.

- **Building Confidence:** The coaches focused on boosting Kartik's confidence. By addressing the unhelpful belief system that undermined his self-assurance, the coaches helped Kartik feel more confident in his ability to manage his workload and assert his professional boundaries for the best results.

- **Shifting Perspective:** Through in-depth conversations, Kartik's perspective shifted from viewing his role as one of compliance within a top-down hierarchy to seeing himself as an essential and equal part of the organization. This shift was crucial in helping him understand that his input and boundaries were valuable and respected.
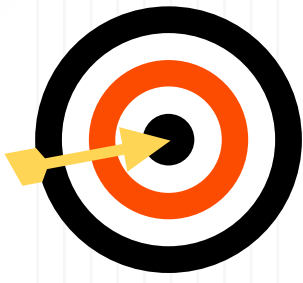
Results

Here's how 1-on-1 coaching helped Kartik make better decisions at work by saying no to requests that hampered productivity and project health.

- **Confidence in Saying "No":** On a scale of 1 to 10, Kartik's confidence in saying "no" when it's in the best interest of his work and well-being increased to a 9. This marked a significant transformation from his earlier mindset.

- **Frequency of Saying "No":** Since the coaching sessions, Kartik reported that he now "often declines requests or tasks that he previously would have accepted," even if they weren't feasible. And he can do so in an informed manner with logical reasoning with the help of a questioning framework. This has helped him manage his workload more effectively.

- **Stress Reduction:** Kartik experienced a substantial decrease in his stress levels, estimating a 76-100% reduction. This demonstrates the profound impact that learning to set boundaries has had on his emotional well-being and that of his team by extension.

- **Impact on Work Performance:** Kartik rated the impact of coaching on his overall work performance as having a "significant positive impact." This change has not only improved his productivity but has also enhanced the quality of his work.

- **Improved Client and Colleague Interactions:** Kartik estimated that about 90% of his recent interactions with clients and managers have been "more positive and productive" as a result of applying the coaching techniques. He also reported that his shift in behavior caused a ripple effect in his team. This improvement has contributed to better relationships and more successful project outcomes.

- **Positive Feedback from Clients:** He regularly receives positive feedback and recognition from clients as he doesn't hold back from saying things that won't work in the long run, which, in most cases, has proven beneficial for the client. His pronounced integrity has won the trust of several new clients for the organization.