

## SAYING “NO” WITH COMPASSION

**SUMMARY:** Setting boundaries and upholding policies in challenging circumstances.

**CASE TYPE:** Practical

Practical cases offer procedures and strategies for handling situations that one might encounter in community engaged work. These cases have answers that would be considered appropriate and others that would be ill advised.

*This case outlines how and when to say no and enforce boundaries. Although this dynamic can create complex ethical tensions, the following text focuses exclusively on practical considerations. For the ethical perspective, please refer to the companion case: [“The Ethics of Saying No.”](#)*

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Organizational Policies</li><li>• Respect vs. Integrity</li><li>• Conflict Resolution</li></ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Learn to enforce boundaries and say no, even within complex situations and dynamics.</li><li>2. Examine power dynamics, emotional safety, and burnout in immersive service roles.</li><li>3. Discuss strategies for respectful, equitable interactions across differences.</li><li>4. Reflect on how to uphold organizational policies without dehumanizing individuals.</li></ol>

### SCENARIO

Nevaeh is a sophomore studying computer science and philosophy. This year, she decided to join her university’s community service partnership program, and is assigned to work each Saturday morning at a local drop-in center for the unhoused population. Nevaeh is surprised at how much she loves the work, and starts looking forward to it each Saturday. Her job is to field requests from the guests at the service counter. She receives information about their clothing, toiletry, food, and information needs. She also hands out basic supplies. Over time, she learns some guests are easy going and always go along with the established policies about what and how much they can receive each weekend. Others are more demanding, either using their familiarity with Nevaeh or an aggressive attitude to try to get more. Nevaeh is very conflict averse, and she starts to quietly acquiesce when these guests keep pushing. She knows this goes against the center’s policies, but she feels bad denying requests to people in need.

During her next Saturday shift, a familiar guest comes up to the counter, one who has always been kind and followed the center’s policies. However, this encounter is very different. The guest requests an extra bag of food. When Nevaeh says, “I’m sorry, but we can only give one to each guest,” the formerly easygoing guest demands another. “I know you’ve been giving more to other people, it’s not fair, why won’t you treat me the same way!” she shouts. Throughout the day, this happens four more times. At the end of the day, Nevaeh discusses this with the site supervisor.

She encourages Nevaeh to stick to the established guidelines, even if it's hard to say no.

The following Saturday, Nevaeh is determined to stick to this plan. Her first guest of the day asks for an additional shirt from those available, and Nevaeh kindly but firmly reminds him of their policy. The man is not happy and tells Nevaeh she's not thinking of his needs. Nevaeh holds strong and feels good about her response, even though it was very hard for her emotionally. However, as the day goes on, the same situation repeats over and over again. Guests that Nevaeh knows well, with whom she has strong relationships with, keep getting angry at her new response. After her fifth confrontation of the morning, Nevaeh is emotionally exhausted and disheartened. Her relationships with the guests all seem broken, and she's not sure where to go from here. She wonders how she can say no with compassion.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What feelings might Nevaeh have had when first faced with the requests, especially from guests who were aggressive, demanding, or persistent?
  1. How would you have felt in this position initially?
  2. How might you feel after saying "no"?
2. Why might some guests have started demanding more?
3. What do you think shifted when she changed her response to follow the policies?
4. How can organizations support staff and volunteers in holding compassionate boundaries? What role do organizational policies play in this process? How might you go about seeking or requesting additional support from those around you?
5. What are the risks of always saying yes? What are the risks of a strict no?
6. How could or should Nevaeh reflect on her disheartened feelings after setting these boundaries?
7. How does perceived special treatment impact dynamics in group settings? What's the difference between being fair and being equal in this context?
8. What might you anticipate happening over time if Nevaeh sticks to her plan and continues to uphold the policies?
9. How should volunteers or interns manage expectations—both their own and others?
10. What strategies can help you stay compassionate while following policies and rules?

## FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **EXPLORE COMPLEXITY.** Acknowledge that this is a complex, emotionally charged situation. Many students may relate to the discomfort of saying no or to the fear of confrontation. There is likely not a perfect outcome possible here.
- **INVITE MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES.** Challenge students to consider the various points of view: the student's, the guests', the supervisor's, and the organization's.
- **DISTINGUISH PERSONAL FROM STRUCTURAL.** Emphasize structural inequity—that guest behavior may reflect deeper systemic frustrations, not just personal aggression.
- **SET BOUNDARIES.** Reinforce that holding boundaries is not inherently unkind and can, in fact, support long-term trust and consistency.

## CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- How can you learn about organizational policies or preferences in preparation for appropriate decision making during any upcoming or current community engagement or immersion experiences?