critical. Recently he agreed to a trip to Kuala Lumpur before he realized just how difficult it was going to be to make time for the visit. He didn't think he could back out of the trip, but the alternative was worse: doing a mediocre job on projects that were important for the future of his company. Ultimately, he realized that he had to tell the organizer that he was withdrawing, so he could reclaim the time in his schedule.

Normally Anthony would have written something like this:

> "I'm so sorry, but unfortunately I'm no longer going to be able to join you on the trip to KL. We've recently taken on three big projects and I'm finding myself swamped with all that entails. As a result, I just can't carve out the time to make it possible, despite my best efforts. Huge apologies again."

By comparison, his positive no went something like this:

> "I was honored that you invited me to KL. The work you're doing is fascinating and impressive [warmth]. As you might know, our side of the business has also grown enormously in the past few months. We've taken on three exciting new projects that will really change the way our clients think about marketing. I'll be setting up the projects in the coming month, and it's my responsibility to make them the success they deserve to be [his yes]. To do a good job, though, I'm having to let go of a lot of things. And sadly, one of them is the chance to come to KL. I'm disappointed, as I was looking forward to it [his no]. Please let me know if it would be helpful to connect you with people who might take my place and add value to the group—I have a few ideas. In the meantime, I wish you all the best for a fruitful trip [warmth]."

The two responses feel very different to read, don't they? The content of his positive no was essentially the same as his conventional no—a decision, an explanation, and an apology. And as soon as the trip leader started reading Anthony's more positive version, it's likely she guessed the reason for his email. But there's no mistaking the fact that the tone of the second email feels quite different from that of the first. With the positive version, her reward-hungry brain will have been a little buoyed by Anthony's upbeat comments about his new projects. Sure enough, despite her disappointment, Anthony ended up with her

understanding and respect. And this has generally been his experience. He used to fear that he'd damage relationships by saying "no thanks," but it hasn't happened since he began deploying the positive no. And he realized that "it's far better to convey a clear, sincere message that I'm not in a position to give my all, instead of doing a half-baked job because I'm stretched too thin."

SET YOUR BOUNDARIES

There are days when it feels as if other people's demands are pressing in on us from all sides. Kristen certainly felt like that during much of her early career. She's a sharp-minded HR director for a global pharmaceutical company, with four children, a long commute, and a busy job. She initially struggled to find her balance as her family grew.

"When I came back to work after my third maternity leave," she recalls (slipping into the present tense), "I'm feeling like I haven't slept in four years. I'm three months behind because no one did my work while I was gone, and I'm way overloaded. I'm sitting in my office, feeling so mad, and I wanted to articulate who I was mad at. Initially I directed it at my company. I was mad because they were making me come to meetings really early, and they were making me stay really late. But then I thought, who is 'the company'?" And in that moment, she says, "I had this epiphany, because I realized I was mostly mad at *me* and my lack of boundaries. I'd let things get out of control and I was trying to find someone else to blame. But if I didn't have boundaries, who else was going to give them to me?" She laughs and shakes her head. "Did I think the company was going to say, 'Oh, Kristen, you're a new mom, poor you, don't work before eight, don't stay later than six'? No, it was up to me. Perhaps it shouldn't have been, but it kind of always is."

So she decided to take control. "I wrote on my notepad what my boundaries were: 'I don't accept meetings before eight. I don't stay past six. Between noon and one I'm going to be at my desk and I'm going to eat lunch. When I'm home, I'm home; when I'm at work, I'm at work.'" It was a very short list. "If it had a negative impact on my career, so be it, I thought. I couldn't carry on the way I'd been going. The irony is that after I instituted that list of boundaries, my career skyrocketed." Why did she think that happened? "Because it made me calmer and more effective. Also, I wasn't an executive at the time, but I think it showed that I had the capacity to be one, that I knew how to manage myself."

Overcoming Overload

Next time you're feeling overloaded, try these strategies—in fact, why not try them right now?

➡ **Mindful pause.** Give your brain's deliberate system a chance to fully engage, by pausing to focus on your breath (or scanning your body, or counting back from one hundred) for five minutes.

➡ **Get it out of your head.** Write down everything that's swirling around your mind, even the tiniest to-dos.

➡ **Most important thing.** What really matters most right now, either because it has to happen today or because it has the biggest impact?

➡ **Smallest first step.** What's the very first step you can take toward doing that most important thing—something small enough to do today?

➡ **Comparative advantage.** What are you *uniquely* well placed to do—and what could others do, even if not as well as you? Focus on tasks where the gap between your capabilities and other people's is biggest.

➡ **Positive no.** For a commitment that you need to delegate or decline: start with warmth; say what you're saying "yes" to; say your "no"; end with warmth.

➡ **Setting boundaries.** If you could set one boundary in the way you organize your time, what would it be? What's the clearest, cleanest way to communicate this preference to others?

➡ **Automate small daily decisions.** Consider whether you can do something at the same time or in the same way each day, to spend more of your mental energy on the things that matter.

➡ And finally: remember that you'll lessen your feeling of being overloaded if you also take the singletasking advice from Chapter 4 and the downtime advice from Chapter 5, since both will boost your mental performance and productivity.