



## Yes = No = Yes

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Flummoxed, a foreigner asked me in utter incomprehension: “Does it mean ‘Yes’ when you nod your head vertically, or when you shake your head horizontally?” In India both actions mean ‘Yes’ I said. His obvious next question was, “How do you differentiate?” Now that’s not so easy. You have to be culturally ingrained to understand the mind and body language of saying Yes.

I’ve deeply observed this Yes aspect in the last ten years in India. My habit in the West has been that people clearly choose to say Yes or No. Committing to Yes as to be 100% supported by your capability, which you can yourself measure. I’ve never faced a problem saying No when I don’t know. I’ve noticed that Americans, in particular, become enthusiastic to enlighten me if I say, “I don’t know, I want to learn.”

A few years ago, in a 360-degree, around-the-world research I did for a client, I had to meet senior management of diverse Fortune 500 companies to diagnose their industry. My client who’d fixed my meetings said none of the top business leaders had given more than 15 minutes time. So I accordingly made questions for 5 minutes only to record them in the next 10 minutes. My questions were so embedded with curiosity that I ended up spending

almost two hours with my interviewees. They were engrossed and sincere in parting with knowledge. In a couple of meetings I even had to beg leave as my next appointment was already scheduled. This vast learning from global business leaders of different industries was indeed helpful for me to present my client with strategic planning inputs that allowed the client’s business to move ahead. It proved that if you sincerely admit you want to learn, it’s not a defect. It encourages those who teach to unleash their generosity.

In contrast, people in India hesitate to say No. I’ve analyzed 8 types of Yes saying reasons: Satisfying the hierarchy; Respecting elders; Complacent arrogance; Guilt; Escapism; Avoiding weakness; Fear of expression; Baggage of British colonization.

**1. Satisfying the hierarchy:** Saying Yes Boss without assessing one’s own capability is very common. A subordinate can be a boss to others, so this lack of capability can cascade down to several subordinate layers. Without substantiating capability, the boss guarantees some delivery to the super-boss. If you’re the super-boss and have slept easy on your subordinate’s commitment, you could be exposing your business to grave danger. The more you delay verifying the reality of that Yes, the more business sedimentation you will create. As a boss in any layer you have to assess what’s happening behind your subordinate’s Yes factor. Otherwise don’t be surprised if things collapse!

**2. Respecting elders:** Our cultural nuance is to revere people older in age, without considering competence. When this stretches to the Guru, whether in music, literature or art, a learner has to respect the teacher like a god of boundaryless competence, and always be submissive. Both understand the one-way discipline, top down. The guru cannot imagine his disciple can become better than him yet subliminally the guru feels insecure.

**3. Complacent arrogance:** Just to prove a point, people challengingly say yes even though there's no substance there, just make believe. This complacent arrogance to temporarily overcome a crisis without considering the long-term can have a debilitating impact. Later when market reality emerges to the contrary, the business takes a hit. Such Yes masters disturb Indian industry in both renovation and innovation in product and service.

**4. Guilt:** To avoid confrontation, some people say Yes. These salaried people guiltily realize they don't have the capability required for the job. So they camouflage the situation with glib, neutral statements that are neither negative nor positive so nobody else discovers their incompetence.

**5. Escapism:** It's quite shocking when I hear managers admitting to a market mistake, but in the same breath happily pointing to their competitors making the same mistake. This amounts to escaping from the problem, shrugging off responsibility for defects, instead of correcting those deficiencies.

**6. Avoiding weakness:** Those incompetent at work are the best at glossing the apple. Upholding Indian tradition of obeying the superior, they affirm they've given the right orders. Then they turn around to blame subordinates for non-execution. This very dangerous political game of not owning up to

accountability or correcting incompetence takes a company squarely into mediocrity.

**7. Fear of expression:** Our feudal heritage leads to the boss becoming a lion and subordinates having little choice but to say Yes to protect their livelihood. Their mundane jobs get scant respect, their craftsmanship no appreciation. They rarely have scope to learn more. Fear of expression is the killer for the bottom and mid level working force, driving them towards hierarchy deference, and impacting operational and maintenance areas of business. If you're oblivious to their hidden reasons, you could be waiting indefinitely without the job being done.

**8. Baggage of British colonization:** Colonial British influence has so weakened our country's backbone as to make the Yes very vulnerable. Thankfully, colonial "Ji Huzoor" no longer works with the sub-30 Zap generation. Let's hope it'll vanish in 10-20 years, making Yes more pragmatic. One day the HR person of a client company where I'd recommended hiring Zappers to contemporarize operations complained to me. He said when the CEO wanted his computer adjusted, he called a 24-year-old IT engineer who fixed it in a jiffy. Then in innocent amazement the Zapper said, "You're the CEO, and you didn't even know this simple fix?" The CEO was intelligent enough to take his bewilderment positively and appreciated the youngster. But the HR person's attitude was somewhat reminiscent of colonial days. He said these brash Zappers were disturbing the company's work ethic and throwing protocol out the window.

Dear Reader, please let me know if you have identified more Yes nuances to add to my list.

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