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# Darlene Fountaine

*Before You Say YES*

Spark Talk transcript
IGNITE: Global Gathering
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*Edited for readability. Filler words and false starts removed.*

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TRANSCRIPT

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*Before You Say YES*

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You know how once you decide you're going to buy that red Porsche, you start to see red Porsches everywhere? The same thing is about to happen to you with this talk. Once you know what to look for, you'll start noticing it in your own calendar, your own commitments, and your own life.

This talk almost had a different name: "Before You Commit," "What's on Your Plate," "How to Say No." But none of those said it as clearly as the one I landed on: "Before I Say Yes."

Can I get a show of hands? Is your calendar fuller than you'd like it to be, with the wrong things?

I used to think overwhelm just happened to me. Too many clients, too many board meetings, too many favors for people I care about. Then one day I looked at my calendar and realized something uncomfortable. Almost none of it was assigned to me. I built it, one yes at a time.

A few years ago, I left my job as an admissions director. As people reached out to me, I figured they were watching to see what I would do next, maybe offer me another role, who knows. I think I just started hearing from lots of people. But instead, something entirely different happened. People started calling me with requests to volunteer. A board seat here, another committee there. It was one good cause after another.

I thought, "I'm going to use all my talents, all of those talents I had, right?" And, clueless, I said yes a couple of times too many.

Eventually I was miserable, because I was doing all of these things for other people and not the things that were truly aligned with my values. None of those things were bad. They all added value. They just weren't aligned with mine. And I never stopped to ask why, or what I was doing.

I even joined the board of a food co-op. They wanted to open a grocery store in a part of Los Angeles that's a food desert. Is that my passion? My passion is education. Was it a good cause? Absolutely. But was it my cause? It was not.

That's the moment I started really paying attention to why I say yes. Not the polite reason you might say out loud, but the real reason underneath. Am I afraid I might disappoint someone? Am I afraid people will stop asking? We want to feel needed, right? Am I afraid that if I ask one more clarifying question, I might seem annoying, or ungrateful, or maybe challenging,

like when it's your boss asking you to do one more thing and you ask clarifying questions?

As coaches, we ask our clients powerful questions every single day. We help them see what they can't see in themselves. But how often do we turn that same lens on ourselves before we say yes to one more commitment?

I had a client who was completely overwhelmed. We worked together to make a list of everything on her plate and figure out what did not belong to her. She thought always saying yes would earn her respect. Instead, it earned her more work, because she became the easy yes. Anyone the easy yes in here? Everyone went to her first.

So her overwhelm wasn't bad luck. It was the direct result of always saying yes and never setting a boundary. Her life is calmer now, because she created and started using her very own Before I Say Yes list.

So what do you want to do about this? I thought you'd never ask. Here's a simple practice I call the Before I Say Yes list. It's a handful of questions that turn a reflexive yes into a real choice.

> *It's not about saying no more. It's about saying yes on purpose.*

So how does it work? It starts with a pause. We've heard about that pause already, because we all know how important the pause is. I want to stress the importance of the pause, because sometimes yes slips out before you've even realized it.

So the next time you're asked to commit to something, before you answer, stop and ask yourself a few powerful questions. Because let's be honest: we can't say yes to everything, nor should we.

Everyone's list will look a little different. I'd like to share a list of questions I choose from.

- Do I really want to do this? That's a powerful question.
- Do I have time, or am I hoping the time just appears?
- What's my real reason for saying yes? What is my why?
- Am I taking one for the team?

This is an important one for me, so allow me a moment for an example. I was asked to chair the board at a high school where I was a trustee. I knew that board chair was a major commitment. I thought long and hard about it and decided it was aligned with my values, since my passion is education, and I really was the best person for the job at that time. But after my three-year term, it was clear that I took one for the team.

Okay, back to the list.

- Am I doing this because I think I should?
- Is it a win-win, or am I burning myself out to please someone else?
- If I say yes to this, what am I saying no to?
- Will I regret this halfway through? Anyone ever been there?
- What if I don't do it? Then what?
- What is my gut telling me?
- And does this align with my values?

For the new coaches in the room, here's one for your list:

- Am I saying yes to more training because I need it, or because it feels safer than trying to get a paying client?

You don't have to memorize any of this. There's a QR code for my LinkedIn and my website, and you can see a version of my list there.

These questions don't just prevent burnout. They build clarity, confidence, and agency. I'm passionate about this because I've coached brilliant, capable leaders who could not see that their own overwhelm was self-created. And I've lived it myself. This isn't theory. It's the strategy that changed how I run my practice, my volunteer work, and my life.

So let's practice it now. Take five seconds. Think of one thing on your plate that you wish you hadn't said yes to. Don't tell me about it. Just notice it for a second.

That's it. That's the whole practice. Those five seconds of noticing are the pause. So before you say yes to your next commitment, do it again. Pull out your list and ask yourself the questions. Because once you start looking, you'll see it everywhere. Every commitment is a choice. What's on your list? Thank you.