



Girls' Leadership Guide: *The Art of Saying No*

Ivy Walker

Serial Entrepreneur, Author & Risk Management Expert
Treasurer, S.H.A.U.N. Foundation for Girls

Most leaders of small nonprofits know the feeling. You're researching new grant opportunities, and something catches your eye. It looks like a solid opportunity. Real money that could keep your staff paid for six months or help you replace your ancient technology. There's just one catch: the RFP is written for something adjacent to your mission, not squarely inside it. Maybe it funds career readiness and your program is about mentorship. Maybe it requires a STEM component you'd have to build from scratch. Maybe it funds "youth services" broadly enough that you could squint and make your girls' program fit, if you stretched the language enough on the application.

So, you decide to stretch. You tell yourself the girls you serve will still benefit, and maybe they will. But this is how mission drift usually starts: not with a funder demanding something foreign, but with an organization reshaping its own description of itself to match whatever money is on the table.

Saying yes feels like survival. Saying no feels like leaving money on the table you desperately need. But the leaders who build organizations that last are the ones who learn to say no and remain focused.

The wrong kind of funding costs more than it gives.

A grant you had to stretch to qualify for isn't free money; it's a loan against your future capacity. Once you've written a program description broad enough to capture that funding, you're on the hook to deliver it. That might mean tracking twelve new metrics, hiring a part-time evaluator, or running a workshop series that was never part of your original plan. Girls' programs in particular can get pulled toward whatever is trending in the funding world: empowerment language one year, workforce readiness the next, mental health the year after. Chasing the trend means your program becomes a reflection of what funders are prioritizing rather than what the girls in front of you need.

Program creep is a slow leak, not a flood.

Adding a parent workshop series or a career readiness track because a grant was available and it seemed close enough, or because a board member saw a competitor doing it, or because passing on a funding opportunity felt irresponsible when you're forecasting a funding deficit down the line, can cause you to lose focus and ultimately hurt your ability to deliver meaningful and measurable outcomes for the constituents you serve. Each addition seems small and reasonable in the moment. But three years later, a staff of six is running four programs at a mediocre level instead of one program exceptionally well. Girls notice when a program is stretched thin. So do the staff who burn out trying to hold it together.

What to do instead

Before saying yes to new funding or a new program, ask three questions. Does this deepen what we already do well, or does it pull us sideways? Can we staff this without hollowing out our core work? Is this a program we would want to build even if no funding was available?

If the answer to any of those is no, it's worth pausing.

Saying no to a grant is uncomfortable in the moment. Saying no to mission drift is what keeps an organization recognizable to the girls it was built for. The nonprofits that last aren't the ones that chase every dollar. They're the ones with enough clarity about their purpose to know which dollars actually belong to them.

The next time a tempting but misaligned opportunity comes into your field of view, remember that a clear no protects the yes you already gave your girls when you started this work.