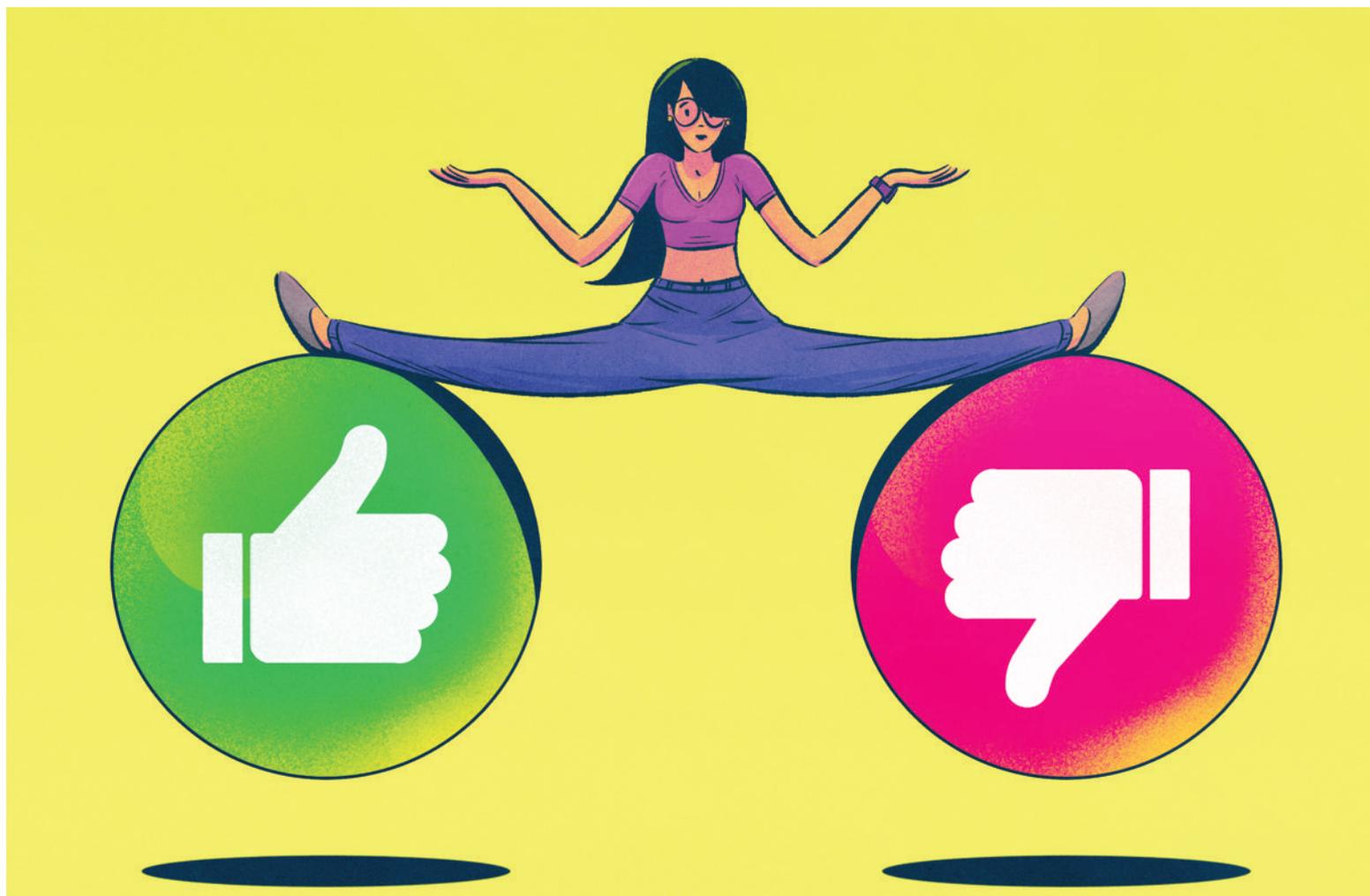


## JOURNAL REPORT | C-SUITE STRATEGIES



# Next Time You Are Invited to a Meeting, Maybe Don't Say 'Maybe'

You may think it's better than saying 'no.' It isn't.

BY JULIAN GIVI

**IT'S A FAMILIAR** routine: You send somebody an invitation—to a party, a lunch, a meeting—and you wait for the reply. Yes or no.

Or maybe.

My colleagues and I wanted to know the psychology involved with receiving (and giving) a

"maybe." Why do people answer invitations that way? And how do the invitation senders feel when they get that response?

The short answer: They hate it.

## The experiments

Our six experiments employed over a thousand participants, who were asked to adopt the role of inviter or invitee. Inviters imagined inviting a friend to a

social activity and were asked whether they'd prefer to receive "maybe" or "no." Similarly, invitees imagined being invited to an activity by a friend and were asked whether they thought their friend would prefer for them to say "maybe" or "no."

In some cases, the invitees were told they had to choose between the two options because they weren't sure they could attend; in other cases, it was because they weren't sure whether they *wanted* to attend.

Across our experiments, we found a consistent asymmetry:

Invitees underestimated how likely inviters were to prefer a "no" over a "maybe." They simply failed to realize how disrespected—and left in limbo—inviters felt with a "maybe."

Why did this disconnect occur? One likely reason is what psychologists call "motivated reasoning." Motivated reasoning occurs when people bias their thinking to arrive at a conclusion that matches their own desires. For invitees, a "maybe" is a better response in the present because it allows them to keep their options open. Because it's

better for them, they then convince themselves that it is also what the inviter wants to hear.

While our studies employed invitations in social settings, they have similar implications in the workplace, where many email platforms offer users the ability to respond to invitations by indicating "maybe."

## The takeaway

Perhaps the biggest piece of advice our work offers is to not assume that colleagues would prefer for you to say "maybe" rather than "no." When you tell someone "maybe," it often raises more questions than answers: Is a conference call with a handful of "maybes" worth holding, or should it be rescheduled? How much food should be ordered for a lunch meeting? Do you need to invite another member of the "maybes" team, so that team is covered? By contrast, when you give a direct "no," the inviter can move forward with a firm plan, knowing exactly what to expect.

Another piece of advice is to put yourself in the shoes of the colleague who invited you before deciding how to respond. In our studies, we found that taking the perspective of the inviter before responding made invitees more likely to think that a "no" is preferred to a "maybe." This simple exercise helped keep motivated reasoning at bay.

One other thought for those inclined to say "maybe": Communicating why you cannot commit just yet—perhaps you are waiting to hear back from your boss about a meeting at the same time, for example—could help keep the person who invited you from feeling slighted.

Lastly, in the event that you do tell a colleague "maybe," it is a good idea to give a definitive answer as soon as possible. Regardless of whether your answer ends up being "no" or "yes," having an answer allows the person to carry on with a plan.

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