

Workplace Boundaries: Examples To Create a Healthier Work Environment

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Do not equate the act of setting boundaries at work with selfishness. Rather, understand how work boundaries assist with performance and job satisfaction. They allow you to maintain focus and stay on track. They promote better mental health and work-life balance. They offer fellow team members guidelines on what makes you uncomfortable, leading to healthier work relationships.

What types of boundaries might you want to establish at work? The following examples present a variety of common work-related dilemmas and how setting healthy boundaries might aid in resolution.

Limiting interruptions

Bria realizes that being an administrative assistant involves a good deal of interaction with others. She takes pride in being helpful and even welcomes casual conversation. However, times

exist when she really needs team members to leave her alone. Compiling budgetary reports, for instance, demands intense focus. Losing concentration could lead to disastrous numerical errors. She wonders how to politely, but firmly, inform people to go away.

Boundary solutions: Bria could consider constructing some physical boundaries. Wearing noise-canceling headphones is a universal symbol of signaling to others not to bother you. If she has an office door, closing it when busy conveys the desire for privacy. A “do not disturb until after (select time)” sign on a cubicle or desk also works. Plus, it tells those with questions when to return instead of them popping back every few minutes.

Bria also might benefit from setting a daily “power hour” during which she is unavailable. She can inform colleagues that she tackles her most detailed work every day during this time slot. Others will become accustomed to seeking her out before or after.

Avoiding physical contact

Emily does not enjoy hugging people outside of her immediate family. To her, it feels like an awkward invasion of personal space. Unfortunately, she works with numerous individuals who offer embraces on occasions such as birthdays or to celebrate the end of a project. Emily used to intercept by extending her hand to shake. But since the pandemic, she prefers to avoid this type of contact. As the primary caregiver to her 85-year-old mother, Emily fears bringing germs home.

Boundary solutions: We all possess different comfort levels when it comes to touch. Colleagues likely will respect Emily’s wishes – as long as she makes them known. Communicating these types of boundaries can feel a bit weird. But once word gets out, everyone should be more at ease.

When Emily sees a co-worker with outstretched arms, she can say “not a hugger” and offer a warm smile, head nod, or slight bow instead. Similarly, stating “I’m not comfortable with shaking hands” is an appropriate response to an oncoming outstretched arm. In situations where Emily knows a handshake is likely, she can try to take the lead before any discomfort. She can enthusiastically say, “I’m sorry. I do not shake hands, but I am so happy to meet you!”

And it should go without saying that nobody in the workplace should be subjected to a pat on the behind, a shove, or any other form of unprofessional contact. Crossing this boundary demands immediate attention. State in no uncertain terms that the offender needs to stop. Consider notifying human resources if the act was severe or if the behavior persists.

Handling the “no subject is off limits” colleague

Want to know anything about anyone in the office? Ask Patricia. She has been around the company longer than most of its furniture. Her gift for gab can make new employees feel welcome or prove entertaining while waiting for a meeting to begin. But it also can yield discomfort. Her co-worker Maria is especially bothered by Patricia’s inquiries about when she will start a family, usually followed by her own highly detailed account of giving birth to her daughter.

Boundary solutions: Some employees like to share details of their personal life and encourage others to be open books as well. In a work environment, though, everyone must respect professional boundaries. Such consideration is vital to psychological safety and the well-being of relationships.

Patricia needs to learn to read her audience and not overstep bounds. Maria and others can help her by presenting their personal boundaries. Maria can make a statement such as “I don’t feel comfortable discussing family planning with anyone but my husband.” If Patricia gives pushback, Maria can calmly repeat her message and noticeably change the subject. (“Like I said, that’s a topic for a couple to discuss privately. Let’s move on to thoughts on that new coffee shop that opened next door.”) Such a tactic also proves effective when stuck listening to TMI. (“Patricia, I hope your daughter gives you a wonderful present each Mother’s Day for what you went through in the delivery room. Now I want to know who has tried that cinnamon pumpkin latte.”)

Standing ground is not always easy. As others witness you doing so, however, they may gain the courage to present their own boundaries. A better atmosphere results.

Valuing self-care and healthy work-life balance



Marcus considers himself a team player and a flexible employee. Lately, though, he wonders if he is setting himself up for burnout. He has worked through his lunch break for the past two weeks. The office is short-staffed, and his manager asked everyone to put forth extra effort. Marcus thinks he might have a sinus infection and would love to take a few sick days. He has PTO available, but he hesitates. During his vacation time last June, he received so many calls

and texts that he hardly felt away from the office at all. Not that this scenario doesn't play out routinely anyway. Quite frequently he just starts relaxing after hours only to have his television show disturbed by notifications of work emails.

Boundary solutions: Dedication to work is admirable. But when it starts interfering with your physical and mental well-being, better boundaries need construction. Think about it: How much of a star employee are you going to be if you allow a medical problem to get worse? Or, do you really think your manager wants you to burnout to the point of quitting?

Take sick days without guilt as necessary. If there is pushback, firmly state that coming in when ill does not help anyone. Productivity will suffer, and errors become more likely. (Not to mention, the whole staff could come down with whatever you have if it's something infectious.)

Think carefully about what you can tolerate in terms of work hours both at the office and outside of it. Set limits. If you want a lunch break, let others know you are unavailable during this time. Head to the cafeteria, or brown bag it at the park. Likewise, establish clear boundaries about how early you can come in or how late you can stay. Resentment from needing to catch an earlier train or from paying fees for being late to daycare pick-up will eventually surface. Better to establish time boundaries.

Employees thrive when they have manageable workloads, not unbearable ones. Instead of trying to compensate for lack of staff, Marcus could discuss priorities with his boss. Together, they can arrive at an accomplishable to-do list. If saddled with tasks other than what has been agreed upon, Marcus can refer back to that conversation and state that he cannot take on additional responsibilities.

Setting healthy boundaries applies to your free time, too. Just because others can communicate with you outside the workday does not mean they should. Prioritize relaxation and personal time. Construct voicemail and work email messages that tell people you will get back to them during workday hours. Such a heads-up is courteous and gets others familiar with your schedule.

And definitely unplug while on vacation! When away from the office, truly be away. Let it be known that you won't be checking messages or taking calls. Set up a co-worker in advance to cover pressing matters during your absence.

Successfully working from home

Allison enjoys telecommuting. Very organized and self-motivated, she feels more productive without office distractions. She keeps the television off so as not to be tempted to watch, and she only uses social media and game apps at lunchtime. The ability to run a load of clothes while she works is a definite plus, and the family finally adopted a dog because she is home to let it out as needed.

Lately, though, others have been disturbing Allison's scheduled workday. She didn't mind babysitting her niece once in a jam, but those "emergencies" have started becoming more frequent. She also has received texts from her kids at school asking her to drop off items they forgot. Even her husband at times doesn't seem to understand her hours are accounted for. He left her a note on the fridge to buy more dog food today, even though he passes directly by the pet store on his way home.

Boundary solutions: Allison is doing a wonderful job of regulating her own boundaries, which can be quite challenging when working from home. She eliminates temptations and sets limitations in order to remain on task. Now, she needs to focus on setting healthy boundaries with her family.

People often do not think of home-based workers as “really” working. They envision that telecommuters can change their plans at a moment’s notice or easily put off work-related projects until later. They need guidance as to what you can and cannot do. Communicate limits and schedules. Do not feel obligated to be the default baby-sitter or errand runner. Get used to saying “no,” “I can’t,” and “I won’t” to those who try to take advantage of your presence at home.

A final thing Allison and other diligent telecommuters must watch out for is the tendency to always feel “on.” To stop this mindset, establish boundaries between personal and professional realms. Do not leave work-related material scattered throughout the house. Its presence promotes thinking of your work to-do list. Create rituals for calling it quits for the day, such as logging off the computer or closing the home office door. For Allison, it might mean ceasing work when she hears her husband on the driveway closing his car door and getting dog food out of the trunk!