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BUILDING Good Fences

Respect for
healthy boundaries
leads to productive
and effective
relationships.

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BY CRYSTAL EATHERTON



Poet Robert Frost famously suggested that “good fences make good neighbors.” While there has been great literary debate about Frost’s intent, the phrase has become a shorthand of sorts that acknowledges the role boundaries can play in establishing and maintaining effective, mutually respectful relationships. It’s helpful to understand the value of setting healthy boundaries—while learning how best to communicate these to our teams.

Be Your Best Advocate

What do we mean when we talk about “boundaries”? For the purposes of this article, we’re looking at the rules and limits that we set for ourselves (or *should* set) within different relationships—within our families, with our friends, among our colleagues, in our role as a supervisor, in our service as a volunteer leader and so on. Boundaries involve what we do, what we say and how we act and react. These guardrails can be physical, mental, emotional or some combination of the three. Boundaries (and their lack) can have a significant impact on our well-being, our attitudes and the success of any relationship.

Even back in 2016—before the pandemic and its ripple effects on working environments, generally and within school

nutrition specifically—research showed that a majority of Americans were finding it a struggle to achieve work-life balance, reporting that there were not enough hours in the day to complete their to-do list. In one survey, nearly half of the 2,000 respondents determined they had little or no time to relax, and more than 40% indicated that it had been six months or more since they felt completely relaxed and stress-free. More recent reports on stress, depression, anxiety and other areas of mental health are even more discouraging. Establishing healthy boundaries isn’t a magic pill that will resolve all such issues, but building your awareness and taking steps to create better boundaries can offer improvement—and certainly can help things from getting worse.

For example, setting boundaries at work often allows you to be more productive, focusing on your responsibilities and avoiding distractions. Boundaries also have an impact on lowering work-related stress and reducing the risk of burnout, whether it's how you deal with a "toxic" coworker, delegating tasks to others, politely saying "no" to added projects or letting go of the unreasonable demands you've set for yourself. (That's right, sometimes you need to establish internal boundaries to quiet your inner critic!) Plus, when you establish and maintain healthy boundaries, you are setting a positive example for others on the team.

Know Your Limits

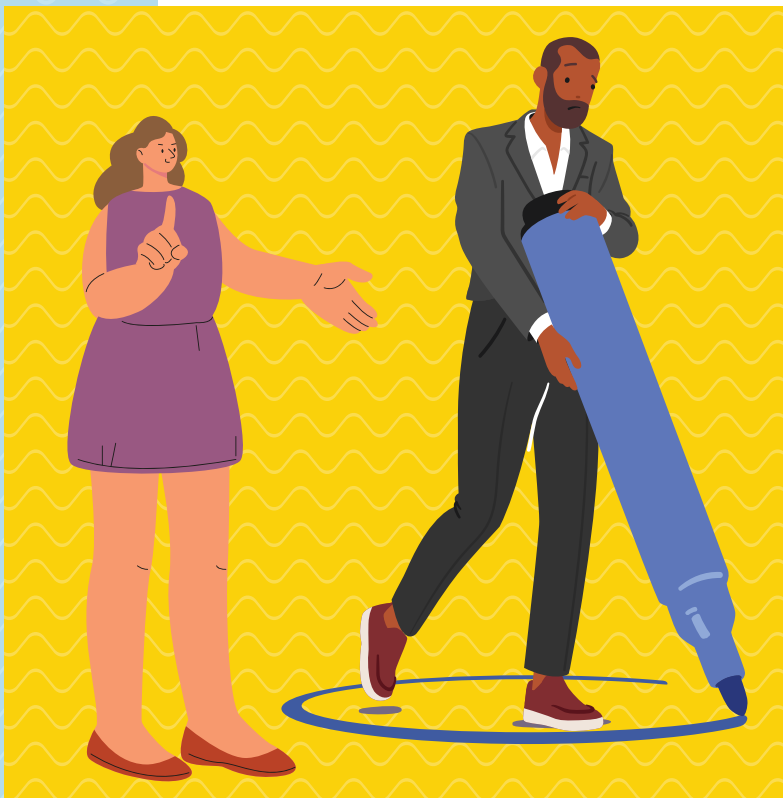
Relational boundaries can be categorized in numerous ways, often depending on the specifics of the particular connection. In this article, we're going to focus on four general areas that can involve the relationships we have at work and in our volunteer service:

- Emotional Boundaries
- Time Boundaries
- Topic Boundaries
- Physical/Tangible Boundaries

Emotional Boundaries. You have likely heard the term "toxic" used to describe someone who brings an abundance of negativity, complaining, naysaying, selfishness and all-around bad juju to the environment. Do you find yourself trying to counter the energy of a toxic person over and over until it begins to drain your own life force? This is one example where you may need to place limits on how much of an effort you are going to put into trying to change someone who resists change. Instead, you can choose to detach and disengage. Perhaps you'll decide not to ask the person for their opinions or you'll limit how much of your attention you'll give to them and their issues.

Not all emotional vampires are wholly toxic. You may know someone who is generally positive, but exceedingly needy, constantly seeking an affirming reaction and response to their feelings, opinions and actions. Or maybe there's an individual who isn't seeking your validation, but is super intense, constantly operating at level 9 or 10—you might admire their energy and focus but find it exhausting. In these cases,

Look to establish new habits and means of connection that will give you a break, allowing you to remain caring and supportive—while being fulfilled, not fatigued, by their energy.



BARRIERS TO SETTING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES



If boundary setting was simple, you probably wouldn't need the tips in this article! Even when we understand—and crave—the benefits that can result, we can be tripped up by internal perceptions and external factors. Take a look at the following list of common barriers that may have impeded your efforts to set boundaries in the past. Recognizing these, and the effect they have, will go a long way in helping you devise strategies to reduce their impact.

INTERNAL BARRIERS

- *Fear of others' possible response(s) to your requested limits:* pushback, confrontation, dismissive remarks, mockery, debate, trying to talk you out of it. (Note that these potential reactions are often propelled by our imaginations. Although none may actually come to pass, the fear of them can be very powerful.)
- *Fear of others' perceptions (spoken and unspoken) about the limits you've set:* gossip about you, accusations that you're not being a team player, complaints made to your supervisor, mischaracterizations of your motives ("She doesn't like me/us," "He's stuck up/unfriendly," "She thinks she's better than me/us").
- *Your own people-pleasing tendencies:* a need to be viewed by others in a positive light, discomfort with negative reactions, a weakness to others' persistence and pleading, a hunger for approval.
- *Pervasive insecurity, including a lack self-worth and self-respect.*
- *Not knowing where or how to start the unfamiliar exercise of setting boundaries that prioritize our own happiness and well-being.*

EXTERNAL BARRIERS

- *Current culture:*
 - "It's the way things are done around here. Why do you want to rock the boat?"
 - You work in a competitive environment with a lot of Type A personalities.
 - The "boss" sets the tone. Perhaps your supervisor (or the chapter president) often works late and on weekends, and you feel pressured to do the same, even though there's been no explicit request to do so.
- *Do you compare yourself to one or more people—including the top leader—who seem to have it all together without any apparent need for their own boundaries?*
- *The scope of your job responsibilities and the structure of your workday (filled with distractions and interruptions that hijack your to-do list) may objectively be overwhelming, but you can't imagine how it could possibly change.*

you may want to set limits on how much time you spend with these individuals in order to "detach with love." Do you have to answer every text of theirs right away? Do you have to have lunch together every day, or can you politely reduce that frequency to just once or twice a week? Look to establish new habits and means of connection that will give you a break, allowing you to remain

caring and supportive—while being fulfilled, not fatigued, by their energy.

Time Boundaries. Many of us keep trying to squeeze more and more out of each day, but there are limits to what we can do within 24 hours and remain healthy enough to keep on keeping on. Whether at work or home, others will make demands of your time. But you can set the limits around



Most of us have subjects that we don't like to discuss with anyone outside our most intimate friends and family members (and sometimes not even with them).

how you will respond to those demands. Such boundaries may come at a price—but it will be up to you to evaluate the trade-offs.

For example, you may decide that you will not work past 7 p.m. on any weeknight nor read emails on the weekends. You'll take your vacations and resist checking in while you're away. Meetings may be more business-focused and less fun to ensure they start and end on time.

This may mean that workaholics might resent your choices. It may mean that you have to let go of projects and tasks that you *want* to do to ensure you're completing what you need to do within those time restrictions. You might even decide to decline a promotion—and it's ok. Such decisions *should* mean that you have more time for what's truly important and nurturing in your life. [Editors' Note: Check out SN's January/February 2024 "From Stress to Strength" articles to learn smart strategies in the art of saying "no," delegating to others and determining if it's time for a major change.]

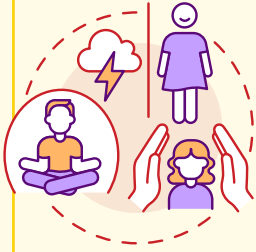
Topic Boundaries. These limits are intended to keep you safe and comfortable

in conversations with others. Most of us have subjects that we don't like to discuss with anyone outside our most intimate friends and family members (and sometimes not even with them). Common hot-button issues include politics, religion, money, parenting, weight/diets and other matters of personal health. You can't prevent someone from bringing up topics that are behind your boundary, but you have choices in the manner in which you respond. You can be direct ("Sorry, I'm not comfortable discussing politics at work") or more circumspect, such as by changing the topic or politely excusing yourself from the group. Certainly, you can be mindful about not volunteering information and opinions in the moment that you might regret later.

Physical or Tangible Boundaries.

These boundaries address rules you want to establish about actions that involve your physical body, as well as your belongings. On one end of the spectrum is your comfort level when it comes to casual touch—hugs, handshakes, etc.—from those who are colleagues and acquaintances. (After all, school nutrition professionals are known for being a fairly "huggy" group, by and large.) You can use body language to indicate your boundary here—be the first to extend a

REFLECTION EXERCISES



Setting and maintaining boundaries—and learning to recognize and respect others’ boundaries—isn’t necessarily an easy or intuitive process. For most of us, it will take some mindful reflection and self-work. Start by making time once a day or once a week to answer the following questions:

- What is the first healthy boundary that comes to mind? Why did this pop into my attention? Is there a particular individual who has triggered a need for me to set a few limits? Or perhaps there are specific circumstances that keep arising?
- What barrier(s) prevent me from setting this boundary? Do I feel reluctant or uncomfortable about creating this boundary? What steps do I need to take to get past any barriers?
- How am I going to communicate this boundary to others?
- How will I follow up with different communications to enforce this boundary over time?
- Am I being consistent in how I am implementing my boundary or am I sending mixed signals?
- Does it seem that a particular individual is resistant to my boundary requests? Is it time to extricate myself from this relationship? How about the environment at work or when volunteering? Do I need to walk away?
- Is there someone whose boundaries I might be failing to recognize and respect? Has the other person explicitly communicated a boundary that I am unintentionally (or semi-consciously) ignoring? Is the other person sending indirect cues about a boundary that I have missed?

Repeat this list with another boundary as appropriate.

hand for a fist bump, high five or handshake or even keep your hands in your pockets and a foot or so of distance if hugs are out of bounds for you.

You can also set boundaries when it comes to material items, whether it’s wrapping your lunch up tight to deter those who think everything in the office

refrigerator is communal or keeping your personal coffee mug or water bottle in your locker or desk drawer, rather than leaving it in a cupboard or on the counter. Perhaps you’ve been burned by the person who repeatedly asks to borrow items—a book, a favorite apron, your last pad of sticky notes—and never returns or replaces them. You may have to firmly, but politely, explain that you have adopted a no-borrow policy, making suggestions about where else they might go to find what they seek.

Communicating Your Boundaries

Some boundaries can be kept to yourself, but many others will only be effective when you give voice to your limits. This is especially the case with time boundaries that impact your working relationships.

Get used to the discomfort of saying “I’m not comfortable with...”. Many of us do not find it easy to self-advocate, especially in a work environment, but this is a critical element of boundary setting. Similarly, avoid the temptation to apologize. Enforcing boundaries is part of every functional relationship, and you don’t need to express regrets for establishing limits to what you will and won’t tolerate.

If you are setting boundaries that will change longstanding processes and expectations, be sure to communicate the changes clearly—and in writing. For example, if you are not going to check emails after a certain hour, you can incorporate that into your signature line or set an out-of-office response for those off-hours. With your team, define legitimate emergencies that are exceptions to the rule, such as the freezer losing power over the weekend



No matter what boundary you set, consistency is crucial to making it an effective tool. Resist temptations to waver in your intention. It may feel uncomfortable at first, but it will get easier each time you show others, and yourself, that in prioritizing your health, happiness and well-being, you will be a better partner in all your relationships.

or a team member being unexpectedly hospitalized.

It may be scary to tell your supervisor that you cannot take on another new project or level of responsibility. Be brave and articulate that you are not being unreasonably arbitrary in this decision. You can politely—and unapologetically—explain that you are feeling overworked and at risk of burnout. Note that you don't want to take on a project that will not get your best performance—and that even may negatively impact your other responsibilities.

Be advised that there's a fine line between a helpful explanation and one that sounds like you are seeking sympathy and validation. You can still stand firm while allowing an explanation to cast your decision in a human light. Context can be helpful, but keep details to a minimum.

Plan for possible responses to your boundary declaration. While you can hope

to avoid an unpleasant confrontation, you should expect *some* pushback. You may want to do a little role playing with a trusted friend or family member to prepare a short, confident, courteous response if someone challenges your boundary. Consider a few alternatives that you might offer, if appropriate to the situation.

No matter what boundary you set, consistency is crucial to making it an effective tool. When you are inconsistent in sticking to your own rules, you risk them being ignored or disrespected by others, who won't believe that you're truly serious. Resist temptations to waver in your intention. It may feel a bit uncomfortable at first, but it will get easier each time you show others, and yourself, that in prioritizing your health, happiness and well-being, you will be a better partner in all your relationships. **SN+**

Crystal Eatherton is Child Nutrition Director, Placer Union High School District, Calif., and this article is based on her SNA Annual National Conference 2023 session "Boundaries in Leadership." SN Senior Editor Patricia Fitzgerald contributed to this article.

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