

A guide to creating, communicating, and enforcing Personal Boundaries

What is a personal boundary? Why is it important?

A boundary is simply a limit we establish for ourselves that allows us to build healthy relationships with others. This limit dictates what we are willing to accept (or not) as an appropriate and safe way for others to interact with us. Sometimes we'll set personal boundaries for everyone we interact with; other times, we may set particular boundaries for specific individuals. Knowing and communicating your boundaries (through your words and actions) is all about setting expectations.

What do boundaries look like?

Boundaries look different for everyone, but here are some examples:

- Scheduling “busy” time on your calendar to work without interruptions (think: flow!)
- Not discussing workplace gossip with co-workers
- Learning to say “no” or “not right now” when your plate is full
- Responding to email during specific times of the day, not as soon as they arrive
- Limiting discussing your personal life in the workplace

How do I set boundaries?

There are four steps to setting successful boundaries:



IDENTIFY



DEFINE



COMMUNICATE



ENFORCE

This guide is designed to walk you through this process. As you work through it, you will find what boundaries you need to establish and learn how to set a realistic limit that allows you to do productive work. Successful boundaries can save us from emotional stress and frustration in the short term, and create rewarding and safe relationships in the long term.

Identify Necessary Boundaries

How do we identify when a boundary needs to be established?

There are a few ways you can identify when and where a boundary should be set.

1. Pay attention to your emotions.

Emotions can act as a compass and give you the data you need to make decisions about which boundaries to set. Pay particular attention to anger, frustration, and resentment; these are key indicators that you need stronger boundaries.

2. Identify your core values and any possible threats to you living those values.

What are your core values? Are you allowing situations that create internal conflict with your commitment to practicing them? What boundaries do you need in place to live true to your core values? What adjustments may you need to make in your life to live your values more fully?

3. Ask people you respect about successful boundaries they've set.

This can help you identify boundaries you'd like to set and give you a model to build yours. Ask what boundaries they have in place, why they decided to draw those boundaries, and how they've been successful in communicating and enforcing them.

Your Turn: Identify Your Boundaries

1. What are some situations that cause you to feel angry, frustrated, or resentful?

Wrestle a little with these situations. What is the root cause of this frustration?

2. What are your core values? Is there anything in your life that could threaten your ability to live these values?

Core Values	Potential Threats to Values

What are some boundaries you may need to draw to help address these threats or live your core values more fully?

3. Is there anyone in your life that you trust that has good boundaries in place? This could be a good friend, a leader, a colleague, a mentor, etc. List potential people here:

What are some of their boundaries you've observed?

Defining Boundaries

How do we know which boundary we should draw?

Consider the following questions when deciding your boundaries:

1. What is my ideal outcome? What would the perfect situation look like?
2. Does this outcome still allow me to complete my work responsibilities and maintain necessary* working relationships?
3. What actions can I control that could facilitate this outcome?

**Remember that necessary doesn't mean you have to be best friends with everyone you work with, but you must be able to treat your colleagues with respect and collaborate where your responsibilities overlap.*

Your Turn: Defining Your Ideal Outcome

1. Let's take a look at your ideal outcome. Write it here:

2. Does this outcome still allow you to complete your work responsibilities and maintain necessary working relationships?

If you answered "no" to either of these questions, you'll need to revisit this outcome and adjust it until you can say "yes." It's important that our boundaries keep us safe and secure but also allow us to work in a productive and safe environment.

If you had to revise your outcome, you can write your new one here:

3. What actions are in your control that could facilitate this outcome?

This could be conversations that need to be had, responses that need to be prepared, or even actions that need to be discontinued. Remember, you likely have more control over this outcome than you realize. List them here:

Communicating Boundaries

Why do I have to communicate my boundaries?

In order to fully establish your boundaries, you have to communicate them to those around you. It is not fair or realistic to expect people to respect boundaries that they don't know about. This doesn't have to be a grand gesture. It can be simple adjustments to interactions, (an auto-reply on your email, a posted sign on outside your cubby) or it may be a firm statement (or crucial conversation) of the boundary.

What does this look like?

It really helps to plan exactly what you're going to say, almost as if you're writing a script. If you do this work in advance, you'll be more comfortable saying what you need to say in the moment, rather than changing your mind and backing out last minute. Here's a formula to consider while crafting your boundary statements. Some may be short and sweet. Some may need more meat.

1. Describe the situation and the feelings that result using "I" statements.

I feel uncomfortable engaging in office gossip.

I feel frustrated when I am interrupted during our meetings.

I get anxious when I am asked to do things with little notice.

2. Express your desired result.

I need to ask you to refrain from office gossip when I'm around

I'd like to ask that you wait until I am finished before speaking.

I need you to discuss timeframes with me before we commit to shared deadlines.

3. State consequences. (These can be positive or negative)

This will allow me to feel safer in my workplace and develop better relationships with my team.

These interruptions prevent me from fully expressing my ideas and undermine the practice of our team's value of respect.

This will allow me to get my work done and produce higher quality work on our shared projects.

Example Final Statements:

- I feel uncomfortable engaging in office gossip. I need to ask you to refrain from it when I'm around. This will allow me to feel safer in my workplace and develop better relationships with my team.
- I feel frustrated when I am interrupted during our meetings. I'd like to ask that you wait until I am finished speaking as these interruptions prevent me from fully expressing my ideas and undermine the practice of our team's value of respect.
- I get anxious when I am asked to do things with little notice. I need you to discuss timeframes with me before we commit to share deadlines. This will allow me to get my work done and produce higher quality work on our shared projects.

Your Turn: Crafting a Boundary Statement

Describe the Situation	Express Your Desired Result	State Consequences

Your Final Statement(s):

Is there anything else I need to know about establishing boundaries?

As you work through them and prepare to communicate and enforce these new boundaries, remember the following:

1. Drawing boundaries takes time. It's not going to happen in a day. It'll take time to identify and create your boundaries. And then even more time to establish and enforce them. Be patient with yourself and forgiving of others during this time.
2. Boundaries are allowed to change. What's best for you today may not be what's best for you in a year. Allow yourself the space to revisit your boundaries and let them grow as you do.
3. Your first attempt may not be perfect. Don't let the weight of perfect boundaries keep you from getting started. A good boundary is better than no boundary. Start with something and continue to work from there.

Enforcing Your Boundaries

What do I do if someone tests the boundaries I set?

Often, merely communicating your boundaries is not sufficient to fully enforce them. People need time to adjust to your new boundaries, just as you did. In this case, it's best to assume that they just forgot and aren't doing it maliciously. However, it is also best to assume that people will overstep your boundaries and prepare how you will handle those violations. Here's how:

1. Identify potential violations. What are some ways that someone might overstep a boundary you've established?
2. Prepare your responses for these violations. Consider 3 responses: Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3. How will you handle minor violations as opposed to major? What if they repeatedly violate your boundaries?
3. Practice your responses out loud, even if to no one in particular.
 - a. "My plate is really full right now."
 - b. "Let me look at my work load and see if I can fit that in."
 - c. "I felt disrespected by your comment."

Example: Maintaining six-foot distance at work

Violation	Tier 1 Response	Tier 2 Response	Tier 3 Response
Someone's standing too close	Personally taking one step back	A more firm reminder: "Six-foot distancing, please."	"I'm not comfortable standing this close. Can we putting a little more space between us?"
Someone calls a face-to-face meeting	"Could we chat about this over the phone instead?"	"I don't feel comfortable holding in-person meetings yet. Could we hold this meeting over Zoom or over the phone?"	Discuss with the supervisor about creating a team norm around in-person meetings.

Your Turn: Preparing for Violations

Violation	Tier 1 Response	Tier 2 Response	Tier 3 Response

What if they push it?

It's important to note that as you begin to set boundaries (especially if you've had flimsy boundaries before), people will likely resist or push back. It may be a good exercise to imagine how the people affected by your boundaries may respond to your boundary statements.

You're allowed to revisit and change your boundaries as you change and grow, but this shouldn't be a result of pushback from others. When you've established a boundary, you need to honor that boundary. If you dishonor your boundaries, you give others permission to dishonor them as well.

Your Turn: Prepare for Pushback

Here are some situations to consider:

What might you say if they...

Situation	Response
Press for more details?	
Say you're overreacting?	
Laugh at you or tease you?	
Excuse their own behavior/dismiss your needs?	
Accept ownership and show they respect your boundary?	

Living a Boundaried Life

As you develop a pattern of identifying, creating, and enforcing boundaries, you'll find that it gets easier. You'll find where you need more strict boundaries and where you can be a little more flexible. You'll get more comfortable telling people "no" when their request falls outside of your responsibilities or your values. The keys to boundaries is consistency and communication. You've got this!