



## Management Assistance Program

### **SETTING BOUNDARIES AT WORK:**

Helping others to understand your boundaries while respecting and protecting theirs

### **GOALS:**

The goal of this module is to provide organizations, managers and employees with the tools necessary to set and abide by boundaries in the workplace to create a healthy and productive work environment.

The specific goals are to help organizations, managers, and employees:

- Understand the importance of boundary setting
- Learn how to set and maintain boundaries

### **OVERVIEW:**

According to educators at the University of California, San Francisco, "When we talk about needing space, setting limits, determining acceptable behavior, or creating a sense of autonomy, we are really talking about boundaries. It is a general misconception that having good boundaries will distance you from others. However, the truth is that when you know where you end and others begin, you can closely engage with others because you will not feel overwhelmed or unprotected."<sup>1</sup> Boundaries are important in the workplace because they define the limits and responsibilities of the people with whom you interact in the workplace. When workplace boundaries are clearly defined, the organization works more efficiently. Setting proper boundaries can result in a sense of accountability for all staff members. Job responsibilities can be more precisely assigned, and job performance can be more accurately measured.

Boundaries are the invisible lines that are drawn to help define roles and interactions in relationships. When these lines are crossed, negative consequences may result. Having weak boundaries or no boundaries at all is as debilitating as violating boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup> "Setting Healthy Workplace Boundaries." University of California, San Francisco. 21 July 2006. Available at <http://ucsfhr.ucsf.edu/index.php/assist/article/setting-healthy-workplace-boundaries>

Violation of boundaries, weak boundaries or no boundaries can cause an unhealthy work environment with:

- Poor performance
- Workplace bullying
- Low morale
- Reduced motivation to take on additional tasks or responsibilities
- Over-worked employees
- Disrespectful staff
- Sexual harassment
- Acts of violence
- Legal liability

The objectives presented in this module will help employees, managers and organizations set and follow boundaries in the workplace to create a healthy and productive work environment.

To gain a better understanding of the importance of setting boundaries in the work place, it is first necessary to define the boundaries. Boundaries may be defined from different perspectives, all valid:

### *Boundary Definitions:*

- Letting people know the affect their behavior has on you.<sup>2</sup>
- The lines that we draw that help us define our roles and interactions in relationships.<sup>3</sup>
- The ability to know where you end and where another person begins.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to recognize the types of boundaries that need to be established in the workplace. (These will be discussed in detail in Objective #2.)

### *Types of Boundaries:*

- Job Responsibility Boundaries - Individual job responsibilities and duties.
- Interpersonal Boundaries – Interaction with co-workers and managers in the work place.
- Personal Boundaries – Special/individual boundaries.

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<sup>2</sup> "Workplace Bullying." Impact Factory.com. Accessed 30 Oct 2006. Available at: <[http://www.impactfactory.com/p/workplace\\_bullying\\_skills\\_training.com](http://www.impactfactory.com/p/workplace_bullying_skills_training.com)>

<sup>3</sup> Sabney, Mary and Gafner, George. "Boundaries in the workplace". The Health Care Supervisor. 1996 36-41.

<sup>4</sup> Weaver, Richard and Farrell, John. Managers as Facilitators. (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco, 1997) 148.

### OBJECTIVES:

#### 1. Understanding the Importance of Boundary Setting

Setting boundaries in the workplace, whether job responsibility, interpersonal, or personal boundaries, is important to maintaining good productivity and social dynamics in the work place environment. Without boundaries, there are no firm guidelines for behavior. When professional boundaries and priorities have been clearly defined, a group can function more effectively in the workplace.

Most companies and organizations have a code of ethics or fixed rules of behavior. For example, many companies state that all employees must work at least 8 hours a day, employees must ask for approval before taking time off, and must call to speak with a manager or co-worker when calling in sick. Other companies have strict rules pertaining to privacy issues: personal information must not be shared, no cameras are allowed in the workplace, and proprietary information must be locked up each night. The majority of companies also have a code of ethics that outlines acceptable and unacceptable behavior. These fixed rules of behavior are company boundaries that help keep every member of the company on the same page. In addition to the set company guidelines, managers need to create specific boundaries for their staff, and employees and managers must establish interpersonal and personal boundaries for themselves.

Having rigid or no boundaries can cause negative consequences, violence being the most extreme. If employees feel as though they have been betrayed or taken advantage of, violent behavior i.e. physical attacks, murder, or sexual harassment, could be one result. Weak or no boundaries could also result in low morale, poor performance, and even legal liability. Firm rules must be established, and certain violations of boundaries such as lying, stealing, or physically abusing a co-worker should not be tolerated.

Mary Sabney and George Gafner address the prevalence of boundary crossing in the health care environment. According to their article, "health care workers, though motivated by good intentions, occasionally cross the invisible line drawn between helper and the person being helped." The article highlights a situation where a social worker became personally involved with two of her alcoholic patients. One of the patients relapsed and beat her up, and the other brought a sexual harassment law suit against her soon after their relationship ended.

### 2. Setting and Maintaining Boundaries

When professional boundaries and priorities have been clearly defined, a group can function more effectively in the workplace. If each team member understands what to do, how to do it, and when to do it, the workplace will be a more productive environment. Managers must define the boundaries. An effective manager understands that failing to define boundaries, having no boundaries, or having rigid boundaries can have a negative impact on the organization.

#### *Job Responsibility Boundaries*

Job responsibility boundaries refer to boundaries that a manager needs to set for each staff member. An individual's professional boundaries should be created based on his or her basic responsibilities and reporting relationships. When a manager clearly defines their employee's role and responsibilities, it establishes accountability and leaves little room for excuses and blame. For example, a staff member cannot legitimately blame another employee for his or her poor job performance.

For employees, professional boundaries become more clearly defined when you can answer these questions satisfactorily:

- Who gives you your assignments?
- To whom do you report?
- Who gives you feedback?
- Who sets your work priorities?
- How is your company and client personal information kept secure?
- Do you know how to treat all staff members fairly without positive or negative feelings influencing your decisions?

These questions help employees understand their work role boundaries. For instance, employees should always check with their manager before taking on tasks from a person they do not report to. Make a rule that when someone requires your assistance for a task, they must ask your manager for permission. This will allow the employee to meet his or her specific job duties and obligations in addition to other company needs.

For managers, this example from the chapter "Facilitation Is Boundary Management" in *Managers as Facilitators* by Richard Weaver and John Farrell shows the importance of setting good work role boundaries:

Sarah, the project group leader, was feeling steamed again. The group had just listed the next set of tasks to be completed and several group members had once again agreed to do a minimal amount of work. Sarah could see they were going to end another meeting with important work still unassigned. In the past she had ended up doing it,

and she was tired of working extra hours while others went home on time. She felt it was increasingly futile. As she looked around the room she noticed others who always took more than their share were tired of this as well. Just then one of her employees strolled into the meeting 15 minutes late....Remembering the concept of boundaries; she could see that the group had not adequately defined the "working role boundary".

As the authors stated, in this situation, the project leader had not established or defined the working role boundary for herself or her staff. Her staff members were not taking on their fair share of responsibilities, and were quite disrespectful. The project leader also needs to be able to delegate responsibilities to staff authoritatively, and not get trapped into doing most of the work.

Katrina Katsarelis suggests the following items below to help establish and maintain boundaries in the workplace:

- *Pushing Boundaries*  
Once you set boundaries, let people know when they are asking too much. "If a co-worker says, 'I'll call you later tonight to discuss this project,' you can simply say 'please don't call me after 6pm'."
- *The Right Way to Say No*  
The wrong way to say no is the passive aggressive approach of taking on too many projects and just not doing them. A "No" needs to be made very clear. "Without limits it becomes very difficult to say no to requests and honor your own needs."
- *Ask For What You Need*  
When you are nearing your workload limit, enlist the help of supervisors, coworkers and subordinates. If you need additional staff or an assistant to help you manage your growing workload, present your boss with the problem and a solution.

### *Interpersonal Boundaries*

In addition to job responsibility boundaries, interpersonal boundaries should be negotiated in the workplace because "professional and interpersonal boundaries substantially impact workplace productivity and the quality of social environment."

Interpersonal Boundary parameters include:

- The tone people use with one another.
- The attitude and approach co-workers use with each other.
- The ability to focus on work objectives even with people you do not like or with whom you are having a personal conflict.

## Management Resources

- The ability to effectively set limits with others who have poor boundaries.
- Clearly defining consequences when a boundary is violated and sticking to it.

Interpersonal boundaries can also include limiting work conversations and e-mails to appropriate topics, i.e. no sexual or personal topics, no discussion of salaries, and no hanging of offensive or religious photographs in your office. Again, this is usually included in company policies, but it would not hurt for managers to reiterate this information to their staff.

Interpersonal boundaries must be created so co-workers can work together productively, which in turn, profits the organization. When people have weak interpersonal boundaries, workplace bullying can occur. An individual may be constantly taken advantage of because he or she has not created boundaries. If that employee does not speak up nor lets his or her co-workers know they are being disrespectful, the behavior will continue. When your boundaries are weak, you may attract needy or disrespectful people who will devour the time and energy you need for your family and work.

### *Personal Boundaries*

Setting personal boundaries can also result in a better workplace and an emotionally healthy employee.

In the age of technology, employees are faced with a double-edged sword. They have unlimited means of communications, but are also burdened with the responsibility of being "online" and available at all times. "High tech tools can ease work pressure, but beware: by enabling instantaneous round-the-clock communications, such gadgetry can also trap managers into remaining on the job at all times, in all places." It is important to set personal boundaries to allow yourself time away from work.

The Economist Business Unit White Paper, "Striking a Healthy Workplace Balance," provides insight on how to "get a life while staying productive."<sup>5</sup> The article emphasizes the importance of setting boundaries. It states, "It's hard to overestimate the benefits of returning to the office from a relaxing vacation or weekend spent tending to the garden or fixing the sink. Such breaks are necessary mental respites that help unleash creativity and prevent your outlook from becoming pedestrian and grim. Managers make the mistake of never switching off. 'The inbox is never going to be

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<sup>5</sup> "Striking a Healthy Workplace Balance: How to 'get a life' while staying productive."

completely empty no matter how much you do so you need to set boundaries'."

### *Establishing Boundaries*

Once you identify the need for boundaries, it is important to establish your own explicit boundaries as goals, recognizing that the boundaries are not rigid barriers but guidelines for behavior.

- Draw distinct boundaries between family time and work time.
  - Force yourself to leave your blackberry/cell phone/pagers/laptops at home when you're not working.
  - Make firm vacation plans well in advance; sit down each year at the end of December to plan personal trips – that way they are scheduled on the calendar.
- Be flexible
  - A flexible attitude is essential. You are ultimately on the same team trying to accomplish day-to-day tasks. If you are willing to work late during occasional crunch times, chances are your employer will be more receptive to letting you leave early for an occasional school play.
- The Bottom Line
  - Whatever your boundaries are, work together with your employer to achieve the balance you need to be a successful parent and employee. *Be creative and present an alternate solution.* The bottom line is that your employer thinks in terms of its issues, goals and needs. Only you are the expert on your own issues, goals and needs. Nobody is going to come to you with solutions so it is incumbent upon you to make your life the way you want it.

### *Violating Boundaries*

When job responsibility boundaries, interpersonal boundaries or personal boundaries are violated there should be consequences. In most cases, these issues are left to the discretion of the manager and employee.

Proper procedures for serious violations are usually outlined in the company's employee manual. While the consequences depend on the severity of the action, serious boundary violations such as sexual harassment, physical or mental abuse, lying, and cheating should not be tolerated. Supervisors need to be aware of early warning signs of boundary violations, and be prepared to deal effectively with the offender.

### **SUMMARY:** Tips for Setting Boundaries at Work

- Establish firm work role boundaries for each of your staff members so each person understands his or her obligations.
- Make a list of job responsibilities, interpersonal, and personal boundaries, and abide by them.
- Know your limits. Know what you want. To protect yourself from going "overboard," be organized and on top of your commitments, including knowing yourself and your strengths to give accurate estimates of timeframes.
- Tactfully and openly *communicate* your goals and limits.
- When boundaries have been violated, address the issues as soon as possible in a clear controlled and positive manner.
- When communicating boundaries use assertive language regarding the observed behaviors, concerns regarding those behaviors and the consequences of continuance.
- Be available to discuss differences of views to achieve compromise and agreements.
- When you are nearing your workload limit, enlist the help of supervisors, coworkers and subordinates. If you need additional staff or an assistant to help you manage your growing workload, present your boss with the problem and a solution.
- Violations of boundaries should be handled efficiently. Serious offenses should not be tolerated.
- Human Resources or Senior Management should be made aware of serious boundary offenses by the person(s) who are directly involved.