



## Professional Boundaries at Work

### Our Behavioral Compass

**B**oundaries are like guardrails on a very winding and treacherous road. They are in place to keep you from plunging over the side of a cliff. In other words, when boundaries are set, you are much safer and confident in your travels. It's no different at work. Professionally, we need to know where the line is for our safety.

#### Examples where boundaries are needed:

- Getting saddled with another person's responsibilities.
- Working too much overtime.
- Having unending conflict with a supervisor.
- Bringing work-related stress or workload home.
- Increased chaos in the workplace environment.
- Disliking your work so much that you are ready to change jobs.
- Working with a difficult co-worker with no resolution.

#### Boundary Self-Assessment Questions

Good boundaries force you to ask pointed questions of yourself such as:

- How many hours will I allow myself to work?
- When is it time to say no to an unreasonable request?
- Where should the social line begin and end between an administrator and their staff?
- Should I receive exorbitant gifts from a client or patient?
- How personal should our conversations be at work and with whom?
- Can others gossip to me inappropriately without any restraint or gentle correction?
- How do I navigate around a belligerent co-worker, client or supervisor?
- Should the corporation expect blind obedience of me in spite of how my personal health and welfare are impacted?
- When is it the right time to ask for a raise or compensation adjustment and what do I do if the answer is "not now" again?

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### A Friend's Experience

I have a friend whose company was bought out by a much larger organization. Although there were certain financial and resource benefits to being a part of a larger company, their expectations and demands were unreasonably high.

My friend finally said "I can only do what I can do." Instead of cramming every expectation they had of her department into each day, she drew a boundary and was able to manage the job much more successfully while still accomplishing the necessary workload.

I think you get the point. If we don't have a behavioral compass or some kind of professional standard to go by, we will have a dissatisfying work experience, feel taken advantage of, and at the very least, compromise our performance.

Having clear boundaries will many times help define and maintain priorities in your personal life. As a counselor, for example, I've seen casualties in the home as a direct result of "boundary-less" behavior in the workplace. The family or friends can start feeling displaced and life can seem to become all about work! When one area becomes all-consuming, other areas are bound to suffer.

### The Issue of Boundary-less Resentment

How do we know if we don't have good boundaries at work?

**Resentment!** Resentment is the indicator light on your personal dashboard that signals there are ongoing problems that are deep and are not being managed or controlled.

Most workers prefer to avoid issues that are getting out of control, thinking they will work themselves out on their own. Rare is the case that this happens, especially if it has been a problem for a while.

If you find yourself frequently not going to the lunchroom at the same time as the "other person," or going out of your way to avoid them in a staff meeting, or are thinking about the hurt or injustice they caused you, that is called resentment. The emotional 'signal light' of resentment or bitterness is flashing because it is time to talk or deal with the elephant in the room once and for all.

### How to Draw a Boundary and Stop the Chaos

**Pick your principal and stick with it:** Frequently I find that when it is time to speak up about a situation which is becoming intolerable for us, someone more powerful or persuasive can talk us out of our concern. Be clear about the change necessary and don't back down.

Whatever your boundary is don't deviate from it. Whether you are negotiating a request, need to say no, or have to articulate a concern, be consistent about what is really important to you and the organization.

**Decide what's negotiable and what's not negotiable.**

We all have times at work when we take the high road, sacrifice, give the benefit of the doubt to others, and occasionally do what we don't like. On the other hand, there are times when strict boundaries or expectations must be adhered to and are non-negotiable. Only you can decide between the two.

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### Ask yourself; when is enough, enough?

Boundaries let others know where you stand on a matter, but they only work if you stick to them. My favorite phrase is, “A boundary without a consequence is only a suggestion.”

Ask yourself this question, “Should I let this issue go, or is this a hill I want to die on”?

Remember that whether a boundary is needed in your professional life or personal life, the decision is up to you in terms of where the issue goes from here. Another great phrase to memorize is this:

“IN LIFE YOU GET  
WHAT YOU TOLERATE!”

For more information regarding Professional Boundaries in the Workplace go to [teamworks-works.com](http://teamworks-works.com) and click on “workshops” or email me at [bill@teamworks-works.com](mailto:bill@teamworks-works.com)



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.