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Setting limits: how to keep work relationships from becoming sources of stress

When your view of appropriate boundaries differs from that of your colleagues, students or others up and down the organizational chart, your life at work can be extra-stressful.

You may try to maintain professional distance, then end up being perceived as “cold.” Or, you can be friendly and always willing to help, which can backfire when you need to assert yourself.

So where is the balance and what boundaries do you need to pay attention to?

Limits and boundaries

“A boundary is a limit defining you in relationship to someone or to something,” says clinical psychologist, executive coach, author and speaker Dana Gionta, PhD. She specializes in leadership and team development, boundaries in the workplace, organizational performance and employee well-being, stress management, and self-care.

“Boundaries can be physical, emotional and mental,” Gionta says. “I believe it’s important to

understand our limits and have boundaries, because boundaries serve many functions. They help to protect us, to clarify what is our responsibility and what is another’s; to preserve our physical and emotional energy; to live our values, maintain our standards and priorities, and to honor our personal limits.”

Feelings such as guilt, resentment, anger, and repeated discomfort are often key signs a boundary likely needs to be set, Gionta adds.

Is “niceness” unhealthy?

Maintaining professional boundaries doesn’t mean we can’t be caring individuals. “We can show empathy, compassion and support and still maintain a professional way of interacting with others,” says Gionta.

Yet when the balance tips to the side of friendly-and-nice, others can potentially take advantage of us, or perceive us as having an agenda, whether true or not.



“Neither outcome is healthy for the ‘too nice’ person,” Gionta notes.

Key elements to consider

Every workplace has some unwritten rules as well as those stated in its policies manual. You can observe or ask more senior colleagues to learn what the most important department and campus norms are.

There are some key elements for maintaining professional relationships at work. Gionta offers these:

Respect: Aim to be respectful and thoughtful to those you work with—even if you don’t like them or think they deserve it. It is the right and professional way to be. You will feel better about yourself when you show respect. Most people have

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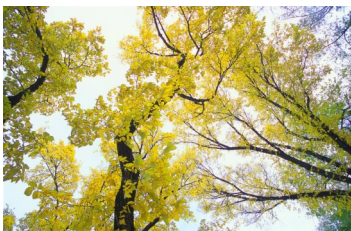
- Dana Gionta, PhD

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Respect for boundaries can create better workplace harmony

"I believe that working with good people matters because then the work environment is good. If there is a sense of respect and belief among the people you work with, that is when good work is done."

- Ranbir Kapoor



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something quite likeable about them. To find it, open your mind and heart, and let go of any immediate judgments.

Kindness: Be kind, and do not gossip about others. Praise, recognition, kindness and acknowledgement of others' efforts are what create a positive, supportive environment. Life is hard enough, so why make it harder? We have a choice in the attitude and energy we bring each day. We also never know what personal difficulties a colleague might be going through in their lives. We can choose our approach so that we do not add to someone else's pain.

Be trustworthy: Keep confidences. Don't talk negatively about co-workers or repeatedly complain about others. No one likes to learn others are talking critically about them. This creates an environment of mistrust and negativity. It is contagious, and if it is persistent, the working environment becomes unhealthy.

Don't play favorites: Favoritism, even the perception of favoritism, can create stress within a work environment. It can give the appearance of unfair treatment, especially if you are in the role of rating the performance of

your staff. When employees no longer feel that promotion is based on their effort and ability, insecurity around career advancement heightens. Resentment, mistrust, perceived loss of control, competitiveness and discouragement are key outcomes of a work culture where favoritism is perceived to exist. Instead, work to show genuine recognition for others' contributions, and help them feel valued and cared about equally.

When you understand appropriate boundaries, respect them, and communicate clearly about

them, you can improve work relationships and reduce some frequent causes of stress.

Resources

- Dr. Dana Gionta website: www.danagionta.com
- *From Stressed to Centered: A Practical Guide to a Healthier and Happier You*, by Dana Gionta and Dan Guerra (Sea Hill Press, 2015; available on Amazon)
- *How Successful People Set Boundaries at Work*, by Dana Gionta and Dan Guerra (Inc. magazine, April 2015) <https://www.inc.com/dana-gionta-dan-guerra/how-to-manage-boundaries-at-work.html>
- *7 Tips for Setting Boundaries At Work*, by Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S. (Psych Central blog post) <https://psychcentral.com/blog/7-tips-for-setting-boundaries-at-work/>

Some ground rules for friendships at work

- Do aim to cultivate a sense of connection with a co-worker/colleague, based on shared interests, hobbies, life experiences or values.
- Don't try to develop a very personal relationship, with intimate knowledge of others' home lives, children or financial issues.
- Aim for shared connection and support, rather than intimacy, which is best reserved for close friends, family, partner/spouse.
- Do socialize with co-worker friends and other co-workers who you may not know or connect with as easily. Include others in the conversations and activities to create a supportive environment. Everyone wants to feel accepted.
- Be mindful not to exclude others or choose "favorites." This leads to hurt feelings, resentment, increased conflict and low morale. A clear boundary is needed to address this.
- Do aim to keep socializing outside the workplace separate, by not frequently bringing up those events or activities to other co-workers who were not invited. Be considerate of others' feelings.

Source: Dana Gionta, PhD