



*For you, your career, and your life*

# RAP

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## Maintaining Professional Boundaries in the Workplace

You probably know someone who loves to chime in with their own opinion during a conversation, even if the subject is far beyond their area of expertise. It's likely you have also come across a colleague or two who shares way too much about their personal life. Both of these fall into the category of boundary issues. A misstep in either area can have a negative consequences for the person who's crossing the line.

What lines should never be crossed? What can seasoned professionals tell us about the importance of maintaining

certain boundaries between work and personal activities?

### Stay in Your Lane

"The issue of professional boundaries comes up almost daily in my job," says Houston area human resources management consultant Arquella Hargrove. "Maintaining professional boundaries means staying in your own lane. That means staying true to who you are and what you know. It means staying away from making a recommendation or giving your opinion if a question is not within your area of expertise. Know what you know and what you are good at. It's when you cross over into someone else's lane that you can start having issues in the workplace."

### To Share or Not to Share?

There are different personality styles in any workplace, and there are different cultures of sharing as well. "Some people are protective of their private lives. Others love to share anything and everything," says Hargrove. "They'll tell you all about their weekend, where they went, how much they had to drink, and

Maintaining boundaries can be a challenging balancing act. Understanding what boundaries you need to set for yourself and others is part of your development as a resilient and productive professional. If you find yourself with questions about what boundaries are appropriate during your residency, should you have a resource available 24/7: your Resident Assistance Program. A confidential and caring resource for even the most difficult personal and work related issues, RAP professionals will listen to your concerns.

Contact RAP: 813-870-3344

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what their boyfriend or girlfriend said or did."

Sharing too much information can come back to hurt us, says Hargrove. "We have to be careful about sharing personal information. There's a chance someone else may use that information against us."

A person who "overshares" can end up damaging their professional reputation. "Less is always better," says Hargrove. "The way we represent ourselves speaks volumes."

The way we carry ourselves, our demeanor, and our treatment of superiors, colleagues and subordinates, defines who we

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"If A equals success, then the formula is A equals X plus Y and Z, with X being work, Y play, and Z keeping your mouth shut.

*- Albert Einstein*

## Being Open vs. Being Professional

How can you let others see aspects of your life that shape your unique personality, while you maintain a professional boundary?

Showing a certain amount of vulnerability can benefit a leader. Your personal stories can be powerful when you present them in the right way and for the right reasons.

The key is that they should be *your* stories—and not tales about others in the workplace.

“Being vulnerable, empathetic and involved doesn’t mean you have to share your life history,” says Kathi Crawford, founder and CEO of People Possibilities.

“Share stories that show you’re human and connect you with others. Steer clear of topics like religion, politics and finances. Those can move people apart instead of bringing them together. For example, I talk to colleagues about my passion for cycling. This provides a glimpse into my personal side. No one’s offended by it, and it gives them a touch point when we start a conversation.”

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## Your Resident Assistance Program

The RAP newsletter is provided as a benefit to medical residents at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine and their dependents.

*We welcome your comments on newsletter topics, however, we cannot provide RAP services by email.*

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## Maintaining Professional Boundaries

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are. Our verbal and nonverbal communication also signals to other people how they should treat us. People who are loud, tend to tell everything, and blur the boundaries between their work and personal lives run the risk of being seen as unprofessional.

“Instead, do your job, and participate in a few activities at work, but don’t get caught up in the grapevine of gossip,” Hargrove advises. “People will respect that, and they’ll learn not to come to you with gossip or personal information that isn’t appropriate.”

### Finding Commonalities

Understanding “safe” territory takes a some study of your hospital’s workplace culture. “Get to know the leaders and understand what they expect,” says Hargrove. “Be observant. Find out what others’ interests and hobbies are. Do they like Starbucks? Going to the movies? Find neutral topics so you can stay within safe territory, instead of sharing a lot of detail no one needs to know. It can also be helpful to have a mentor who can help you navigate the organizational culture and politics.”

### When You Need to Share

Residents who work 80 hours a week may find that it’s essential to be able to share at least some personal things with the people around them. “Professionals with higher levels of emotional intelligence will know what’s appropriate to share in a work setting, but not everyone has this discernment,” says Kathi Crawford, founder and CEO of the coaching, consulting and professional development firm People Possibilities. “Under stress, some people have an even greater need to share,” she adds. “If they have no way to have that need met outside the workplace, they will find a place to get it met at work.”

“People in high-stress environments should make sure they have a safe outlet where they can talk freely,” Crawford says. “That might be a family member, a spouse, or a friend. A good first resource is a 24-hour hotline.” (RAP, available around the clock, is designed to serve this need for residents.)

### Resources:

- “Daring Greatly,” by Brene’ Brown, Ph.D., LMSW (2012), Gotham Books, New York, NY
- “Leadership: Take it Personal!” May 23, 2009 blog post by Kathi Crawford [www.peoplepossibilities.com](http://www.peoplepossibilities.com)
- “Working with Emotional Intelligence” by Daniel Goleman (1998), Bantam, New York, NY
- “Emotional Intelligence 2.0” by Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves (2009), TalentSmart, San Diego, CA
- Emotional Intelligence at Work Self-Test <http://justcoachit.com/blog/2011/08/01/eq-ei-self-test/>