



EAP EMPLOYEE ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER

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SETTING BOUNDARIES TO AVOID BURNOUT

If you're feeling overloaded and burned out, one problem could be the boundaries you're setting around your work, time, and relationships. Boundaries are the limits you establish on what responsibilities you take on, how you spend your time, and how you expect other people to treat you. Boundaries are key to maintaining healthy relationships and an appropriate balance between your own needs and work requirements, and the needs and expectations of others.

If you find yourself saying "yes" too readily to additional demands on your time, attention, and energy, to the point where you feel overloaded, exhausted, resentful, and emotionally drained, you may need to pay closer attention to your boundaries.

Saying "no" or "not now" is appropriate and necessary at times, even at work, with coworkers, customers, and your boss. You can do it without being rude or unhelpful or signaling that you're not committed to the work. When you set healthy boundaries for yourself and respect the boundaries of others, you'll build stronger relationships, help focus efforts on the most important priorities, and set yourself on a path to greater happiness and success.

How to Set and Maintain Boundaries

- **Give yourself permission**—to attend to your own needs, to focus on what's most important to you and your organization, or to take a break to relax and recharge. You have a right to set boundaries for your own wellbeing. You have an obligation to your employers to set boundaries to ensure that the most important work gets done.
- **Identify your limits.** Think about the requests you've said "yes" to or activities you've volunteered for that later left you feeling overloaded or resentful. Think about when you've put other people's wishes ahead of your own needs in ways that ultimately left you feeling bad. Think about times you've responded to "urgent" requests that pulled you away from more important obligations:
 - It's great to apply your energies and skills to important endeavors. If helping someone, adding another activity to your busy schedule, or giving an extra effort at work feels good to you, great—but you have needs, too. Pay attention to your emotions. If a relationship or activity drains your energy and makes you unhappy, it's likely



you've allowed yourself to be pushed beyond an important boundary. If work feels overwhelming and you are at risk of burnout, you may need to step back and reconsider how you are focusing your efforts.

- Consider what your emotions are telling you. What are your limits? Which people and activities energize you, bring you joy, or help you move toward your most important goals? Which bring you down or hold you back? Which of your work activities have high value to your customers and your organization, and which are taking your time and attention but producing little return? Paying attention to your emotions can help you identify the boundaries that are important to you.

- **Protect your time.** Think about how you spend your time. Are there meetings on your calendar that don't have a clear purpose or lead to productive outcomes? How often, when you're trying to concentrate on something, are you interrupted by incoming messages or other distractions? How much time do you spend outside of work checking news or social media or watching TV, or on other activities that don't bring satisfaction and restore your energy? You might be surprised to see what a difference it can make to focus your time and attention on your most important priorities at work and in your life outside of work:

- Set aside time to focus on what's most important. That includes both the work that's most important and your priorities outside of work. It includes time to relax, connect with friends and family, recharge, and take care of yourself. Block time for these activities in your calendar, and treat them as unbreakable commitments.
- To the extent that you can, find places and ways to work that minimize interruptions.
- Set times when you'll respond to messages and times when you won't. You don't need to respond immediately to everything.
- Expect that meetings you attend have a purpose and an agenda and that they lead to productive outcomes. When you're invited to a meeting, look at the agenda to make sure your attendance is needed. If it's not clear to you, ask why you've been invited.
- Take short breaks during the workday, as allowed, to stretch, relax, clear your mind, and refresh your energy.
- Protect time outside of work to be with family and friends, get physical activity, eat healthy foods, and get the sleep you need.

- **Reset unrealistic expectations**—both your own and other people's. If you're exhausting yourself because of your own high expectations of yourself, consider whether you might be crossing the boundary between pushing for excellence and striving for perfection. Excellence is an admirable goal, but perfectionism can be bad for your mental health. If other people have grown to expect you to respond immediately to their requests or to be the one who always volunteers for extra tasks, start resetting their expectations, politely but firmly. Make it clear that you are focusing on the most important work and that you have your own priorities and needs.



- **Start small.** It can be hard to break old habits in your own behavior and to change other people's expectations of you. Try setting boundaries with a friend or family member and see how it can improve your relationship. Try setting boundaries in small ways at work as a way to practice your communication.
- **Be consistent.** Don't say "no" to something, then give in to pressure and agree to it. If you feel guilty about not being more responsive and available, consider why you have those feelings. Challenge yourself to think about whether they are appropriate or helpful. You can't stop other people from asking you to do things, but you can control how you respond. With practice, maintaining your boundaries will become easier and you'll see the benefits in improved productivity and better relationships, work-life balance, and wellbeing.

How to Communicate Your Boundaries

- **Assert yourself.** If it's hard for you to say "no" to requests, it may be because you fear conflict, want too much to be liked or praised, or have fallen into a habit of putting other people's needs before your own. Learn to assert yourself. It won't lead to conflict if you're clear and respectful in your communication. Considering both your own needs, your organization's most important needs, and the needs of others, be firm and polite in explaining what you're willing and unwilling to do.
- **Be clear, calm, and direct.** If you're asserting your boundaries for the first time, you can't expect other people to know without telling them. Be clear, calm, and direct when you explain to someone that you're not able to do what they're asking. It may help you get your message across if you let the person know what your other priorities are, especially if they are work priorities. But that's not always necessary or even appropriate if your other priorities are personal. There's no need to defend or over-explain your reasons for maintaining a boundary.
- **Rehearse ahead of time.** If you're intimidated by the prospect of being more assertive, practice saying "no" in clear, calm, and respectful ways. You might do this in front of a mirror or with a trusted friend or family member.
- **Offer other options.** If you're willing to help someone, but not right now, suggest another time that might work for both of you. If you can't contribute to a project or effort right now and have thoughts on ways it might get done without you, offer your suggestions in a helpful way. If the request seems important but conflicts with other work priorities, ask your manager whether you should set aside existing work to make time for the new assignment.

Maintain your boundaries.

- **Be firm and stay strong in maintaining your boundaries.** Remind yourself of the reasons you've decided on them—the feelings of overload and resentment you've had in the past or the awareness that you're not getting to the most important work. If you back down or are inconsistent, you invite people to ignore your needs.
- **Be realistic and adaptable.** While you need to be firm about important boundaries, be open to adjusting them if they prove to be too rigid. Your organization's needs and priorities can change quickly with economic conditions, innovation, and shifting customer preferences. You have



to be flexible in supporting your organization as it adapts to those changes. Remember, too, that a key goal of boundaries is mutual respect—to have others respect your needs while you respect theirs. Don't set boundaries that are so protective of your needs that they get in the way of collaboration, friendship, and engagement with activities that are important to you and your organization.

Seek help.

If you're struggling to set and maintain healthy boundaries, reach out for help. Contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to speak with an expert who can help you understand what boundaries might be helpful to you or coach you on how to explain your boundaries to others.

Source: Morgan, H. (2022, August 4). *Setting boundaries to avoid burnout* (B. Schuette & E. Morton, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO).

FLEXIBLE THINKING

What is flexible thinking?

Flexible thinking is a frame of mind or way of thinking that enables you to solve novel problems, come up with new ideas, and see beyond the limitations of established approaches and conventional views. It includes the ability to:

- Imagine new solutions to problems, beyond those that have been tried in the past
- Consider different, even conflicting, interpretations of the same information
- Collaborate effectively with other people, listening to and seriously considering their views
- Explore nuances and gray areas, rather than seeing only absolutes, like right and wrong or good and bad
- Question your assumptions and beliefs when presented with new information

Rigid thinking, by contrast, can limit you to seeing just one solution to a problem or considering your own opinion as the only valid one. It can blind you to new ideas, new ways of doing things, and alternative explanations for things you observe. It can close your mind to noticing or accepting information that conflicts with your views and that could lead you to a richer and more accurate understanding of the world around you.

Leonard Mlodinow, who has written about flexible thinking in his book, *Elastic: Flexible Thinking in a Time of Change*, also contrasts flexible thinking with rational and logical thought, the kind of conscious thinking that helps you make decisions based on learned knowledge and previous experience. Mlodinow describes logical thought as the "top-down" thinking of the conscious mind and flexible or elastic thinking as the "bottom-up" working of the mind at rest, where unfiltered thoughts bubble, churn, and make new connections. It's the difference between rationally tackling a problem by weighing the risks and benefits of known options, and daydreaming about it and coming up with an entirely new solution.

Why is flexible thinking important?

Rigid thinking and habitual responses have their place in a stable world when nothing is changing. They save you time and mental energy when novel solutions and a deeper understanding aren't needed. In a changing world, however, when you encounter new problems and when you need to work with other people, flexible thinking can be critical to success. Flexible thinking leads to innovation



and invention. It's required for effective collaboration. It can also open the door to a richer and more fulfilling life.

How to Be a More Flexible Thinker

- **Learn ways to relax.** Fear and anxiety work to narrow thinking. When you're afraid or tense, you tend to focus on details rather than the big picture. You're more likely to become frustrated when initial attempts to solve a problem don't work. You're also less open to considering ideas and opinions from other people. When you're calm, it's easier to step back and take a fresh look at a problem. You're more likely to hear and accept other views. Recognize the signs of stress, and learn ways to calm yourself when you're tense.
- **Take a break from a challenging mental task** to relax, exercise, or engage in an activity that doesn't require the same kind of rational or logical thinking. That might be playing music, making art, or practicing a craft. This gives your mind a chance to relax its conscious—and narrow—focus. As your mind loosens its focused concentration and shifts its attention, unrelated thoughts can bubble up and new thought connections can form. Daydreaming and a wondering

mind, far from being negatives, can be valuable boosts to flexible thinking. The same kinds of creative connections are more likely to occur when you're in a relaxed and hazy state as you gradually wake from sleep or wind down at the end of the day.

- **Change to a different environment.** If you're feeling stuck on a mental problem, try moving to a different place, one with less distraction, softer light, higher ceilings, or some other feature conducive to relaxed thought. A walk outdoors in nature can sometimes free your mind to think of new ideas.
- **Become comfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction.** There's not a right and wrong answer to every question, and even when there is, you don't always have the information you need to recognize it. Accept that you don't have all the answers. Learn to say, "I don't know." Resist the temptation to judge ideas, opinions, or people as right or wrong, or as good or bad. Learn to operate comfortably in the gray areas, when you don't have all the information and when both sides of an argument have merit.
- **Question your beliefs.** Your beliefs affect how you approach problems and how you respond to new ideas and people who are different from you. To become a more flexible thinker, have the humility to question your beliefs, even those you hold most strongly. When you encounter information that contradicts one of your beliefs, have the courage to examine that information carefully, and ask yourself whether your belief could be wrong.
- **Focus on the "why" before the "how."** As you consider a new problem, consider the goal that lies behind it. Why are you trying to solve this problem? What do you, your partner, your organization, or the customer hope to achieve? Understanding the bigger picture might lead you to redefine the problem or consider a different range of potential solutions.
- **Expand your frame of reference.** Look beyond the way things have been done in your department, your industry, or your family. Seek ideas wherever you can find them. The solution to your organization's manufacturing or marketing challenge might be found in the practices of an unrelated enterprise.

- **Expand your social circle and professional network** to include people who have had different life experiences, different areas of interest and expertise, and views that are different from your own. Share ideas, opinions, and experiences with this broader circle. Listen to what they tell you, and use their insights to look at the world and think in new ways.
- **Be willing to experiment and be comfortable with failure.** New ideas and solutions come from trying novel ways of doing things. Scientists and inventors know that experiments often result in failure, and that those failures lead, in a productive way, to refinements in new experiments. Learn to take the same approach to experiment and failure in your life and work.
- **Generate new ideas without judging them.** Brainstorming is the practice of generating lots of ideas without squelching their flow with negative comments or judgments. There's no such thing as a bad idea in a productive brainstorming session. Once you have a long list of ideas, you can review them and consider which have the most promise. An idea that seems crazy at first might, upon reflection, have great value, perhaps with some small modification. Brainstorming typically happens in a group, but you can follow the same process by keeping a journal of thoughts and ideas. Set aside time without distraction or interruption to build your list. As you write down your thoughts, do your best to keep the rational, logical part of your mind from judging and censoring what you come up with.

For More Information

Cook, G. (2018, March 21). The power of flexible thinking. *Scientific American*. London: Springer Nature Group.

Mlodinow, L. (2018). *Elastic: Flexible thinking in a time of change*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Source Morgan, H. (2023, February 9). *Flexible thinking* (B. Schuette & E. Morton, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO).

QUESTIONS PARENTS ASK ABOUT SCHOOLS: WORKING WITH SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

How I can be more actively involved with my child's school?

When parents get involved in their children's education, the children do better in school, are better behaved, have more positive attitudes toward school, and grow up to be more successful in life:

- Attend back-to-school nights, student exhibitions, and other school events. Get to know the teachers and other school personnel. Listen to their plans, know what they hope to accomplish with their students, and understand why they chose these goals.
- Attend parent organization meetings. Voice your hopes and concerns for your child and for the school. Help organize parent-teacher meetings around your interests and those of other parents.
- Offer to tutor students. If you are comfortable with technology, volunteer to be a computer tutor for both students and teachers, or ask if there are other ways that you can help the school to use technology.
- Offer to help in the office or the cafeteria or to chaperone field trips and other outside events.
- Agree to serve on parent and community advisory groups to your school. They may consider everything from school policies and programs to the kinds of parent involvement activities the school plans.
- Work in a parent resource center or help start one. In these school centers, parents may gather informally, borrow materials on parenting and children's schoolwork, and get information about community services.



- If you are unable to volunteer in the school, look for ways to help at home: Call other parents to tell them about school-related activities, edit the school newsletter, or make educational materials for teachers. If you are bilingual, help translate school materials or interpret for non-English speaking parents in your school.

What can I do to help make sure that my child's school is safe and drug-free?

- Review school discipline policies with your child. Make sure that your child knows what behaviors you expect of him or her in school.
- Work with the school to develop a plan to handle safety and drug problems, such as drug education and violence prevention programs. Make sure the school has clear consequences for students who break school rules.
- Get to know your child's friends and their parents. Make sure their attitude about drugs is compatible with yours. If not, encourage your child to find new friends.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Communications and Outreach. (Revised 2005, August 26; Reviewed 2021 [Ed.]). Working with schools and teachers & Creating safe and drug-free schools. In Questions parents ask about schools. Retrieved February 18, 2021, from <https://www.ed.gov>