

## Boundaries

Setting boundaries is the next category of energy drainers that we will focus on. If we take a stroll in the suburbs, we will see that physical boundaries are clearly marked by hedges, fences or walls. Boundaries are evident and it is clear when we trespass on other people's territory.

Unfortunately, personal boundaries are not like that. We are forced to communicate our personal boundaries. What is within our area of responsibility, and what falls beyond? What works for us and what does not? Recognizing and articulating our personal boundaries is extremely important. When we do so, we exhibit self-respect and a responsibility towards protecting ourselves and our interests.

To set a boundary is to make clear what we find acceptable or unacceptable. This could be related to personal space, commitment of time, sharing of personal information or other interests. Being able to say "No" is an important skill to develop as is developing a healthy respect for others' boundaries.

Of course having and communicating boundaries does not mean that others will change their behavior. Though our boundary setting might motivate the individual to change his or her behavior, we must remember that it is impossible to force other people to change. As we mentioned earlier, many people struggle with this fact every day.

### Challenges in respect to setting boundaries

It can be difficult to set boundaries because doing so is associated with fear that we might:

- Hurt someone else's feelings
- Be abandoned or isolated
- Make someone angry
- Be considered a bad or selfish person
- Develop a guilty conscience
- Not be loved
- Feel that we are to blame
- Owe a debt

Our sense of duty is often to blame for our inability to set boundaries: the idea that if we receive something, we must owe a debt of return. What do we owe our colleagues? Or what do we owe others who have behaved kindly towards us? What is reasonable, and what is not?

Many people solve this dilemma by avoiding setting boundaries with people to whom they feel obligated. This way they avoid the guilt that follows from rejecting someone who has been kind to them – or to whom they would like to be kind.

Indeed, before we set a boundary it is extremely important to decide whether we are willing to face the consequences. Boundaries without consequences are not boundaries.

**EXAMPLE:** *At a large company, the changing nature of the business led the CEO to put pressure on several groups to arrange to be available around the clock, where they had previously worked regular hours five days a week.*

*For one manager, this request pushed right up against his boundaries: he had already taken his group through salary cuts and several rounds of layoffs which meant that the remaining staff was emotionally frayed and carrying much heavier workloads than ever before. He knew that they were close to the breaking point and so he resisted the pressure.*

Taking such a stand on boundary issues can sometimes come at a personal cost, which is why they tend to be particularly stressful as energy drainers go. Sometimes they send the message

that an organization isn't the right place for you – as it was for a CFO who refused to book a sale made on January 10<sup>th</sup> in the quarter that closed December 31<sup>st</sup>.

Setting boundaries can have serious consequences. But the saying “yes” when you don't want to can lead to burnout and pent-up anger that is worse than the professional or social rejection you are afraid of when you do set a firm boundary.

The core principle is this: Recognize and communicate your own boundaries. Recognize other people's feelings but make it clear that your feelings warrant the same consideration. Each individual is responsible for owning and articulating their own reactions. Luckily once the initial anger or defensiveness has subsided, the end result is often positive.