SETTING BOUNDARIES - QUICK TIPS

Five quick tips for setting personal and professional boundaries in the workplace.

Manage Your Time

- As a new leader, you will find yourself having to manage your time dealing with your own issues, and all the issues of those who work for you as well. The latter can quickly become overwhelming if you are unable to set clear boundaries on both the types of things your subordinates feel they can bring to you, as well as the time that you spend dealing with them.

- If there is a good time of day for people to be able to meet with you, try to make it well known and keep it routine. Simply knowing that they can rely on you to be there if they have an issue can assuage a lot of problems for your employees before they become more complicated.

- Establish some time for yourself. Everyone needs to have a way to decompress, to disconnect and get some distance from issues at work. Setting aside some "me time" will help you to maintain sanity, creativity and patience in dealing with challenging issues at work.

It's All About Balance

- Maintaining a balance between the things in your life is important. Too much or too little of anything can be a detriment. This is is particularly crucial when you step into a leadership role.

- If you are too closed with your employees, you will never connect with them and build the trust that truly productive relationships are founded upon. If you are too open, you risk losing respect and getting bogged down in dealing with every little problem that arises.

- Try to find the "just right" zone of being friendly and open, while maintaining the propriety that is expected of your more senior position.

Think About the "Why?" First

- Try not to get caught up in establishing your boundaries too hastily. Before you can be effective in setting those boundaries, you should know why you have set them and be able to clearly communicate those reasons to your subordinates.

- Setting a lot of rules very fast can make them seem arbitrary or contrived, and invites casual dismissal of them by those who work for you.

- A more patient and methodical approach, in which each of your employees comes to understand for themselves why such a rule or boundary exists, will result in more compliance and fewer misunderstandings.

Know The Limits and Expectations of Your Position

- Some of the interactions that go on at work between two peers may be perfectly acceptable for them in their respective positions, but not for you if you are their leader.

  - For example, two peers may borrow and lend a few dollars here and there for lunch money. It is an altogether different situation if the boss asks for or makes a loan.

  - Likewise, asking a peer to babysit for a couple of hours might be an understandable favor between equal friends ... but if your boss asked you to do it, it would come with a host of additional issues. Would refusing the boss put your job in jeopardy? Would your boss pay you for babysitting? What's the HR payout policy? Is such a thing explicitly against the rules? Is it simply frowned upon?

- Things can get complicated very quickly in those circumstances. The savvy leader respects role boundaries and refrains from becoming overly familiar in tone, language choice, conversation topics, or requests for action.

Know When "Enough is Enough"

- Mistakes and transgressions happen ... we are each of us only human, after all. When they do occur, it can sometimes pay to give people second chances – especially the young.

- That said, giving someone a second chance simply because you feel sympathy for them is often not the best course of action. When people cross that perceptual line of "too far," examine how they behave in the aftermath:

  - ✦ Did the transgressor accept responsibility for his or her behavior and apologize? Or make excuses and equivocate?

  - ✦ Did the person take any action to prevent recurrence and make amends? Or just express regret at being caught?

- Empathy is a valuable quality in a leader; don't let it obfuscate a more clinical analysis of the situation. If there is no "teachable moment," in which the transgressor can truly come to understand his or her mistakes and atone in the appropriate fashion, then you might just be letting your emotions scam you into giving the person a second chance that he or she hasn't actually earned.

In general, for setting boundaries, a helpful tool is to have some words and personal scripts for some of the predictable moments that will arise. Some approaches others have found helpful for setting and maintaining professional boundaries with colleagues and members of your unit include:

SAMPLE SCRIPTS for maintaining boundaries	Information sharing	"Yes, we are friends and I hope you can understand there are things I cannot discuss" "That's not something I can discuss with you, as much as I'd love to have your perspective. My duty now is to follow the university's regulations/the law."
	Performance feedback	"This is awkward for both of us because we are friends and I value that relationship. My duty in this role is to give you candid feedback and I do that because I am interested in your success and care about you."

Adapt these examples to your own personality, situation, and voice, and consider other moments where having considered words in advance would be helpful.