

Beware the Boundary Violators



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Despite the slightly alarming title, most people do not go out of their way to violate your boundaries.

Our session on boundaries at this year's NLP International Conference was born from our experience working with people in organisations, colleagues, associates and supervisees.

We noted and they reported finding many interactions confusing, stressful and unfulfilling, often finding themselves in messy situations they can't get out of.

Exploring the situations with them led to an understanding that the situation arose because they did not have as good a grasp of boundaries as they thought they had or, in some cases that they had not even considered the boundaries at the beginning.

Getting the boundaries right saves time and builds relationships. It's not easy and is worth the effort.

Working consciously with boundaries will help you to be more efficient and effective in your work, avoid getting into difficult situations with other people that become hard to resolve or exit from, and will increase the impact of what you are doing.

Boundaries define the foundations of all relationships; back in tribal days these boundaries were explicit and well defined. We knew who was in and who was out, and how to behave with each type of person based on their relativity to us and their hierarchical status.

Today those boundaries are less explicit and clear, expertise is less valued than before and many things are being

reduced to processes, algorithms and urgency.

We have social media 'friends', immediate communication at all levels of an organisation and with clients, and a form of connection with others using smartphones, leaving little time to consider what type of relationship we want or have with another person – our boundaries.

Healthy boundary setting is not easy for a lot of people, even highly trained and well-rounded people. We all interpret someone else's boundaries through our own filters, so one person's clear can become another person's rude. Some people are far too rigid and inflexible with their boundaries and others too loose.

The key focus for any professionals



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working with groups and individuals is to:

- 1 Set and maintain your own boundaries
- 2 Support other people to develop their boundaries.

Modelling is a great way of helping others set their boundaries.

The people you are working with learn a lot about boundaries from working with you, and whilst some is explicit, they learn a lot more unconsciously by being with you and working with you.

That means we have a lot of responsibility in the relational dynamic to be aware of and be very skilled at our own boundary setting.

Our focus on the need and power of well-defined and maintained boundaries developed as we became aware of people (some of whom were highly trained) using their NLP knowledge to trash other people's boundaries or getting into tricky situations by not setting or holding their own boundaries.

We also learnt a lot by training together and us each having totally different perspectives on boundaries in the same room with the same group of people. It is not that one of us was right and the other wrong.

What was clear was that individual approaches created both useful and useless consequences. And by paying attention and learning from this we have been able to support our clients and each other more effectively from getting sucked into situations unwittingly.

As with many things, this is still a work in progress and we have pulled together, from our experience to date, useful and practical hints, tips and processes to help you set appropriate boundaries and allow you to teach and pass this on to your clients and others.

Below are some of the key boundary setting areas that we will build on and develop during our session on 19 May at the Conference.

Explicit boundary setting

Explicit boundary setting is probably the most obvious form of boundary setting and done well can set up good 'rules of engagement'. Explicit boundary setting

includes:

- Contracting with clients
- Formal written contracts
- Negotiations
- Beginnings and endings of relationships.

On the face of it, it is easy and understandable yet often professionals skip steps or deal superficially with this in their eagerness to get started, causing problems later. You can use your NLP skills and knowledge to help you at this stage, for example:

- 1 Check, check and check again – what assumptions are you making? Have you verified them?
- 2 Framing – if you frame it you don't have to reframe it. Use the frames we all know about to establish clear boundaries about outcomes, what's included and not.
- 3 Having the courage and competence to discuss payment and payment terms upfront. Some people are naturally good at this and many are not. When training coaches, we have them practice this bit over and over again, until it is without awkward involuntary body language and avoids over justification. A key tip is to imagine you are working with them to explain how to use the coffee machine and then self-model the tone and pace of the dialogue.



Back in tribal days, boundaries were explicit and well defined

Implicit boundary setting: emotional

In normal life we usually only let those close to us into our emotional boundaries, but in our line of work people very often let you into their emotional boundaries which is both an honour and a responsibility.

People share their emotional vulnerability with you and you can support them with this, but what about your own emotional boundaries?

Some professionals, for their own reasons, are too rigid in their boundaries making it harder for them to work well with their clients or their clients to feel heard and safe. For others the boundary is too loose and poorly defined and this is a key contributory factor to burnout for coaches, trainers and therapists.

The inability to manage and maintain emotional boundaries leaves some professionals exhausted and carrying clients with them all the time. It can also lead to power dynamic problems which could be bad for your clients.

Ways to manage emotional boundaries

Begin by knowing where you get 'hooked' on the Drama Triangle. How do you emotionally react if someone goes into Victim, Persecutor or Rescuer with you or you observe it happening in a group?

- Work on your own Emotional First Aid and teach your clients how to do the same. Emotion blinds us to rational thinking because our amygdala is hijacking things. Yet amazingly many people still try and work through emotionally charged interactions rather than sorting out their state first.

If someone is emotional, check explicitly what they would like to do or have others do for them. Don't assume that when someone is emotional they are incapable, need to be saved or need to be told. You can practise your own boundaries and teach them theirs by giving them some choices, asking them what they would like to have happen. The key is to empower them.

Use Perceptual Positions to get better information on how boundaries might be being experienced by your client or different people within a group in a given situation.

Implicit boundary setting: mental

Mental boundaries are closely aligned with emotional boundaries we know, thoughts and emotions are bound together. These can be managed well using explicit boundary setting and also using some of the following ideas.

Ways to manage mental boundaries

Have a basic knowledge of common mental health issues so that you can support people more than just giving them the contact details of a local therapist they can go to (although this is good too). This impacts boundaries



Some professionals are too rigid in their boundaries making it harder for them to work well

because people in distress will often act out their difficulties, and that could disrupt the work or a whole group.

You don't need to know how to work with them, that's for the professionals in that field but you should know how to interact with them and help them maintain their boundaries and your own.

For example, someone who is depressed may have difficulty maintaining their state at times. If someone else Rescues them, and makes a decision for them without checking with them, that's a violation of their boundaries. You may even end up doing this yourself if you are unaware. Instead, sit down and ask them what support they need, listen to this and then decide if that's something you are able to provide in the context of the boundary of the work.

In particular, confusing issues from a boundary perspective (and often undiagnosed) are displayed by people who experience Bipolar and those with Borderline Personality Disorder. These issues are confusing enough for the person experiencing them and the relational aspect of these conditions mean their behaviour may be either boundary violating itself or they could be vulnerable to others in a group situation who are looking to exploit it.





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Also, watch out for mind reads, they are a mental boundary violation. A person has the right to their own thoughts – no one has the right to tell someone how to think or what they should be thinking. Be very aware of this for yourself and model it for others to help maintain mental safety.

Implicit boundary setting: physical

Physical boundaries are not easy to interpret but they are easier when you focus your attention on them and practice.

For example, you could pay attention in a situation where you don't know someone that well and sense when they feel just a little too close. You do this by tuning in as you interact with people.

You can also tune into other people's physical boundaries by using your sensory acuity; people will back away, step back or lean back if they feel you are too close and lean in or step in when then feel you are too distant.

The key to a successful working relationship is to find physical space that suits you both.

Ways to manage physical boundaries

You can use your sensory acuity skills to check for signs you might be too close or losing rapport.

Remember to touch people only with permission or if you have an existing relationship where permission is clear.

Know your own energy thresholds and watch out for signs of burnout. If you are near burnout or even there, your boundaries will either be more vulnerable (you are affected by others emotions, agree to things you don't want to do) or more rigid (refusing to be flexible, closing in on yourself). Take immediate action if you experience this.

Set up a set of physical gestures that you use to consistently set boundaries. Using your body language to give people signals for 'come closer' and 'this conversation is finished' is extremely powerful as you train people all the time how to treat you by how you behave. The key is to be consistent and aware of any involuntary gestures which might mix the message.

Really understanding and managing your

own emotional, mental and physical boundaries and doing your best to understand and respect others; all at the same time is not easy.

The first step is to know your own, be aware of where your natural boundaries lie, what counts as a violation to you? What behaviours other people do that make you feel comfortable and uncomfortable? How do you deal with that emotionally, mentally and behaviourally?

We often think we need to have all the answers there and then, but this can and does get coaches, trainers, consultants and therapists into trouble.

Take time to reflect when you feel boundaries have been violated. As soon after the fact as possible review how the session went, how you felt and what happened that made you or others feel uncomfortable.

Learn your own pattern and then decide what adjustments you can make to help you and those you work with. It's often good to discuss it with someone else to get a Third Position view so use your supervisor, a colleague or a trusted adviser to help you. ●