

Setting Boundaries

Professional boundaries define limits and responsibilities in the workplace. Boundaries are essential to building personal resilience, supporting wellbeing, and creating strong professional relationships.¹ Use the following approaches to increase your ability to set professional boundaries:

Ask

Clarifying Questions

Ensures you understand what the other person is asking.

Express

Empathy

Conveys your understanding and that you are considering the person's needs.

Set

Limits

Addresses what is and is not possible for you.

Indicate

Action

Tells the person what should happen moving forward.

Below are examples that utilize the approaches identified above:

Setting Boundaries with a Colleague

"It sounds like you have a lot on your plate, and I'm sorry to hear what you're going through. I understand what you're looking for and realize it's very important to you, and I cannot take that on right now. However, I am able to complete a smaller portion of the project or review and give feedback when you are ready, if that would help."

"If I understand correctly, you're asking _____. Is that correct? I appreciate that you came to me for this task as it shows you have a lot of trust in me, and I'm unfortunately unable to take on this task as I have a lot happening right now. Perhaps I can assist you in finding someone else to take on the task."

"Thank you for the offer, and I must decline. Maybe we could _____ instead?"

Setting Boundaries with a Supervisor

"I understand that this is a really important project and am thankful you have considered me for it, and due to other obligations, I'm unable to join you for that meeting. Can we set up a conference call to discuss the agenda ahead of time?"

"I can see that this is a pressing task which requires prioritization, and although I'm interested in assisting with it, I'm unable to do so because of my current workload. Would you be open to assigning the task to someone else on the team?"

"From what I understand, this assignment must be complete by _____. Is that correct? I understand that this is a priority assignment and would be happy to assist you with it, and the size of my current caseload is preventing me from taking on any new tasks. Perhaps instead I can give feedback to the assignment. Would that work?"

[1] Rutherford A, Harmon D, Werfel J, Gard-Murray AS, Bar-Yam S, Gros A, et al. (2014) Good Fences: The Importance of Setting Boundaries for Peaceful Coexistence. PLoS ONE 9(5): e95660. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0095660>