



WORKPLACE WELLBEING

Chapter 3

Building Healthy Boundaries at Work

Protecting Your Wellbeing Without Compromising Your Career

In this chapter

Explore why healthy workplace boundaries matter, recognise signs that your limits may need attention, understand different types of boundaries, and develop practical ways to protect your time, energy and wellbeing.

SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY



Building Healthy Boundaries at Work: Protecting Your Wellbeing Without Compromising Your Career

Healthy boundaries are one of the most important foundations of workplace wellbeing, yet they are often one of the most difficult skills to develop. Many people worry that saying "no," asking for support or protecting their time will make them appear unhelpful, uncommitted or incapable.

In reality, healthy boundaries are not about avoiding work or doing less. They are about creating clear, realistic limits that allow people to work effectively while protecting their physical health, mental wellbeing and personal relationships.

Without boundaries, work can gradually begin to consume every aspect of life. Employees may find themselves checking emails late into the evening, skipping breaks, working through holidays or taking on responsibilities that were never theirs to begin with. While this may seem manageable in the short term, over time it often leads to stress, exhaustion and burnout.

Learning to establish healthy boundaries is not selfish—it is an essential part of maintaining wellbeing and sustaining a long, successful career.

What Are Healthy Boundaries?

Boundaries are the limits we set to protect our time, energy, health and emotional wellbeing.

In the workplace, boundaries help define:

- What responsibilities belong to you.
- How much work you can realistically complete.
- How you expect to be treated.
- When your working day begins and ends.
- How you communicate with colleagues.
- What behaviours are acceptable.

Healthy boundaries create clarity.

They help both employees and employers understand expectations while reducing misunderstandings and unnecessary stress.

Why Are Boundaries Important?

Many people believe working longer hours means they are more productive.

Research consistently suggests otherwise.

When people regularly ignore their own needs they often experience:

- Reduced concentration.
- Poor decision-making.
- Increased mistakes.
- Emotional exhaustion.
- Lower productivity.
- Reduced creativity.
- Declining motivation.



Healthy boundaries protect the energy needed to perform well over the long term.

Think of your energy like a rechargeable battery.

If you never allow it to recharge, eventually it will run flat.

Signs Your Boundaries May Need Attention

Many people don't realise their boundaries have gradually disappeared until they begin experiencing stress or burnout.

Common signs include:

- Feeling guilty for taking breaks.
- Working through lunch every day.
- Checking emails late at night.
- Saying yes when you want to say no.
- Taking work home regularly.
- Feeling responsible for everyone else's workload.
- Struggling to switch off after work.
- Frequently feeling overwhelmed.
- Feeling resentful towards colleagues.
- Cancelling personal plans because of work.
- Rarely taking annual leave.
- Feeling emotionally exhausted.

These behaviours often develop gradually and can become normalised.

Why Do People Struggle to Set Boundaries?

Fear of Disappointing Others

Many people worry that saying no will upset colleagues or managers.

They may believe they need to agree to every request in order to be seen as hardworking or valued.

Perfectionism

People with perfectionistic tendencies often set unrealistically high expectations for themselves.

They may struggle to delegate because they believe everything must be completed perfectly.

This can result in taking on far more than is sustainable.

People-Pleasing

Some individuals place other people's needs above their own.

While kindness is valuable, consistently ignoring your own needs often leads to resentment and exhaustion.

Healthy relationships require balance.

Workplace Culture

Some organisations unintentionally encourage unhealthy boundaries through:

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- Long working hours.
 - Constant availability.
 - Unrealistic deadlines.
 - Celebrating overwork.
 - Responding to emails outside working hours.

Employees often feel pressure to follow these unwritten expectations.

Different Types of Workplace Boundaries

Healthy boundaries extend beyond simply finishing work on time.

Time Boundaries

Protecting your time may involve:

- Starting and finishing work as agreed.
- Taking lunch breaks.
- Using annual leave.
- Avoiding excessive overtime.
- Scheduling uninterrupted work time.

Time is one of our most valuable resources.

Protecting it protects wellbeing.

Emotional Boundaries

Emotional boundaries help prevent becoming overwhelmed by other people's emotions or workplace pressures.

This may include:

- Not taking criticism personally.
- Recognising that other people's emotions belong to them.
- Avoiding becoming everyone's problem solver.
- Protecting your emotional energy.

This is particularly important in caring professions where compassion fatigue can develop.

Communication Boundaries

Healthy communication boundaries include:

- Responding during working hours where possible.
- Respectful conversations.
- Saying when you're unavailable.
- Limiting unnecessary interruptions.
- Setting expectations around response times.

Technology has blurred the line between work and home.

Communication boundaries help restore that balance.

Workload Boundaries

Workload boundaries involve recognising what is realistic.

This might mean:

- Prioritising tasks.

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- Delegating appropriately.
 - Asking for clarification.
 - Discussing unrealistic deadlines.
 - Raising concerns early.

Accepting more work than is manageable rarely benefits anyone.

Learning to Say No

Many people find saying no uncomfortable.

However, saying yes to everything often means saying no to your own wellbeing.

Saying no does not need to be confrontational.

Examples include:

"I'd like to help, but I don't have capacity this week."

"I can do this, but something else will need to be reprioritised."

"I'm unable to take on additional work at the moment."

"Can we discuss which task is the priority?"

These responses are respectful, professional and honest.

Boundaries for Remote Working

Working from home has brought many benefits, but it has also created new challenges.

Without physical separation between work and home, many people find themselves:

- Starting earlier.
- Finishing later.
- Checking emails constantly.
- Taking fewer breaks.
- Feeling unable to switch off.

Helpful strategies include:

- Creating a dedicated workspace.
- Having a consistent start and finish time.
- Closing your laptop at the end of the day.
- Turning off work notifications.
- Changing clothes after work.
- Going for a short walk to mark the end of the working day.

These routines help the brain transition between work and personal life.

The Role of Managers

Managers play an important role in encouraging healthy boundaries.

Supportive leaders:

- Respect working hours.
- Avoid unnecessary out-of-hours emails.
- Encourage annual leave.

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- Monitor workloads.
 - Lead by example.
 - Discourage excessive overtime.
 - Recognise signs of burnout.
 - Promote healthy work-life balance.

Employees often follow the behaviours they see modelled by leaders.

Boundaries and Mental Health

Healthy boundaries are closely linked with mental wellbeing.

Strong boundaries can reduce:

- Anxiety.
- Stress.
- Burnout.
- Compassion fatigue.
- Emotional exhaustion.

They also improve:

- Confidence.
- Self-esteem.
- Relationships.
- Productivity.
- Job satisfaction.
- Overall wellbeing.

Protecting your wellbeing allows you to perform consistently rather than simply surviving one deadline after another.

Building Better Boundaries

Developing boundaries takes practice.

Start by asking yourself:

- What drains my energy most at work?
- What situations leave me feeling overwhelmed?
- Where do I struggle to say no?
- What boundary would improve my wellbeing most?
- What small change could I make this week?

Small changes often lead to significant improvements over time.

Key Takeaways

- Healthy boundaries protect your physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.
- Boundaries improve productivity rather than reducing it.
- Saying no professionally is an important workplace skill.
- Managers play a key role in creating cultures that respect boundaries.
- Protecting your time allows you to perform consistently over the long term.



- Healthy boundaries benefit both employees and organisations.

Final Thoughts

Healthy boundaries are not barriers that keep people out, they are guidelines that protect our wellbeing and help us work sustainably. They allow us to give our best without giving everything.

Many people mistakenly believe that success requires constant availability, endless overtime or sacrificing personal wellbeing. In reality, sustainable success comes from recognising our limits, respecting our needs and communicating them clearly.

Creating healthy boundaries takes courage, particularly in workplaces where overworking has become normalised. However, each small boundary, taking a lunch break, leaving work on time, asking for help or declining an unrealistic request, is an investment in your long-term health and professional effectiveness.

Work should be an important part of life, but it should not become your entire life. By protecting your time, energy and wellbeing, you create the foundation for a healthier career, stronger relationships and a more balanced, fulfilling future.