

Blurred Lines: Setting Healthy Boundaries at Work

By Van Moody

Success in the workplace depends on your ability to relate effectively to people. Research shows that 60-80% of all difficulties in organizations stem from strained relationships between employees, not from deficits in an individual employee's skill or motivation.¹ Difficult workplace relationships are far more than a nuisance; they can cause anxiety, burnout, clinical depression and even physical illness.

Healthy relationships at work can propel you to great heights of achievement; dysfunctional or toxic ones will tether you to mediocrity. When we mismanage relationships, the fall-out affects productivity and quite possibly our ability to advance. Your success at work depends on your ability to set the kinds of boundaries that encourage mutual respect and keep the focus on productivity.

7 Tale-Tell Signs of a Toxic Relationship

You're in a toxic professional relationship with a boss or peer when they:

1. Stifle your talent and limit your opportunities for advancement
2. Twist circumstances and conversations to their benefit
3. Chide or punish you for a mistake rather than help you correct it
4. Remind you constantly or publicly of a disappointing experience or unmet expectation
5. Take credit or withhold recognition for new ideas and extra effort
6. Focus solely on meeting their goals and do so at your expense
7. Fail to respect your need for personal space and time

One of the best ways to work with unhealthy people is to set boundaries. Healthy boundaries keep frustration and confusion low. Boundaries remind people of what is acceptable to you and what is reasonable to expect from you. Boundaries prevent unhealthy people from taking up too much of your time, energy, or resources – all precious commodities in the workplace.

Be warned, toxic people don't like boundaries because they want to shift responsibilities according to their mood or the project. It is important to recognize that toxic people create work environments that mirror their personal environments.

They want to operate where they are most comfortable. They will not set the boundaries for you. Here are 4 ways you can set boundaries:

1. **Manage Your Time.** Set a limit on the amount of time you spend beyond the hours needed to complete projects. Rigidity douses the flames of collegiality but blurred lines lead to confusion and frustration.

2. **Express Yourself.** Reveal aspects of your personality that will reinforce your values. Sometimes it's a matter of letting people in a little bit to help keep your boundaries intact.
3. **Play Your Part.** Everyone plays a role at work: the victim, the brown-noser, the star, the slacker, the go-to guy. Build your reputation, and do it carefully and consistently. It's important that your coworkers know what you stand for and what to expect from you. Then, don't waiver.
4. **Change the Conversation.** Working close quarters or long hours sometimes blur the lines. Here are suggested words to say to help you stay focused on the project and away from nonproductive behavior: "Let's focus on finishing the quarterly projections instead of the latest gossip about the CEO so we can get home early."

Bottom line, every relationship you have influences you. There are no neutral relationships; each one lifts you up or weighs you down. They move you forward or hold you back. They help you or they hurt you. When you know how to handle relationships appropriately, it will make the difference between a fulfilling work life or one that is riddled with disappointment, failure, and regret.

¹ Association for Psychological Type International, APTI

About the Author



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Field expert **Van Moody** is the author of *The People Factor* (published by Thomas Nelson) and a motivational speaker who advises on matters related to relationships as they pertain to friends, family, significant others and the workplace. He is a “People Scholar” who helps others build their “Relational IQ” to achieve success at home, in their social circles, and in business. Among his numerous affiliations, Moody is an associate trainer in Japan for EQUIP, the world’s largest and most comprehensive grassroots leadership, personal growth and development organization founded by Dr. John C. Maxwell. He also serves on the board of directors for Joel Osteen’s Champions Network. Moody earned a B.A. from DePauw University and a Masters in Ethics from ITS. He has lectured in the classrooms of Harvard and Oxford Universities where he, himself, has also studied to further his quest for knowledge in business, economic and community Development. Moody and his wife reside in Birmingham, Alabama with their two children. Learn more online at www.VanMoody.com.

While relationships are a fundamental aspect of the human experience, our dealings with friends, family members, significant others, co-workers and superiors are often riddled with strife and consternation. To address this enduring conundrum, Moody authored “*The People Factor*” (paperback, ISBN: 9781400205028, \$16.99 U.S.). This highly anticipated book specifies how to build great relationships and end bad ones at home, in social networks, and in the workplace. “*The People Factor*” is currently available for pre-order at www.VanMoody.com (target ship date January 7, 2014).

