



# Family Values

## Boundaries

### Boundaries and Work

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Next to home, we spend the majority of our time at work. Since we are also dependent on work for our livelihood, we have an important investment in what happens there. As a matter of fact, the workplace can elicit patterns of behavior similar to those in our family of origin. There are bosses to please, co-workers to contend with and expectations to meet, the same dynamics that were/are present in our families. The roles are the same, but the cast is different. We cannot afford to be excluded and there is a perceived risk that we might become absorbed and lose our identity. These prospects can serve as a source of stress and anxiety or assist us in clarifying who we are.

In many ways, lack of boundaries is the major cause of personnel difficulties in the workplace. Problems arise when people do not take responsibility for their own work or when they fail to set limits. Other people within the work setting either pick up the slack or are taken advantage of. If this is a consistent pattern, one person may continually feel exploited, but may hesitate to point this out for fear of being labeled a whiner or someone disloyal to the team. Yet every time someone covers up for another person or regularly assumes another person's responsibilities, he or she is actually encouraging that person to be irresponsible. A company may reward people who are overly responsible, yet it can lead to resentment and burnout.

The following reflect limit-setting problems at work:

- Work takes on more importance in your life than it deserves;
- You are consistently working overtime or bringing work home;
- You dread going to work because of difficulties with a co-worker;
- Your boss is supercritical and you feel you can't do anything right;

- You dislike your job or bring work-related stress home.

The following are some suggestions for setting clear boundaries at work:

1. **Keep work in perspective.** Remember no one has ever been heard to say on his/her deathbed, "*I wish I had spent more time at work.*"
2. **Address problems as they arise at work.** If you feel taken advantage of by another worker, talk about it before it becomes a pattern of resentment.
3. **File a grievance if you are being exploited or harassed at work.** These procedures are there for your safety and are meant to keep the workplace from becoming a hostile environment.
4. **Get your emotional, spiritual and social needs met outside of work.** Do not expect your job to make up for unmet childhood needs.
5. **Clarify expectations at work.** If you are unclear about what is expected of you, ask your supervisor for clarification.
6. **Decide how much of your time and energy you are willing to give to work.** If your job is taking its toll on your family or relationships, you may want to decide whether it is worth the cost.
7. **Give yourself permission to follow your dreams.** Find work that fits for you and reflects your gifts and talents rather than doing something to please others.

See also: Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, c.1992.