How to set and maintain boundaries

Define your boundaries

Before you can protect your boundaries you need to set them. Setting them will require you considering:

- Your role and existing responsibilities;
- Your career aspirations,
- Your commitments outside of work,
- Your work life balance, and
- Your preferences around working styles, patterns and colleague relationships.

Take account of processes, culture and context at your school to ensure your boundaries are realistic and straightforward to communicate.

Ask yourself what your red lines are. These are non-negotiable or immoveable boundaries, or things that you definitely can't take on. Examples include: not taking on work outside of your job description, or that will cause you significant stress. A red line could also be not working late on a particular night when you have family commitments.

Document your boundaries

Write them down, so you can remember and revisit them.

Communicate your boundaries

Once you have planned out your boundaries, you need to make them clear. You cannot maintain your boundaries if others aren't aware of them. Share your boundaries as a plan or as part of a wider conversation about work, responsibilities and planning. This could be at key moments such as the start of a new school year or term. Share them with those who manage you and those you work with.

Team meetings and one-to-one sessions can be good times to discuss boundaries. Be honest and clear about why these are your boundaries - practice explaining them in a firm and positive way.

Be aware of, and protect, boundaries for your colleagues to encourage this behaviour in others.

Protect and stick to your boundaries

At some stage colleagues will cross boundaries however hard you work to communicate yours and respect others. When this happens, try to avoid a personal or emotional response and instead be polite, firm and clear about what has happened.

If your manager makes a request, rather than saying "I am so stressed - I can't cope with this on top of the million other things I have to do today", explain "If I do this now then X will not get completed - what is your preference?" See also the section in this guide on 'how to say no the right way'.

Review and reset boundaries

Things change, and that includes your working boundaries and the environment you're working in. Don't be afraid to bring up the drawbridge if you need to strengthen boundaries at certain times. Equally if you feel you have more scope or space for additional work or your career goals change, you can flex your boundaries to be more open.