



## Drawing Work Life Boundaries with Your Boss...Smart or Suicide?

Virtually every busy professional that I know – particularly professional women – struggle with this issue of managing, balancing work life balance. With the lightning speed of technology tempting us with the latest, greatest, must have tablet every 18 months, the lines become blurred to the point where bosses today often expect staff to conduct business calls on the drive home, check emails Sunday night to get a head start on the new week or respond to emails on vacation. Ironically, many of the same workers who detest this “no boundaries, workaholic culture” also tend to perpetuate it out of fear of retribution or being viewed as an outlier. During my management consulting days, I had a friend who would regularly set an alarm at 3 a.m. to wake him so he could send a few emails and impress his boss that he was working until 3. (Now, I hear that timed emails can take care of that for you.) In his case he felt he needed to perpetuate the perception that he was one of the “top workers” on the team. Unfortunately, as he tried to perpetuate this image in his boss’ mind, I could only assume that he also unwittingly encouraging his boss to have these unrealistic expectations and disrespect his boundaries. As Dr. Phil said years ago, “*we teach people how to treat us.*” This professional peer pressure reminds me of the mantra that so many of us heard in high school warning us against trying drugs “*because everyone else was doing it*”. Are we similarly in our 30s and 40s+ not drawing our own work life balance boundaries because we’re afraid that we won’t get invited to the cool kids’ table at lunch? It sounds silly, but in many ways, it’s true. The good news is that if we’re part of the problem, we can also become part of the solution!

Given this dangerous cycle of violating personal boundaries to satisfy needy bosses which only normalizes the expectation and perpetuates a culture of the 10-12+ hour work day, the question becomes.....*If I do step forward to insist on boundaries, is it organizational savvy or suicide?* As with most complex questions, I doubt there is a single “right” answer that applies to everyone. Personally, when faced with this conundrum my approach has always been to clearly establish work life balance boundaries, making rare exceptions as needed. If this is the goal, the question then becomes how do you do that with a difficult boss or difficult workplace culture?

Here are a few suggestions:

- ❖ Pick the right environment!!! It sounds obvious but is so often overlooked. Be strategic about selecting a work environment with a family friendly corporate culture if that’s something that’s important to you. Ask questions during the interview process. Don’t take the word of the interviewer. Talk to employees who work there to get a sense of whether the culture is flexible/supportive or cutthroat/workaholic.
- ❖ Share your work philosophy with your boss very early on. For example, I’d say something like this... “*I believe in exceeding goals, being proactive, and giving 120% during work hours but I also try to relentlessly protect my precious family time after work hours. I’ve had some problems keeping these boundaries in the past, but I’m hoping to maintain them going forward. What’s your work philosophy?*”



- ❖ If your boss says they believe in work life balance and don't want to infringe on personal time (most will), ask him/her how you should handle it if (in the future) you receive requests or workload seems to dictate violating your personal boundaries. You're essentially asking for permission to push back upfront and it'll make it easier later when you need to actually push back.
- ❖ Try your best to honor your own boundaries. It's somewhat hypocritical (and confusing) to expect others not to expect you to work evenings/weekends, if you're consistently sending emails on evenings/weekends so avoid it at all costs. If you do choose to email on an evening/weekend, acknowledge it as an exception in the email (e.g. *I normally wouldn't email this report on a Sunday; however....*) or consider scheduling a delayed email that will send during normal office hours.
- ❖ If your boss is overloading you and causing work after hours, ask them to help you reprioritize. Using this approach you minimize the risk of being viewed as a whiner and instead seem proactive. The prioritization activity will reinforce the workload issue and help your manager see the problem.
- ❖ Don't hesitate to say that you're not available if requested to complete a task that will require work after hours. For example, if you get assigned something Friday afternoon that's due Monday morning, don't be afraid to simply state that you have an important family commitment and won't be available to work over the weekend. Don't feel the need to explain your weekend plans. It's completely appropriate to gently remind management that barring emergencies you don't work weekends.
- ❖ If the writing is on the walls, and it becomes clear that your boundaries won't be respected, consider asking for a part time schedule if it seems like that might be the best option (and you can afford it).
- ❖ If all else fails, jump ship!

I will be the first to admit that there are some bosses out there who are certifiable jerks who will completely abuse staff without any regard for their personal time; however, those are exceedingly rare in my experience. Most bosses (even the demanding ones) have personal lives of their own and want to respect employee's boundaries, but it's the employee's responsibility to establish them! Once we clearly articulate our boundaries, it's amazing how those around us begin to respect them....and some may even adopt them!

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