



Boundaries: A Top-Down Approach

By Janki DePalma, CPSM

Early in my career, I was the victim of several layoffs (seven, but who's counting). In tight times, historically the first staff to be cut have been in marketing. Fast forward two decades, and I'm amazed by an unfathomable change in the A/E/C industries and the working world in general. I'm referring, of course, to The Great Resignation.

Why are people leaving their jobs? Like many events, there isn't just one simple explanation. Naturally, as potential and current employees seek greener grasses, employers are finding themselves in a talent race. Competitive salaries, a 401K, and health/vacation benefits are table stakes in today's market. Aside from outbidding your competitors, what's needed to attract and keep top talent? Is it flex working? What about going back to ping pong tables and casual Fridays?

I think the answer could be something far less obvious but much more impactful. Could creating a culture of boundaries (and the accompanying trust and psychological safety) be the secret sauce in today's job market?

Most people think of boundary setting as simply saying "no." Early in my career as a marketing coordinator, well-meaning mentors told me to establish boundaries—no late nights, holidays, or weekends. I was never sure how to say I wouldn't stay late for a multimillion-dollar pursuit. Even now, 20 years into my career, it seems peculiar that boundaries are the sole responsibility of the ones doing the work.

What if managers, even up to the C-suite, took the lead? After all, most managers aren't greedy exploiters

living by the mantra of "I will push you to exhaustion until you say no." Yes, boundaries are needed. But they need to come from those at the top.

Why Boundaries Matter

The world of sports gives the clearest example of why boundaries matter. Boundaries define the playing field. Players know the rules, what's acceptable, what the goal is, and where they are in relation to it all. You wouldn't expect a player to dictate where out of bounds is, so why should employees?

Managers shouldn't let boundaries rest solely on the shoulders of the employees. Helping to create clearly defined boundaries can be exactly what we all need to be our best.

One key difference between the sports field and office is that boundaries may differ based on the individual. For example, some employees may not mind working late, while others have a schedule that requires a hard end time. But a good manager, like a good referee, helps set the stage. Here are a few key areas to explore for your team:

- 1. Pay attention.** A good manager doesn't sit idly and let their team manage deadlines. They notice when, how, and how long the team is working. Are emails being sent at midnight or over the weekend? Do timesheets show consistent overtime? If yes, as a manager, you need to start getting curious. Begin with a private conversation to learn more. Are the off-hour emails a result of a flexible work situation, anxiety, or workload?
- 2. Be careful of mixed messages.** Your firm may promote work-life balance, but, as a manager, you may be sending subtle contrary messages. Do you publicly praise someone who burns the midnight oil? Are you guilty of sending emails Saturday night? Do you work during your vacation? Your team is looking at what you do more than what

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📖 Story Behind the Picture

A dazzling display of backlit perforated metal building panel allows the museum's contemporary addition to shimmer prominently from the entry plaza and immediate downtown surroundings. Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, NC. ARCA Design, Beverly-Grant Inc, Clearscapes.



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you say. Be the role model through your actions and what you praise.

- 3. Watch what you tolerate.** The primary job of a good manager should be to create a space to grow the next level of leaders. As you pay attention, you may see patterns of behavior. Questions to think about include: Do you let someone slide on assignments, forcing others to pick up the slack? Do multiple managers dump work on an employee without creating a system to call for help? Do you have an employee who has a hard time saying no?
- 4. Create redundancy.** It can be hard not to feel overworked when you're the sole person who can do a task. Remember, this indispensable feeling isn't sustainable and will eventually lead to burnout. This is where you, as a manager, need to push for planned redundancy. At first, it may seem like a waste of resources. However, planned redundancy serves as a backup. Find ways to cross-train your team. This builds your proverbial bench of players and gives people the freedom to take time off.
- 5. Know the warning signs.** As a people pleaser who always strives to be helpful, I realized that feeling resentful is my check engine light telling me there's a boundary problem. A good manager has the emotional intelligence to hear what isn't being said. Look for

fellow teammates who seem angry, passive-aggressive, or not themselves. Again, stay curious and check to see if they're feeling overwhelmed or resentful. These changes may be the sign that you, as the referee, need to make an out-of-bounds call.

You may be thinking, "Yes, this sounds great, but I'm not a manager." I challenge this line of thinking. As marketers, we're often perched in a unique spot in our firms. Most likely, we have direct access to key leaders. We also may have additional emotional-intelligence skills that help us identify patterns and warning signs.

Most important, we understand the key connection between top talent and winning new work. To quote Brené Brown, "A leader is anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential."

Don't let your title prevent you from being a leader. Maybe now's the time to start this discussion in your firm. Since most firms are struggling with the talent war, leaders may be more open to creative ideas. I challenge you to help create the space for boundary discussions and see where it leads. The Great Resignation could be the signal for us that business as usual needs to change, again. ■

Boundaries in Action

In researching for this article, I asked my LinkedIn network for their input. My colleague Allison Tivnon, pursuit strategist with Middle of Six | Marketing Consultants, located in Tacoma, WA, offered a compelling example.

Early in her career, her marketing manager pulled her aside to explain the "rules" of her marketing team. These included no work (including emails) after hours unless it was for the benefit of the project and arranged in advance. Before flex work was popular, her manager asked everyone to give "their best eight hours" to the team—whether that meant starting work at 7 a.m., 10 a.m., or taking a two-hour break for school pickup.

These rules were created to benefit the team and breaking them needed to be done infrequently and with discernment. The manager explained that every time you pulled an all-nighter, you made it harder for team members to keep their schedule boundaries. Even when team members moved onto other firms, they carried these rules forward.

Tivnon noticed the sharp contrast when she moved to a firm that had few boundaries. The frantic pace burned her team out quickly because the culture wouldn't let boundaries take hold.



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