

Boundaries: The point at which something ends or beyond which it becomes something else

How do you maintain boundaries when you work closely with someone? The longer someone works for you, the closer you may become. Keeping the employer/employee boundaries can be more difficult in the healthcare field, as oftentimes the person working for you has need to know intimate, personal details about you. Your workers might be the only contact you have for extended periods of time, or they could be the primary people you rely on for assistance. In turn, your worker could have just one person (you) they are caring for and the focus of their attention becomes the one consumer they have. With these dynamics in play, boundaries can fade away – all too often these boundaries disappear without the realization that they have...then the employer/employee relationship can turn into things it shouldn't:

- * Employee begins telling supervisor about the troubles they are having (financially: no money for gas, no food, relationships: boyfriend/girlfriend troubles so they have no place to live) in the hopes of getting help from the supervisor.
- * Employee becomes a person who is making requests they should not be making (I need to bring my kids to work tomorrow, I need to borrow your car, I need to leave early but can't afford to lose those hours in my paycheck)
- * Supervisor becomes a person who is making requests they should not be making (I need you to work tonight because my worker called out and I don't have anyone. If you stay an extra hour I'll put down that you worked 2 extra hours on your timesheet.)
- * Supervisor is bored/lonely, and starts seeking extra attention (Do you want to stay for pizza tonight...I'll buy? Do you want to watch TV with me when your shift is through? My door is always open – come over anytime!)

So how do you keep those boundaries, especially when you are so caring and compassionate about the people who are helping you?

Keep things professional:

- ◇ When your workers clock in, put your supervisor "face" on. Have a routine that starts immediately upon workers clocking in and keep in mind what they need to accomplish during their working hours. Stick to the plan of care and responsibilities as written. Do not ask workers to do things that are not part of their responsibilities, and *use your common sense* to determine if a request you have seems reasonable or not (If you ask a worker to sweep the dusting of snow from your walkway, that would seem like something they might want to help you with. But if you ask a worker to shovel the three feet of snow that just fell on your walkway, they have every right to politely refuse and remind you that this is not part of the care plan).
- ◇ Try not to talk about personal things going on in your life. That's not to say you can't ever bring things up with regards to your life outside the workplace, we all do, but keep it minimal – your workers are there to work, not chat about everything going on in your

world or their world. Redirect the conversation back to work related topics when it goes beyond simple chatter.

- ◇ Don't try to solve your worker's problems, don't expect your workers to solve yours. Understand that discussions about personal issues quickly dissolves professional boundaries.
- ◇ Avoid hot topics - discussions about politics, religion, race, sexual orientation and other hot topics should be shut down as soon as they begin – heated debates are not for the workplace.
- ◇ Listen politely and with concern to your worker when they are in the mood to talk about their personal lives, but reign in the desire to offer your advice or opinion. Keep those conversations short - if it goes beyond simple chatter, be polite, redirect the conversation and remind them that they have work to attend to.

Be Polite, Be Respectful and Be a Great Supervisor

If you focus to the tasks that your workers need to complete and they do a thorough job while they are working, there should be minimal time for chatting. If you find that your workers are completing tasks well ahead of their shift being completed, discuss other necessary tasks that might need to be done. Sitting idle is cause for concern and may well lead to boundaries being crossed. Keep workers busy with tasks. Follow and adhere to the care plan.

If your worker asks for things that you know cross boundaries, be polite and respectfully decline (Mary, I can't possibly do that...I know it would be helpful to you, but I just cannot. That would be crossing lines we should not cross and when that happens, things can get messy. I'm sorry and I understand your troubles, but I just can't help you with that.) It's oftentimes the thought that counts and saying no politely is what you should do.

Keep in mind that boundaries are in place for a reason – they are meant **to protect** both the supervisor and the worker from harm that might occur when boundaries are crossed.

Sadly enough, there are people out there that are great at scamming others and lying to get what they want. We see that all too often. The person seems innocence enough and they have told you the most heartbreaking story and they have made you feel badly about their situation – so much so that you want to help them. **Don't do it!** If you can maintain your boundaries, you will not have to worry about someone taking advantage of your goodwill because you will have prevented that from happening in the first place. Accusations of misconduct, feelings being hurt, complaints against you, money being owed back that you might never get are less likely to occur if you maintain boundaries. Respect earns respect and if you keep boundaries in place, respect is easier to come by. If you set those expectations right from the start, with reminders along the way, your supervisor/employee relationship can be a long and successful one.

