Life Hacks.

How to Create Healthy Work Boundaries

By Margie Ireland

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Since the start of the pandemic, we have seen a significant spike in the hours spent working, even though we might not physically be at the office.

Recent research shows that 70 percent of professionals who started working from home when lockdowns began say they worked longer days and also started working weekends.

However, flexible working arrangements such as working from home had positive outcomes on performance and mental health before and during the early days of the pandemic. Some leaders reported that remote work allowed them to create healthier boundaries.

They would often step aside throughout the day to spend time with family, exercise, or do something else they wouldn't have been able to do in an office environment.

More research needs to be conducted to understand the longer-term impacts of remote work. Meanwhile, many organizations are encouraging employees to return to the office. This begs the question: Are we all returning to "normal" working hours, and how does that impact setting healthy boundaries at work?

What Is a Healthy Work Boundary?

Healthy work boundaries occur when you feel you can set physical, emotional, and mental limits that protect you from feeling physical or psychological harm while allowing room for you to reach your potential. Some flexibility around work boundaries is also important in times of crisis. Sometimes people are willing to work longer hours or take on extra work for the good of their team, community, or even humanity, as long as it doesn't lead to physical and psychological harm.

How Leaders Can Help Set Healthy Work Boundaries

As trite as it may sound, the concept of "do as I do" applies here. Leaders can show employees how to set boundaries by setting reasonable boundaries for themselves. Here are three examples of ways leaders can exhibit healthy boundaries.

1. Reset your email habits.

Leaders who send emails outside of business hours or on the weekends put pressure on their team members to break their work/home boundaries to respond. This also means you may not be setting healthy boundaries for yourself. I occasionally respond to emails over the weekend as I find it's a quieter time to catch up, so I understand why this happens.

One option is to schedule emails to send on the next working day. It's a bit like how we used to fly without wifi—you could draft messages, but they wouldn't send until you landed and reconnected to the internet. Some employees may figure out what you are doing, but at least you are not putting pressure on them to respond immediately.

2. Take a break.

Once a week, take a lunch break with your employees. Let them see that it's OK to take a break. Maybe take them with you on a 10-minute walking meeting if that is the only way you can get yourself and a team member away from their desk.

3. Leave the office at least once a week at the official finishing time.

If possible, commit to yourself that you will not send emails after dinner on this day. An even more outrageous suggestion? Finish early once a week!

The Importance of Leadership Examples

The Adecco Group, which has 14,800 offices worldwide, conducted research in 2021 that found 52 percent of employees had taken time off for mental health reasons. LinkedIn conducted similar research with the same findings—52 percent of employees admitted to taking time off for mental health. You have likely had people take time off or take extended sick leave. You may have been one of them. Mental health concerns are not just a challenge for maintaining one's well-being—they are also a challenge for business.

Leaders must ask themselves if they have set an expectation that their team continues to work outside core hours, regardless of whether they have returned to the office or continue to work remotely. They may also need to set their own healthy work boundaries, giving their team members permission to do the same. Healthy work boundaries can equate to a happier and healthier workplace, which is also good for the bottom line.

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