

AONE Leadership Laboratory Insights: *The Practice of Boundary Clarity*

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This is the first in a series of six columns that will be published in Nurse Leader. Each column will focus on one nurse leadership practice and features challenges and strategies in the words of nurse managers. These columns are designed to encourage nurse managers to reflect on their own best practices and experiment with new approaches in leadership. The material in these columns complements the topics covered in the Leadership Laboratory for Nurse Managers, an online real time six-session seminar offered by the American Organization of Nurse Executives, and facilitated by Barbara Mackoff. The first monthly session will be in September and focus on motivation. For more information or to register for the Leadership Laboratory, visit www.aone.org/leadershiplab.

For many nurse managers, the need to build clear boundaries begins on the first day on the job: Tuesday you were complaining about the manager; on Friday you *became* the manager. In this column, we will explore what your colleague means when she says, “you have to separate yourself.” She is describing the essence of the leadership practice of creating boundary clarity—building strong connections to others without losing your sense of self or authority.

Whether you are a new manager making the transition from nurse peer to nurse leader or a seasoned sage, you know that boundaries are those invisible lines of separation that allow you to define and shape limits and responsibilities in your relationships with staff, colleagues, physicians, patients and families. With appropriate boundaries you can establish and communicate what is acceptable to you and what to expect from you. Clear boundaries underline your sense of responsibility—which tasks, feelings and outcomes belong to you and which do not. This allows you to choose how you respond to the demands and feelings of others.

By contrast, when boundaries are unclear, you can over react and disappear into the feelings and actions of others. Your decisions are then driven by fear of someone’s anger or rejection, by the desire to avoid hurting them, of being hurt, or by the impulse to fix everything to protect them.

A wise manager explains her discovery of the difference: “the need to, when things were happening, to step back and say, ‘they’re not doing this to me, they’ve chosen to act this way for some reason. I can’t take it personally.’ It was really upsetting to me at first, and then I realized I needed to stop and take a moment and realize that whatever they needed to do was their own issue and not directly related to me.”

“I was a nurse for 15 years on this unit. Those staff members that were my friends were no longer. To succeed as a manager, you must be consistent and fair and do what is right for your patient.... but I realize that you do have to separate yourself a little bit from the staff in order to make unbiased judgments and to make calls that are correct. You can’t just be one of their buddies.”
— nurse manager from the northwest



This “stepping back” is the blueprint for what social psychologist Jane Adams calls boundary intelligence. When you choose your response to others you can also control your time and energy, which in turn, allows you to focus on your priorities.

THE BOUNDARY CRASHERS

Boundary clarity is a contact sport. Your boundaries are like invisible shields; they are most often revealed when someone crashes into them. Meet eight boundary crushers. With your permission, they can break down the appropriate limits you have set. What are your best practices for responding to each of them?

THE A-B-C-D-ES OF BOUNDARY CLARITY

Consider a five-step plan to enhance boundary clarity and cope with boundary crushers in your leadership. As you read, reflect on your experiences, add your best

The A-B-C-D-ES of Clear Boundaries

- **Accept your authority.**
- **Build thick borders.**
- **Create emotional insulation.**
- **Disengage to gain perspective.**
- **Edit your story.**

practices and plan to experiment with some new actionable strategies.

ACCEPT YOUR AUTHORITY.

Boundary clarity provides the inner authority that allows you to lead without being a buddy or a bully. It begins when you accept that you are in charge of directing care and patient outcomes. Taking the lead requires that you communicate your standards and expectations. This includes being clear about job responsibilities, reporting relationships, priorities and timelines. It also means that you set clear limits with your supervisor. And it might mean that you think twice about who views your birthday photos on Facebook.

The acceptance of authority requires finding the sweet spot between responding to the demands of others and taking your own needs into account. Be alert to the two boundary blurring behaviors that can undermine your authority: perfection seeking and crowd-pleasing. Offer clear directions when you delegate to a staffer, but don't detract from your authority by micromanaging him to do it the way you would—so that he meet your standard of perfection.

Above all, remember that even the most enlightened authority cannot make every camper happy. Just think about the pitfalls of pleasing in drafting the staff schedule. “Despite discussions and emails explaining the needs of the unit, the schedule still comes back with many requests and many days understaffed,” said one manager. “Then I wind up having to take away requests or texting staff to see whose request is more important. It takes so much of my time. I want to make everyone happy, but it is making me miserable.”



Reflections: Recall a situation when you felt comfortable in accepting your authority.

Next, describe an experience where your desire to be a buddy, strive for perfection or please the crowd crossed the boundary of your authority. What would you want to teach other managers about what you have learned?



Experiments. Ask—and answer—the crucial questions. What are the rewards and necessary losses of taking charge? Have I invested in friends outside of work? Why is it so difficult for me to delegate and risk that he won't do it as well as I would? Why am I trying so hard to make everyone happy? What are the consequences of saying yes to every demand of my supervisor?

Don't just say no. Employ your authority to enhance staff autonomy. Try the No + Why + How formula. (“No, we can't postpone the date of switching to bedside reporting because the whole center is making the change on that date. How do you think we can best prepare for this?”)

Convey your approachability and limits with a “yes + statement. To staff: “Yes, I can talk now *and* in ten minutes I have to take a conference call. With your supervisor: “Yes, I can work on the presentation *and* this means I will have to set aside the budget projections for a couple of days.”

BUILD THICK BORDERS.

Psychologist Edward Hartmann used the term “thick boundaries” to characterize those who are able to maintain their focus and equilibrium in the face of the strong feelings of others. One manager called herself a “communication ambassador” who understands and translates what she calls the “gap of intensity” between the feelings that belong to her staff and her own feelings.

Maintaining healthy thick boundaries also means fencing in your own intense feelings: In one manager's memorable words, “If they see that my hair is on fire, their hair will be on fire.”

Being a communication ambassador—with a fire-proof hair-do—can be challenging. This can mean accepting the gripes of wrath about vacation time, refusing to take sides with the staffer feuding with the patient care technician or responding with a kind firmness to the son whose stinging criticism of his father's care is an expression of his own fear and grief. It also means cultivating trusted friends and colleagues.



Reflections: Recall a situation when you were able to maintain your emotional equilibrium—while others were losing theirs.

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