



Life and Death

Living with boundaries

I receive anything between eighty and one hundred emails each working day. Now, whilst a certain proportion of them insist on how much better my life could be if I were to invest in Viagra or Cialis, or offer me access to porn websites with celebrities in various states of undress or bad behaviour, or invite me to a three day workshop in Mogadishu on electronic document management, or try and sell me the third edition of the definitive book on "*Berthing procedures for fishing vessels in Malta*", most of what I receive I actually need to look at in order to see whether I need to respond to it or not, and at least sixty percent of everything I receive does require a response.

I also receive no less than twenty telephone calls a day on my landline and mobile phone. Again, whilst some of them are customer surveys to determine satisfaction levels with the service I receive from my bank, or surveys regarding my perception of the oil industry, or offers of timeshare in Vladivostok, most of those calls have some sort of purpose which is necessary for my businesses to continue efficiently.

In addition, I receive calls from time to time asking me to contribute to this or that charity. Until yesterday, I had a secretary who would leave the office twenty to thirty minutes early each day, and from time to time would simply not turn up to work, or would do the things she was asked to do in a way which did not reflect the impeccability with which I want my office to run. Last week, when I was on holiday, I found myself being bombarded by messages on my mobile phone from a particular client (lets call her Susan) demanding that I produce a certain document for her whilst I was away. I think the message that I received from my secretary about Susan's demands which got most up my nose was: "*I don't care if he is on holiday.*"

The simple truth of it all is that I have a busy life. In fact, I don't know that many people who don't have busy lives. Some of the other simple truths are that lots of people want things from me, whether it is my time, my expertise, my money, my wisdom, my friendship or whatever. There is just not enough of me to spread around in order to satisfy everyone else's demands in the time available. In any event, I simply don't want to satisfy everyone's demands. I want to be very thoughtful about who I assist and in what manner. In particular, I don't want to satisfy anyone's demands unless firstly there is a fair exchange of resources, (e.g. money, energy or satisfaction) and unless my satisfaction of anyone else's demand aligns with the higher purposes I have in my life.

Yes, it would be really nice to give a regular amount of money to the Donkey Rescue Fund or the Anti-Vivisection Society or even the Cancer Society. However, before doing so, I need to examine whether any of those noble institutions align with my personal vision of how I want to make a difference in the world and whether that is the best possible use to which I can put my money. I don't want to make donations to charities based on a vague sense of obligation and guilt, although very often that is the way the invitation is presented to me. I am not willing to buy into guilt, because doing things out of obligation has to be the worst possible reason to take things on. When I do things out of obligation, all that that does is leave me feeling irritated and pissed off and only one party in the transaction or relationship feeling satisfied (maybe), and that person ain't me. Even then, I doubt whether there is a true sense of satisfaction because there has not been a fair exchange of resources.

Although it is a not-negotiable principle in my office that I will turn work around as soon as I possible can, usually within 24 hours, and I aim to give my clients the support they need within the time in which they need that support, again the truth is that there are only ten hours in a normal working day, and the things that need to be done in my office will take more than ten hours in any one day. It is also true that, if I keep on putting out my energy, in order to satisfy the demands of all of my clients, but take no time out for myself in order to re-charge my batteries from time to time, the batteries must eventually run flat.

The other truth for me is that, if I need things to be done in my office in a certain manner in order to reflect certain values I have concerning the work that goes out of my office, the way in which my office operates and the way in which I want my life to be, but those things are not being done in that manner, I am out of integrity with myself if I allow that situation to persist.

I can go on with endless examples which may or may not resonate with you, but the real question is: what is to be done?

The simple answer is that we need boundaries in our lives. In fact, the better we get at what we do, or the more we know, or the more money we have, the chances are that more and more people are going to want some of what it is that we have, if not all of it. It really matters, therefore, to put protection mechanisms in place in order to protect our time, resources, health and integrity. So how do we do that without pissing other people off?

The truth is that sometimes it is inevitable that others may feel pissed off by our boundaries. When I speak of boundaries, what I mean is the line that we draw around ourselves which says: "*This close and no closer. This much and no more.*"

A teacher of mine, Gavin Harrison, offers that sometimes we need to be willing to disappoint others in order to be absolutely true to ourselves. When we choose to live our own truths, others may well feel disappointed because their demands do not align with what we will permit.

John Demartini coined "*The law of lesser pissers*". The gist of this is that anytime when you are faced with the choice of having to piss someone else off or piss yourself off, it is preferable to choose to piss the other person off. What he is really saying is that we piss ourselves off when we are not being true to ourselves. Anytime we are not acting out of pure willingness, we are going to piss ourselves off. We therefore need to become willing about what it is that we are being asked to do, rather than act out of obligation or survival, two of the motivational states in which we sometimes find ourselves. We also need to be sure that there is a reciprocal exchange of time, energy, money or other value. Without a fair exchange, one party is going to be pissed off.

When people have justifiable time demands on me, I sometimes think I am faced with only two options: put my head in the sand or do it. However, there is a third option. The third option is to negotiate in a clean way. If I find myself under time pressure when a client wants something from me, I will always agree on a deadline with the client, so that I know exactly how much time I have available, I know exactly what the client's needs are and I know that if I deliver any sooner than the deadline, I will "super-please" the client.

One of my mistakes, I realised, when Susan was demanding her document whilst I was on holiday, was that I had forgotten to tell her that I would be out of the office for a week. Quite frankly it wasn't going to make a jot of difference in anyone's life (even Susan's) if the document was only produced in the following week. It wasn't as if something was going to expire if the document wasn't produced, or that Susan would somehow suffer some terrible

prejudice. The principle was simply that she had thought that her document was so important that it had to be produced in the week that I was away. She had also expected that I would do this because I always do what I am asked in quick time. I had forgotten to tell her that she would need to wait for nearly a week for the document to be produced. She got mad, demanding and was unwilling to see the reality of the situation which was I was simply not around to do the document.

As an exception to all the other demands made on me during the time that I was away on leave, I phoned Susan. I heard what she had to say and explained that it wasn't going to make any difference if the document was produced in the week that I was away or during the following week. However, I did say that I was willing to have a colleague produce the document if she was really desperate for it during my week away, but my preference was to deal with it personally once I was back. I also apologised for not letting her know that I would not be in the office. Once I had cleaned up my part in the situation, i.e. apologised for not keeping her in the picture about my movements, she chose to wait for me to come back, so that she could get the expertise that she wanted from me and not from someone she did not know.

The lesson to be learnt was that she would have been absolutely fine with the boundary I had i.e. that I needed some leave in order to recharge my batteries, provided she had known about it. The question was whether I broke my own boundary by phoning her to sort the problem out. One of the issues with boundaries is that they need to be set within a context. Yes, boundaries are all about protecting ourselves, our integrity and our resources, but they need to be set within the context in which they arise. It is out of context for me simply to disappear on holiday without ensuring that this is not going to damage the relationship I have with my clients. I will take my leave when I need it, but I will also ensure that my office continues to run, or that I have negotiated with my clients that things may look a bit different whilst I am away. For 95% of my clients, I had managed to do that, but I slipped up with Susan and in that sense found that my actions had to a large extent led to me needing to allow my own boundaries to be breached.

Boundaries are notoriously difficult to set, especially for people who spend their lives trying to please others. It is really challenging for some people to say "No", and yet that is what is called for on occasion. The general principles which I follow for the setting of boundaries and which I recommend include:

- Determine your highest purpose in the various areas of your life. Until you know what those purposes are, you cannot know what boundaries need to be set in order to protect them.
- Know exactly what it is that you want in your life, even if you are not quite sure of your highest purposes. Then align your actions and exchange of resources with that.
- When you set your boundaries, look at the greater context, or greater picture: will the setting of the boundary serve your purposes or harm your purposes?
- Determine which of your resources are available to others, how much of those resources you are willing to make available and in what circumstances you will make those resources available. For instance, you will be asked by other people to part with your money. If charitable institutions ask you to part with your money, determine whether your support of a particular charity is in line with your purposes for charitable support. If people want your time, decide whether the time that you are willing to share is time which could be better used elsewhere.

- Always act out of willingness and choice when you do or share anything. If you are acting out of obligation or survival, you are going to feel dissatisfied or pissed off as a minimum.
- When you are acting, always be true to yourself; act completely within your own personal integrity, whatever that is. If you are selling out on yourself, you are not serving your highest purpose.
- Be willing to disappoint others, no matter how difficult that may be, if that will avoid disappointing yourself. Remember, you can disappoint others in a caring and compassionate way; it does not mean that you need to be harsh or uncaring. It just means that you need to state your position boldly and unapologetically.
- Ensure that you have an equal exchange of energy, time, money or anything else on which you place a value when you are sharing or parting with your own resources. If there is no fair exchange of resources, the relationship will be out of balance and again, one of you is going to end up feeling pissed of.
- Surround yourself with people who can support you. One of the biggest mistakes we make is trying to do everything ourselves, often because we believe we are the only people in the world who can do them. Rather surround yourself with reliable people who can deliver what you want, when you want it and in the manner in which you want it. This will help you to create the time and quality that you require in your life.

There is no magic formula for what a boundary should look like. You need to decide for yourself. However, if you don't want to end up shredding yourself and even making yourself ill, determine how much of you there is to go around and, unapologetically, offer no more.

References:

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