

What to do when boundary-setting backfires

This LinkedIn post of mine ignited a firestorm! People had a *lot* to say about setting, respecting and ignoring boundaries, especially on teams whose members don't sit by side every day.

Here's the post, followed by an excerpt of dozens of responses, grouped by topic. Most comments were thoughtful and illuminating, offering practical and actionable ideas for setting and honoring boundaries across teams.

Here's how one leader's attempt to set boundaries for her team backfired.

✉ Carol was prone to sending emails to her team members whenever an idea popped into her head, but she didn't want her staff to think they had to do the same, so she sent this email to her team.

✉ She even added a note as part of her email signature to indicate that she expected no replies out of work hours.

✉ It worked, at first. People said they felt relieved they weren't expected to reply whenever they saw Carol's emails come through.

✉ But as the number of Carol's off-hours emails multiplied, her team members began to feel anxious about leaving her many emails unanswered, so they began to mirror her habit of replying (and even initiating) emails during off-hours.

💡 Carol realized that her actions were speaking much louder than her words. She couldn't break her habit of writing emails whenever a thought came to her, but she did start to defer delivery until work hours.

👤 Where are boundaries most needed, especially for teams working across multiple locations and time zones? Do you have examples to share?

Scheduling email works, sometimes

- When team members span time zones, choosing a particular time (say 9 am the next day), will only work if everyone is on the same time zone. There are probably workarounds so one email can be sent at 9 am in *each* person's own time zone, there's no easy or elegant way to do this.
- The technology may provide an answer but it is not terribly helpful to have, say, 10 emails from your boss arrive together at 9am because they have been deferred until working hours. That simply creates a different sort of pressure.
- Schedule send makes no difference, it's still the same overload and lack of inherent prioritization the confines of a normal week force on you.

- I delay send all the time. Makes it so everyone works well and I'm not asking anyone to work off hours or feel they need to do the same. I schedule-send a lot of emails, especially when communicating with applicants. For staff communications, I often schedule them for the next morning and stagger the delivery times if I have multiple emails to the same people.
- Actions always speak louder than words, especially when the two don't align. It's tough with teams that cross time zones, but scheduling her emails for work hours, or better yet, saving them as drafts so she can look at them again once work hours start again to see if they really merit sending, seems like a smarter idea. Also, she clearly wasn't sending them "occasionally," so her words really didn't match her actions, and that can lead to mistrust.
- Use the technology with Send Later. It isn't about you; it's about how the recipient received the information.
- I work best in the evenings (some reason I hit my stride of good ideas and project work between 3 & 4pm so I don't want to stop if I don't have to!) so I'm often at my desk past 5pm (when all our locations close) and schedule send for 8am the next day for this exact reason. I know I have people that seeing emails in their inbox gives them anxiety so they HAVE to respond as soon as they get a notification on their phone.
- This is where a "scheduled send" wins. You still get the release of shipping your ideas out to the people that matter, but you can schedule it for a time that they want to receive it. Everybody gets what they need and no one is anxious.
- 99% of email is not urgent. Most email platforms have a delay delivery feature and Outlook will even alert you that the person you are currently sending an email to may be outside of their business hours.
- Schedule send is a gift. I work odd hours due to childcare, and I hate anyone getting pinged when I have something non urgent to share. If I don't write it and send it in the moment, though, it may get forgotten. So I write it then schedule it for the morning.
- The scheduled send feature is pretty much indispensable for me. I like to work in short bursts throughout the day (and sometimes well into the evening, depending on my schedule) but I don't like the optics of having emails timestamped outside of regular business hours. Some of my clients might have noticed by now that they always get emails from me at exactly 7:00am, but I'm okay with that 😊
- Problem is, over an evening or weekend my boss could write me a dozen emails, all scheduled for 8am Monday. This creates so much more stress when I open my emails and they all appear at once. I'd rather they came through when they're written and I, as an autonomous professional adult, can decide what to do with them and when. I guess the responsibility lies between the sender and the recipient on how to manage this. What I do is I write down my thoughts and then send ONE email to a person. (What you mentioned actually reminds me of how my kids text me. They will write a sentence then SEND then write another sentence then SEND. So I told them: Finish your thoughts THEN click send)

Write first, send later

- I work with a guy who schedules emails in advance. Here is the scenario ... he assumes that chaos will ensue with weekend emails. So he writes his emails as they come and prioritizes his ideas. Then he identifies who needs to be in the loop and schedules the emails for the week based on the time zones of the team and what he knows of the weekly workflow. Things that are important get scheduled for early in the week. Things that are less important go out later in the week. He doesn't forget because he captures the idea in the moment. He doesn't overload everyone because he attempts to plan, organize and balance. As things change he can adapt and interrupt the schedule appropriately.
- Sounds to me like Carol had bad time management or was understaffed and I agree that she could have used a schedule timed email to defer sending. A better way I find is old school but take notes, pen and paper. I do this a lot and I often find that by writing it down it actually gets it off my mind and by the time morning has rolled around the content of what I would have sent has changed as I have thought about differently by removing the urgency from it.
- Instead, write your overnight ideas down for yourself. Do not send them to anyone. If you have time during the week to form it into something useful and reasonably actionable to communicate then great, do so. Otherwise it wasn't that important and stays in your personal log.
- Sadly, I would have liked to see the reply that said "Dear Carol, But do you expect us to read the emails? Do you expect us to think about the content? Do you expect us to lose sleep worrying about the content? If the answer to all of those questions is truly 'No'. Write your email but only enter your own email address, and switch off without sending. The following morning find the email in your drafts, insert the rest of the email addresses and hit 'send'. Then we're all happy."
- Sounds to me like Carol had bad time management or was understaffed. While she could have used a schedule timed email, I find that a better way is old school: Take notes with pen and paper. I often find that by writing it down it actually gets it off my mind and by the time morning has rolled around the content of what I would have sent often changes as I thought about it differently.
- Write the email when the idea pops into your head. Schedule delivery for work hours. Make delivery late enough in the morning to tweak or delete email as needed.
- If you are sending copious emails after hours because that's when you have ideas, please start a draft folder of your emails and send them during business hours. You will still preserve the idea, but not contribute to team anxiety.

Creating explicit agreements and operating norms

- That's part of the ground rules that focus on HOW we're going to do business; not WHAT
- On our team, Emails are for info that doesn't need to be answered right away. I prefer a one full business day reply expectation. If your message needs faster attention you can either set the priority or use tools like Teams or Slack. We use text *only* for emergency communications (and

only if business phones are used). Our practice is to turn off notifications when we aren't on duty/call etc. We don't let this kind of overstepping of boundaries destroy the work life balance.

- We employed auto-rules and hidden context. Those environments were often email communication- heavy and it can be difficult to instantly know what's important. Examples: Random thoughts went into chat channels, but when sent in mail, usage of "Low Pri" helped. If a member from my team CC'd themselves first, then me, then they didn't want me to respond but needed my title on it. If I was CC'd first, then they want me to thoughtfully jump in. We had Email aliases that we would add to CC. Things like "(TeamInitials)Brainstorming," "(TeamInitials)Discussions." All of these can be auto-ruled and encouraged to ignore until work hours permit.
- I did the same thing and was criticized by my team for it (We had a 360-degree review). I did not have the problem of not communicating with my team; I was overcommunicating. I was spamming them. So we came to an agreement. I coded each email according to the following code: 1 - this is need to know, 2 - this is nice to know, 3 - you can ignore this email.
- I frequently email and message out of hours, because I write those messages when I think of them (otherwise I'll forget and/or be distracted later), and I don't expect answers outside of working hours but I guess I am pressuring others to do likewise.
- It's never as simple as this post would suggest. Maybe if you and everyone on your team work in the same time zone and in a business that has massive structure, then it's great advice for leaders. But if that's not the case, and it often isn't, the accountability shifts equally to the recipient to manage their own boundaries.
- I get that we need governance, but more importantly if you are in this bleeding edge digital transformation culture you need to invest in training your people so they can be empowered to apply the right tool to the right problem.

Living in an always-on world

- This is not just an issue of when the emails are being sent, but of the belief that an "always on" work ethic is a successful work ethic. The modeling by the leader sets the tone not just of what is acceptable but what is expected, even when they say otherwise. It is time for us all to examine our priorities.
- The corporate world can be toxic. As a senior level staff I feel it comes with a certain lifestyle commitment to balance work and life so you are performing as expected and to your own standards while living your best personal life. That's on you, not the boss.
- Some people want to portray an image of someone who is "always on" day, night, weekend, public holidays, etc. I had a boss who timed her emails sometimes, especially if the recipient list included senior members of the leadership team, to send late at night or often weekends. Purely for show so she was seen to be working when others probably weren't.
- Don't install anything work related on your phone, unless it's mandated. And don't log in during off hours "just to check" unless there's a real business need.

- People work better when they're allowed down time. That's *real* downtime, no emails, WhatsApp messages or calls. This is something of a rarity these days where people feel compelled to contact you as soon as something pops into their head.

What's a leader to do?

- As a leader, you might think you are sending a simple email...but it comes across as an order for immediate attention from the team.
- Carol should be allowed to work and complete things when SHE wants to work. If she told the people who work for her that they do not need to respond - DON'T respond. Why should Carol be penalized? It's OK for her to have to squeeze all of her necessary communications into someone else's "normal" hours?
- I always tell managers to not do this, because you are supposed to show the example. If you work off hours, even if you tell them not to, they expect that to get ahead they need to do this. This encourages people to do extra work to be like you or get to that level.
- Setting boundaries needs to be done thoughtfully *and* carefully, and the person setting the boundaries needs to adhere to them, or they mean nothing.
- Carol's expectation was completely clear. If employees can't take it at face value it says more about them than the manager. I rapidly discovered when I was in a senior management role that the volume of emails on top of 'important' meetings filling the day meant that often the only time available for email response or to initiate future action was after standard office hours. Where action rather than words would be an issue, would be where the expectation was as stated, but then the manager demanded immediate responses in any case. There didn't seem any indication of that here.
- This is a perfect example of why leaders must "walk the talk". Any disconnect between what we say and what we do sends a "double message" that undermines trust and creates anxiety. We can't just set policies, we have to model them.
- I believe that Carol is demonstrating a lack of organization and self-control, whilst admitting this to her colleagues and then continuing to act in this rather poor demonstration of leadership. By poor, I am being specific in that there's no lead by example, whilst in this case Carol is essentially stating "don't practice what I preach". Once again, do we blame the smartphone, or the habit!
- Her lack of organization says just as much about her as why she can't respect boundaries in other people and the fact that there is a power imbalance between her and her employees. At the very least she could use the outlook scheduled email function when dropping in her emails
- Your people will do what you do, regardless of what you say. It's right there in the word - "lead"er.
- Your words, your actions carry far greater weight than you think.
- It's not necessarily inappropriate for me to be responding outside my hours to someone in USA when it's still in their working hours, but I do need to consider my impact on others and perhaps set up delays to send my stuff in working hours. I frequently email and message out of hours, because I write those messages when I think of them (otherwise I'll forget and/or be distracted

later), and I don't expect answers outside of working hours but I guess I am pressuring others to do likewise.

- I was guilty of sending emails anytime of the day, but I realized it wasn't fair that others came into work with a bunch of emails from overnight. I didn't like it when my boss did it to me. Another bad habit is sending emails at night and expecting a response by 9 am the next morning. This is something we can teach leaders.
- The same can be said for working while on annual leave. I used to do it to ease the pressure of returning, but I realized my team felt obliged to mirror that behavior when they took their own holidays - so I stopped - and now only deal with urgent things.
- The afterhours behavior also burns out the sender; they aren't sending gold, its often something that will need a serious coffee to decrypt.

Considering the recipient's perspective

- If they are spending their afterhours and weekends sending through "ideas to consider", each one of those is time consuming regardless of when it's sent. Over the weekend they've had 48 hours to load your inbox with all the grand ideas of someone who can't prioritize what's important. Then come Monday you have to deal with the out of hours backlog and what they're sending on Monday at the same time.
- But what if you are short staffed every day and feel the need to answer emails after hours to cheat and get ahead for the next day? What if you have OCD? I sleep better at night knowing have no new emails in my inbox.
- I feel like if my employer is kind enough to let me work flexibly- drop kids off AM, catch up later in evening and send an email or two- then it's kinda the recipients responsibility to guard their own time and their mind. They are adults, they can decide to switch their phone off. Different of course if an employer is compelling such things.
- Because our off hours are different, I would never expect my boss to save an email for later, but he has always been very clear about respecting my work hours, repeatedly letting me know it's okay to let it go until the next business day, which makes it easier for me to maintain my boundary. Note, he doesn't reinforce the message in an email - he says it when we meet. I do think saying it in person resonates deeper.
- It seems a far greater problem that her staff did not trust her word enough to accept the initial statement.
- The Carols and Carlos of the world could also take a few hours to reflect on requests and emails instead of impulse-24/7-"broadcasting"their "leadership by impulse" thoughts. Half of them are likely unnecessary, by morning many are outdated or, on a second thought, just a distraction from more relevant agendas. Allow time for those second thoughts, create drafts or project lists.
- No one likes or needs managers who constantly flood inboxes with "ideas" or with stuff they "saw someone do and we should do too," etc.

- I was the recipient of countless emails from my senior administration leaders with 3 AM or 4:45 AM time stamps. I'd log on a couple of hours later where I'd find a new email from the same sender(s) telling us to disregard the previous email as an unforeseen detail had now become apparent and the previous directive outlined was to be scrapped.
- Carol might have added "...but I do hope you are able to respond during your normal working hours if you feel a need to respond..."

The complexities of variable time zones

- It's unavoidable in multinational and multi timezones environment.
- If you have a team dispersed across time zones it would be wise to create some type of response metrics. I know we did that for our product team at one company I was with- I may not have agreed with the metric we were upheld to because I thought it was a little too rigid especially given the volumes were had but it wasn't too bad.
- Complexity increases with teams spread across time zones, and it's still important to try and to name the norms, behaviors, and impact.
- If you work in a global company, but expect all emails to be within your own personal work hours, you're selfish and entitled. Why should your hours have precedent on someone else's across the world? That was a lesson I learned very early on.
- It's even worse if you have team members working on projects in a time zone that is 10+ hours ahead. And the client (or manager) expects you to have reviewed and approved the document before a call with her at 7:30 AM in your time zone!
- Situated in AP, most of my global meetings in the past would happen at evening AP time (morning in US, afternoon in EU). There was no other workaround 😊
- I recently started a job that is 3 time zones away. I have become pretty good at signing off at my normal stop time. My boss is incredibly thoughtful about the time difference and does not expect me to respond during my off hours, but I can't help it. 98% of the time, I will at least read it.

Autonomy and flexibility above all

- Sometimes adaptability matters more than rigid boundary-setting. I had a heart-to-heart talk with an employee in LA on a video call well past midnight my time. As head of HR, she needed me in that moment. If I had drawn a hard line around my availability, I never would have heard what was weighing so heavily on her heart. Our team understood the realities of time zones, and we agreed that if being flexible once in a while helped create psychological safety, it was worth the discomfort.
- For me, it's less about strict rules and more about intentional choices: knowing when boundaries protect us, and when flexibility is what people really need.

- In my sector, I don't see a problem with sending or receiving messages any time of day; everyone is aware of their own working hours and should be able to decide when they read and respond within them, without anxiety.
- Perhaps consider adding context regarding the company's flexibility in terms of working hours would help. For example, I have young children, and often take some time off during standard working hours, but make up hours after the kids are sleeping. If Carol is in a similar situation, a simple restructuring of her email to provide that context would encourage her team to capitalize on the same flexibility.

Alternatives to email

- It would have been more effective to capture those ideas in a Gantt chart or working notes document, creating a single source of truth for the team. Then setting scheduled async review times team members can provide feedback in a structured way that both protects work/life balance and reinforces clear prioritization, without causing the team undue anxiety!
- I like the idea of using some kind of rolling tracker instead of emails. I don't like/trust email for continuous updates, and I'd much rather have everything in one place rather than scattered across multiple email chains that I can't even guarantee everyone will read.