

Respectful Communication and Setting Boundaries

Why Respectful Communication & Boundaries Matter

Respectful communication is the foundation of a healthy, safe, and productive work environment. When we set and respect boundaries, we:

- Prevent misunderstandings and conflict
- Maintain psychological safety
- Reduce the risk of harassment or escalated issues
- Create a culture of inclusion and trust

“Respect doesn’t mean agreement. It means listening, recognizing needs, and acting with care.”

What is Respectful Communication?

Respectful communication means expressing yourself in a way that is:

- **Clear** – Say what you mean without passive aggression or assumptions.
- **Considerate** – Be mindful of tone, body language, and timing.
- **Consent-based** – Don’t assume others are ready or willing to talk about certain topics or participate in certain conversations.

Examples:

Instead of...

“You’re always late with this.”

Asking personal questions like “Why don’t you have kids yet?”

Interrupting with “I don’t think that’ll work.”

Try...

“I noticed this part came in after the deadline. Can we talk about what got in the way?”

Letting the person share what they want in their own time—or not at all.

Waiting for your turn, then offering: “Can I share another perspective?”

What respectful communication is not:

What one side may *think* is respectful, but isn’t experienced this way by others:

- Saying “I’m just being honest” as a cover for being hurtful.
- Withholding communication as a form of control.
- Using “tone policing” to silence assertiveness.

Everyday Tips for Respectful Communication

1. Listen to Understand, Not Just to Respond

- Give your full attention—avoid interrupting or thinking ahead to your rebuttal.
- Use active listening: *“What I’m hearing is...”*

2. Be Aware of Your Tone and Body Language

- Tone can come across differently in person, emails, or chats.
- A calm, open tone invites dialogue—even during disagreement.

3. Use Clear and Inclusive Language

- Say what you mean without sarcasm or jargon.
- Avoid assumptions about personal identity, family, or background.

4. Pause Before You React

- If something triggers you, take a moment to breathe before replying.
- It's okay to say, *“Can we revisit this in a few minutes?”*

5. Ask, Don’t Assume

- Instead of saying “You never told me”, try “Can we clarify what was expected here?”

6. Give Feedback Privately and Constructively

- Focus on the behaviour, not the person.
- Use “I” statements: *“I noticed deadlines were missed; how can we support that?”*

Cultural Considerations in Communication

What feels respectful to one person may not feel the same to another. Our cultures, communities, and lived experiences shape how we speak, listen, and interpret each other.

- Direct vs. indirect communication - Some cultures value being direct and assertive; others see indirectness or silence as respectful.
- Eye contact or physical space - Comfort with these vary and can be misread.

- Tone and timing - Pauses or silence can hold meaning; interrupting might be seen as disrespectful.

Remember from our earlier conversations about Unconscious Bias, DEIB, and Psychological Safety; we need to give space and empathy to respect these differences in communication styles and invite curiosity over judgement

Benefits of Respectful Communication in the Workplace

Benefit	What It Looks Like
Stronger Collaboration	Teams work more smoothly when people feel heard and respected.
Fewer Conflicts	Prevents escalation by addressing issues early and calmly.
Increased Trust	People are more likely to share ideas and concerns.
Improved Morale & Retention	Respect reduces stress and creates a culture where people want to stay.
Enhanced Psychological Safety	Employees feel safer to speak up about mistakes, ideas, or concerns without fear.
Better Problem-Solving	Diverse voices are included, leading to more thoughtful and creative solutions.

What are Workplace Boundaries?

Boundaries are limits we set with others to feel safe, respected, and focused. They may relate to:

- Time (e.g., “I don’t answer emails after 5 PM.”)
- Space (e.g., “Please knock before coming into my office.”)
- Workload (e.g., “I need a full day’s notice to take on extra tasks.”)
- Topics (e.g., “I prefer not to discuss my personal life at work.”)
- Communication style (e.g., “I respond better when we speak calmly.”)

Boundary-Setting Phrases

Use these examples when you need to set or reinforce a boundary—professionally and respectfully.

If someone is intrusive or overstepping:

- “I’m not comfortable discussing that at work.”
- “Let’s keep this professional—I’d rather talk about the project.”

If you need time or space:

- “Can I finish this task and circle back in 20 minutes?”
- “I’d appreciate it if we could set up a time instead of dropping in.”

If the tone or delivery is off:

- “I want to understand your concern, but I’d like to keep this conversation calm.”
- “Can we revisit this after we’ve both had a moment to regroup?”

Reminder:

Setting a boundary isn’t rude, it’s reasonable and caring. Boundaries can help create clearer expectations of one another. Furthermore, boundaries are about you managing *your own comfort and capacity*, not controlling others.

Work Scenarios

Scenario 1: "Reply-All Ripple"

A colleague points out a spreadsheet error you made, but CCs the whole team unnecessarily.

→ How could you respond respectfully but assertively?

Scenario 2: "Too Personal at Lunch"

Someone persistently asks about your relationship or family plans.

→ What boundary could you set?

Scenario 3: "The Doorway Demand"

While you're on a video call, your manager appears in your doorway expecting immediate answers.

→ How can you ask for space or reschedule the conversation?

Receiving Boundaries with Respect

Setting boundaries is only half the equation. The other is how to respond when *you are the one being given a boundary*:

- Don't take it personally.
- Thank the person for their clarity.
- Adjust behaviour respectfully.

Boundaries & Accountability

You have the right to feel safe at work. If your boundaries are not being respected:

1. **Try speaking directly** – Use clear, respectful language.
2. **Restate and describe the impact** – reiterate the boundary and describe how you affected when the person does not respect the boundary.
3. **Document what happened (if needed)** – Dates, times, and what was said.
4. **Seek Support**

Supervisor – Reach out to your supervisor or manager for support.

Contact HR – Especially if the behaviour continues or escalates; these violations may indicate deeper issues.

Personal Reflection: Your Boundary Action Plan

Take a few minutes to fill this out for yourself (you won't have to share unless you choose to):

- One workplace boundary I'd like to start setting:

- A phrase I feel comfortable using:

- One person or role I can reach out to if I need support:

Final Thought

Setting and respecting boundaries isn't about creating distance. It's about creating clarity, trust, and safety. For everyone.