Setting boundaries: A guide for staff in schools

Introduction

Learning how to set and keep clear boundaries is an essential part of working in a school. School staff are caring and conscientious, so it can be easy to end up saying yes to every request. Is this always in your best interest?

To be the best for your students, you need to be the best you. That won't happen without setting boundaries to help you find a healthy balance which includes professional performance you can be proud of, plus self-care to avoid stress and burnout.

It can be challenging to say no if you aren't used to it. Yet learning to say no in the right way, is a vital part of being a good teacher and maintaining your own wellbeing. The same goes for those working in support roles. By defining what we can and cannot do, we protect our energy so we can be effective when we are most needed. Without boundaries, being open and available can quickly turn you into being overwhelmed and overworked.

Schools must remember that all school staff need boundaries, not least because their time and energy has such a direct impact on students.

Remember, just because schools in the UK are under significant pressure, doesn't mean staff must be too.

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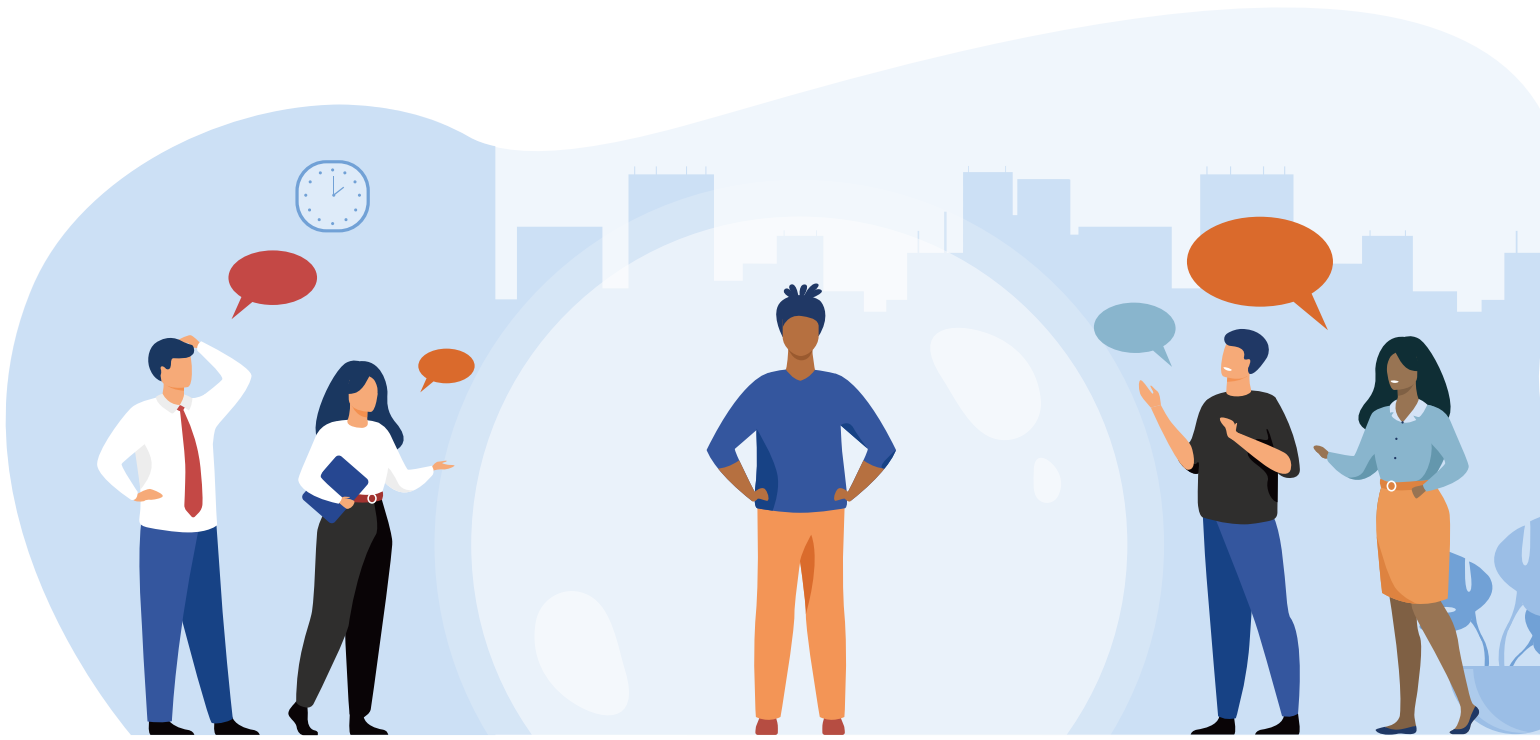
Why set boundaries

Boundaries serve many purposes, all of which result in helping people to give their best, in a mentally healthy way.

Boundaries will help:

- Provide structure around what is expected between staff and their managers

- Avoid over promising and under delivering

- Provide clarity about what is expected of you, your colleagues, your staff and your leaders

- With workload management and keeping excessive stress at bay

- Manage priorities to ensure objectives are delivered and commitments met

- Keep staff healthy and present

Putting boundaries in place, in whatever role you fulfil within a school, will enable you to:

- Better navigate relationships with colleagues at all levels

- Protect yourself, specifically your role, your career and your responsibilities (in and out of school)

- Be more productive

- Preserve your mental health and emotional energy

- Uphold your own standards and values

Boundaries may fall under different categories in schools, for example they may be:

- Your role description: what you are required to do

- Interpersonal and collegiate: how you behave with others

- Personal: your work/life balance

Put simply, boundaries are the rules of the game that enable you and your staff to stay on track with delivering essential work in schools.

How to set and maintain boundaries

Define your boundaries

Before you can protect your boundaries you need to set them. Setting them will require you considering:

- Your role and existing responsibilities;
- Your career aspirations,
- Your commitments outside of work,
- Your work life balance, and
- Your preferences around working styles, patterns and colleague relationships.

Take account of processes, culture and context at your school to ensure your boundaries are realistic and straightforward to communicate.

Ask yourself what your red lines are. These are non-negotiable or immoveable boundaries, or things that you definitely can't take on. Examples include: not taking on work outside of your job description, or that will cause you significant stress. A red line could also be not working late on a particular night when you have family commitments.

Document your boundaries

Write them down, so you can remember and revisit them.

Communicate your boundaries

Once you have planned out your boundaries, you need to make them clear. You cannot maintain your boundaries if others aren't aware of them. Share your boundaries as a plan or as part of a wider conversation about work, responsibilities and planning. This could be at key moments such as the start of a new school year or term.

Share them with those who manage you and those you work with.

Team meetings and one-to-one sessions can be good times to discuss boundaries. Be honest and clear about why these are your boundaries - practice explaining them in a firm and positive way.

Be aware of, and protect, boundaries for your colleagues to encourage this behaviour in others.

Protect and stick to your boundaries

At some stage colleagues will cross boundaries however hard you work to communicate yours and respect others. When this happens, try to avoid a personal or emotional response and instead be polite, firm and clear about what has happened.

If your manager makes a request, rather than saying "I am so stressed - I can't cope with this on top of the million other things I have to do today", explain "If I do this now then X will not get completed - what is your preference?" See also the section in this guide on 'how to say no the right way'.

Review and reset boundaries

Things change, and that includes your working boundaries and the environment you're working in. Don't be afraid to bring up the drawbridge if you need to strengthen boundaries at certain times. Equally if you feel you have more scope or space for additional work or your career goals change, you can flex your boundaries to be more open.

Key principles

Know your priorities

At work and at home. Include the things you enjoy doing. Think about how much time you should allocate to your priorities and any capacity you have to do more. This also includes during job seeking and recruitment processes - knowing your priorities and the school culture before you start, will help you find the right fit for you and your boundaries.

You can't do it all

Ask for help and share the load. School staff handle a lot, often juggling more than you realise. People with boundaries ask for help and delegate to avoid burnout. You're a human, not a robot.

Pay attention to how you feel and trust your gut

If it's making you tired, angry, or resentful, say no. If you are starting to feel any of these things it's time to make a change.

Self-care and 'me time' is essential

School staff who create boundaries recognise when they need to recharge their batteries and do something about it. Think about what helps you stay well and makes you happy, and make time for it, in and out of school.

Find the balance

Boundaries and saying no allow you to say yes to other things which are higher priority or which motivate you more.

Focus on what you can control

Even if it's very small: the order of the lesson, the layout of your desk, deciding what time you'll start and stop marking. It's all good practice.

Respect yourself and your colleagues

We all need to collaborate and work cooperatively but we also need professional boundaries. At school, respect each other's space and non-contact time and boundaries.

Good communication is vital

Be proud of your boundaries. Tell colleagues about them and encourage others to maintain and share theirs.

Time management, planning and organising is essential

These things will help you make the most of your limited time, achieve your goals and maintain your boundaries.

Example boundaries
for all school staff

1 **Set reminders:** very practically, an alarm on your phone will help you remember your boundaries - time to stop marking, time to leave work, time to switch off etc.

2 **15 minute clutter buster:** there are so many little tasks that stack up. Set a timer and tackle them for fifteen minutes each day, to help you then focus on other tasks.

3 **Take back your mornings and weekends:** where possible plan the night before or at the end of the week, so you can approach your mornings (including Monday!) calmly.

4 **Quiet time:** it's hard to think, let alone recharge when you never have any quiet. Create a boundary where you get even a small amount of quiet alone time.

5 **Use the win-win approach:** if a colleague asks "do you have a minute to talk about something?" and you are focused on another task, offer a response that offers two wins. "I'd love to talk to you. I can speak to you at 10am when I am on my break or at 4pm when I have finished teaching. What would you prefer?"

6 **Lists are your friend:** list people who drain your energy and don't respect your boundaries. Where possible, reduce your contact time with them.

7 **Keep your priorities list up to date:** write down what you 'have to' do, and rank everything on the list by importance. You might not get to everything and that's fine!

8 **Fix time boundaries:** rather than focus on tasks (e.g. I'll mark until I'm finished) think about time blocks. For example, dedicate a block of time to marking. Do what you can in that time, and then stop. Stick to that time frame. It will help everyone in the long run.

9 **Strict email boundaries:** don't put work emails on your personal phone if you can avoid it. Can you only check your school email at school or during pre-determined times at home? Be strict with yourself! Put your availability or office hours on your email auto-signature and out of office message.

10 **Clock off:** having an end of the day ritual enables us to separate ourselves from work and helps us to get offline, e.g. 5 minute desk tidy and exit. Have a defined finishing point and leave!

And finally - take a non-negotiable break for yourself. It's easy to get lost in your tasks. Find time for yourself e.g. make your lunch adults-only, choose one of your planning periods to be alone, close your classroom door, go to the break room, or take a walk. A break will help you tackle the rest of the day and beyond.

Saying no in the right way

Part of maintaining boundaries at school is learning to say no. Many school staff are uncomfortable saying no and you can read more about some of the reasons for this *here*.

Times when it's particularly hard to say no include:

- In the early stages of your career
- When schools are under particularly intense pressure, or
- For managers who want to support their staff at all times.

YES

NO

Helping out now and then fosters a collegial and positive attitude in a school, but that doesn't mean you should accept every request made of you. When you already have plenty to deal with, feeling comfortable saying no is a skill all school staff need.

How to say no

Assess the request

Ask clarifying questions and ask for time to consider the request and think strategically about it. Don't feel pressured into giving an immediate response. Don't say no until you're sure you need to, and make sure you've got all the details you need about the request (how long it might take, deadlines, priority level).

Make a decision

Think about what saying yes, or no, would mean and look like. Discuss it with others if you want to, consider your boundaries, the expectations you have of yourself, and your priorities. Decide within an agreed timeframe so people aren't waiting on you.

Communicate your decision

Be straightforward and upfront about why you're saying no e.g. do you have other priorities which you can name? If you're fortunate to be in a school where open dialogue is encouraged, that's great. If it's not so easy, be as clear as you can as to why you can't do it. Encourage realistic expectations of what you can and can't achieve and be honest from the start. Try not to take any negative responses personally. Try to feel confident in saying 'no' and give clear and reasonable reasons why.

Offer alternatives where possible

Saying no can also be a chance to suggest a different approach that may not have been considered previously e.g would it actually sit better with a different team or is it something that could happen more effectively over a longer period of time? Could you offer to work with someone, making the task more manageable? Sometimes though, saying no politely and giving your short, firm reasons is all that is needed, and that's ok.

Alternative ways of saying no

'**May I have time to reflect?**' or '**I need a day to think this through**'. This is a reasonable request, and most often you'll be given time to think about your answer. Don't make the individual come to you again. Make a decision and share your decision along with a reasonable explanation for it.

'**Have we considered the larger implications of this?**' This offers an opportunity to have a wider, strategic conversation about the request and approach being taken.

'**Thanks for asking me, but I just can't do that today/by the deadline.**'

'**I appreciate you asking me. I'm going to take time to fully consider this and I will respond to you when I have an update.**'

'**I am sorry but I must say no- I'm already very stretched. If something changes I'll let you know.**'

'**Thank you for considering me for this. Let me check my diary before I commit.**'

Instead of saying '**I can't**' say '**I don't.**' (when appropriate to the request)

Be aware of:

- Your body language: maintain eye contact and a neutral posture, avoid showing anger or distain in your body language, tone or words
- Making sure you've understood and been understood properly e.g. by paraphrasing statements made by others to confirm your understanding of their request

Remember:

- You're saying no to X so that you can be better at Y and Z.
- That others are under stress and pressure as well. Be kind.
- Your colleagues have their own lives and their own issues, and are not likely as focused on you, and you saying no this time, as you think.

3 ways leaders can set and maintain boundaries

Good school leaders are open and emotionally available with their teams. They protect staff boundaries, but also need to do the same for themselves.

1 **Maintain a predictable schedule of when you are and are not available.** Make it clear when your "door" is really open and when it's not. Communicating your boundaries is essential as a leader and it also sets a good example.

2 **Build a team with many shoulders to lean on (not just yours).** Try not to step in every time. This may make people assume that you will always stop whatever you are doing to meet their immediate needs. Refer requests to other people, offer alternatives, and create structures that foster collaboration and encourage staff to rely on each other as a unit.

3 **Model good practice.** Your staff observe what you do and will act, or feel they need to act, accordingly. If you're sending emails late at night, they will too. If you turn off on the weekends, they will too. Example boundaries for school leaders (and all school staff):

- Hosting weekly office hours for 1:1 support
- Returning emails within a set number of hours/ days of receipt
- Communicating through email or apps instead of a personal phone number
- A weekly meeting with other leaders to discuss and prioritise tasks
- Protecting privacy of staff and students at all times
- Being present at some social / staff events or times e.g. lunchtimes, but not always, giving staff (and yourself) time to relax and decompress

When saying no, do:

- Evaluate whether you have the desire and the bandwidth to help with the request and ask if priorities can be shifted or trade-offs made
- Show a willingness to pitch in by inquiring if there are other smaller ways you can help
- Be polite, firm and clear as to why you're saying no this time
- Practice saying no out loud, e.g. through role-play with a colleague - it will become easier
- Engage in positive self-talk - remind yourself of the value of your own skill set, experience, education and successes, and why you're saying no in this instance.

And don't:

- Be swayed by arguments often used to get people to do tasks e.g. praise– 'you're the most skilled person for this', guilt - 'if you don't do this, our students will go without' or practicality - 'we are stretched thin; you're the only one who can go.
- Use a harsh or hesitant tone, and don't be overly polite either.
- Hold back the real reason you're saying no. To limit frustration, give reasons with good weight up front and be honest.
- Distort your message or act tentatively because you're trying to keep your colleague happy. Be honest and make sure your no is understood.

And finally...

Burn out, work fatigue and work stress are closely linked to working long hours and a failure to set boundaries. If you have no boundaries, then anything goes. Often the first thing to go will be your mental health.

Working in a school means you care, but you can't do or solve everything. You can't take every school challenge and issue to heart. Protecting yourself is essential to performing in your role in a healthy way.

If you have low levels of energy, experience poor sleep, or have a near permanent feeling of 'being stressed', some strict boundary setting will almost certainly help regain control. If you think it would help, talk to a peer or manager to help set out your priorities and boundaries.

Let go of the guilt that can come with drawing lines in the sand. Saying no well, gets easier with practice. Set out your expectations, priorities and your boundaries and stick to them. And remember - **creating boundaries and taking care of you is an important part of being a good educator.**

Sources:

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