
Lead

Leading loudly

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THE ROLE OF LEADERS IN PROMOTING EFFECTIVE WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND PREVENTING EMPLOYEE BURNOUT

We all know the importance of making time for non-work activities, for example blocking out time in our calendars for a yoga class, lunch with a friend, or to coach our child's sports team after school. But how often do you cancel these due to what feels, in the moment, like a more pressing and urgent work demand? Recent research from Boston University and Harvard Business School faculty shows that, with the unrelenting pace and volume of work, setting and keeping boundaries has never been more challenging — or more important. If we don't, significant anxiety, exhaustion, disengagement and —ultimately—burnout may be the result.

Furthermore, in this new age of agile, flexible working and dispersed teams, along with the impact of technology, we have several added complications that can contribute to burnout. Firstly, working from home can blur the boundaries between work and non-work roles – for example, we find ourselves working into the evening more often than usual. Secondly, we feel compelled (and in reality, may be expected) to stay “switched on” to work and respond instantly to technology-enabled communications. And thirdly, many of the signs of burnout are now invisible as we work from home more and have limited in-person interactions with our colleagues.

As a leader, you are in a unique position to model a range of skilful behaviours in meaningful ways. And one area where this is crucially important is demonstrating effective boundary setting for your team members and your organisation's employees. In fact, this is necessary even if setting and sticking to boundaries is an area you struggle with yourself!

Helping your team get better about work-life balance might actually need to start with you challenging and debunking your own limiting beliefs and assumptions (which are often based on a number of distorted thoughts that have little basis in reality). You may need to start acting “as if” a healthy work-life balance is crucial, even if you're still not quite there yet in your own thinking.

As a leader, you can play a vital role in helping your team identify the early stages – akin to “early warning signs” - of the burnout process, as defined in [this month's newsletter](#). Then actively support them to “strike while the iron's lukewarm” and to intervene as quickly and skilfully as possible.

THE CHALLENGE FOR ORGANISATIONS AND LEADERS

Organisations are still struggling to find ways to support employees as they balance work and non-work roles. Central to this challenge is the impact of technology which, as previously mentioned, has enabled many organisations to promote an “always-on” culture and an expectation that employees will follow suit. In addition, organisations need to be responsive to the different preferences held by employees regarding the types of boundaries they set between work and non-work. We know that these preferences tend to lie on a continuum, from a desire to keep our work and non-work lives completely separate (so-called Segmenters), to a desire to live a highly integrated and flexible work/non-work life where we can go between these two spaces as required (Integrators).



Organisations that promote an agile, flexible work culture that supports employees to integrate work and non-work responsibilities may inadvertently contribute to blurring of roles, increased work-life conflict, and reduced work recovery time and decreased wellbeing. This is particularly so among Segmenters. For example, flexible starting and stopping times for work activities can result in employees working much later into the evening than they might with a fixed stopping time.

Similarly, working from home has become commonplace in these COVID times. But although it may be great for accommodating certain aspects of family life, the removal of the physical boundary of an office location may result in constant reminders of work, and/or requests to do work-related tasks, when engaged in non-work activities. This can quickly lead to a sense of overwhelm.

Hence, a one-size-fits-all approach will not prove effective; leaders need to get to know each of their team member's preferences and respond accordingly.

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO SET AND OBSERVE BOUNDARIES AND LIMITS IN THE WORKPLACE?

Boundaries help to define what behaviour is suitable for a particular environment. Clearly communicated boundaries ensure everyone is aware of what you consider acceptable behaviour at work. They allow your people to thrive and feel psychologically safe. Without boundaries, we can feel stressed, angry, confused, uncertain, or resentful – and, ultimately, burnt out.

As a leader, there are several benefits to setting boundaries:

- They communicate very clear expectations – for example, around one's hours and availability.
- They reduce misunderstandings and disputes – in response to, say, performance standards and expectations, or working from home.
- They increase employee engagement and satisfaction – by helping employees feel safer and more able to connect with each other.
- They allow more time for personal activities, without ambiguity or uncertainty around whether this is "OK" or not.
- They improve structure and process – for example, an expectation that all meetings need to have an agenda with time allotments for each topic.
- They contribute to higher productivity - there are fewer mistakes, project derailments and missed deadlines because expectations are clear, and employees are encouraged to communicate openly and honestly.

HOWEVER, LEADERS AND MANAGERS OFTEN HAVE POROUS WORK-WHY ARE LEADERS SUCH SIGNIFICANT ROLE MODELS?

Research has shown that leaders who display behaviours that clearly differentiate between work and non-work roles are more likely to be perceived as work/life-friendly role models. This in turn encourages employees to build boundaries between home and work, resulting in less conflict, exhaustion and disengagement. Leaders and managers are, in effect, “gatekeepers” to implementing a balance-friendly organisational culture.

However, leaders and managers often have porous work-life boundaries, which can send a confusing, contradictory message to their teams. Employees can be left thinking they, too, “should” work late, answer email at all hours, and avoid taking annual or sick leave unless “desperate”. Furthermore, their boundary-challenged managers often then reinforce these behaviours by praising them as “taking one for the team”, “going the extra mile”, and treating them as special and different from their team-mates for doing so.

So, the challenge for leaders becomes: how can I lead from the top, loudly and boldly, by setting and observing clear limits around my own behaviour that do not go unnoticed by my team? And how can I encourage and reinforce these very same behaviours amongst my own team members? Ideally, there would be no more need for employees to “slip out the back door quietly” when they need to leave early, or just not leaving early at all.

WHAT ARE SOME SPECIFIC BEHAVIOURS THAT LEADERS NEED TO DISPLAY MORE OF?

The possibilities are endless! And limited only by your own imagination. Here are some ideas we have come up with:

- Schedule your exercise/yoga/hobbies/lunches with friends/psychologist appointments (!) in a shared calendar for all team members to see.
- Leave work early – or arrive late - in a way that is “loud”, in the sense of being highly visible and clearly communicated: “I’m off now to help coach my son’s football team” or “Just been for a beautiful beach walk to start the day – highly recommend it”. And importantly, encourage your staff to do the same. No apologies, no defensiveness, no guilt, no awkwardness – appear calm, confident, and matter-of fact in your delivery.
- Have explicit discussions with your team about the signs of burnout – what to look out for in ourselves and each other – and encourage everyone to speak out if they notice any of these signs. Model this yourself, perhaps by discussing your own early warning signs, and behaviours you are committed to undertaking to halt the progress towards burnout.
- Make sure you’re actively addressing staff shortages as much as possible, hire enough staff, and ensure that your staff take turns taking time off.
- Redistribute work more evenly, so that too much of the burden doesn’t fall on your best people.
- Set clear team expectations about not sending or responding to emails/texts/calls outside of clearly defined work hours.
- Include work-life balance and boundaries as part of team members’ KPIs, e.g. “I will learn how to say no to things”, “I will eat lunch away from my desk” or “I will leave the office by 6pm”. You could also set personal/non-work KPIs during regular performance reviews that encourage healthy habits (e.g. “I will try to build up to running 5 kms over the next quarter”) and then make sure you offer support to meet these and check in on them regularly (this sends a clear message that it is OK for people to bring their whole selves to work).
- Openly share news of your own healthy habits with your team and wider organisation (e.g. through lunchtime webinars, intranet articles, weekly wellbeing conversations) to share tips for work-life balance with younger employees, and normalise that it is OK to do so.

At an organisational level, employers need to:

- Regularly communicate balance and flexibility as the priority, and collect organisation-wide data to show that this priority is actually being experienced and heard by employees (for example, through Umbrella’s Wellbeing Assessment).
- Set clear expectations and policies related to working beyond the scope of a traditional workday.
- Provide guidance on managing technology use outside of traditional work boundaries, and expectations of availability via technology. This is extremely important, given that the distribution of work-extendable technologies has been found to increase the likelihood that employees engage in work activities during personal time. This may give workers more clarity and reduce anxiety associated with the need to feel “always-on”, and thereby improve satisfaction with the balance between work and family roles.

Finally, get better at setting and keeping your own boundaries. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, helping your team improve their work-life balance might start with you observing and challenging your own distorted and limiting beliefs and assumptions. And then loudly and boldly practise what you preach!