



Drawing the Line

Setting boundaries between business and personal life doesn't have to be messy.

by Marcia Jedd

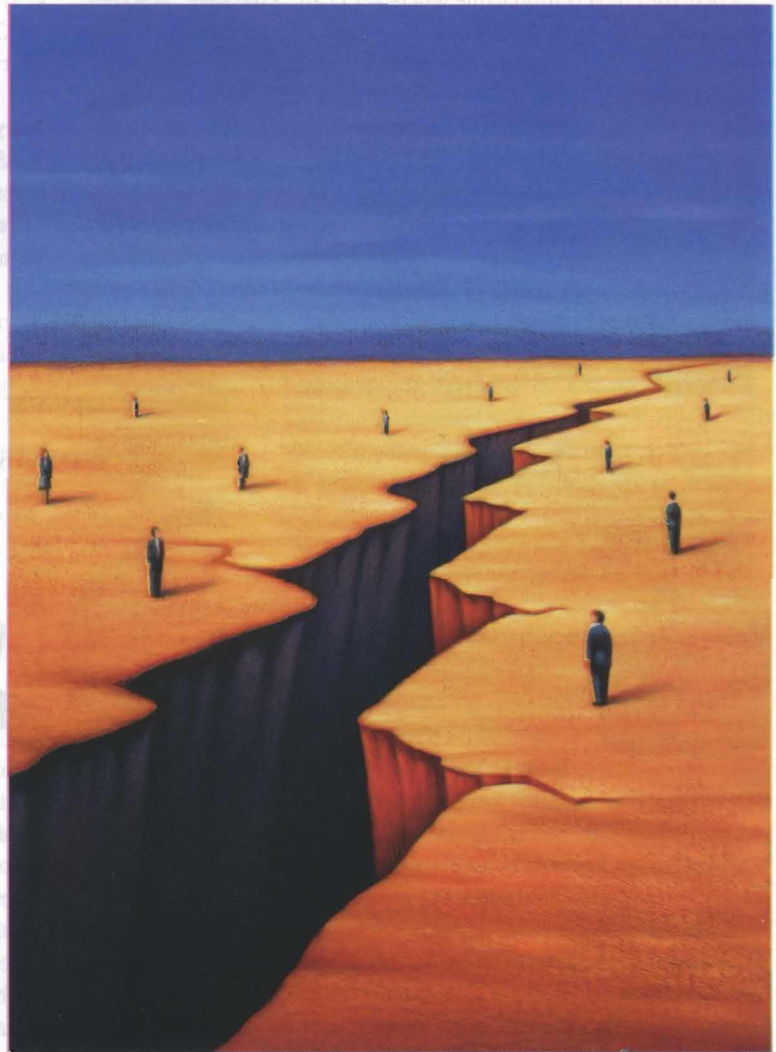
The speed of life—and business today—makes for fuzzy lines between work and personal lives.

Building a business, having children, family obligations and meeting client or customer needs all present daily challenges around boundaries. Like life, it's not all tidy.

In the work setting, unwanted questions or offers that invade home life or values, for example, can create discomfort at the least. Author, psychotherapist and anger specialist Les Carter recalls a situation involving an acquaintance who was at a business dinner and was presented with the choice to go to a strip club. "Many times with in-town and out-of-town convention stuff, we just go along to get along, thinking 'I don't want to offend them.' But you can afford to set your boundaries," Carter says.

In such a situation as the unwanted strip club invitation, Carter recommends that you not demean the offender, but "take responsibility for your response in an individualistic way. Don't make it about the other person." Responses such as "That's not something I'm comfortable with," or, "I'll address this with you later," can send your message without courting conflict.

For working parents, especially single parents, work-related issues that spill into family time can present big challenges. Allen Weinberg, a divorced father of two teen boys, has been successful in navigating the pitfalls by being honest and assertive with colleagues. Since his divorce just over three years ago, Weinberg has worked hard to set boundaries so work doesn't encroach on the joint custody he shares with his ex-wife. A managing partner at Glenbrook Partners, a financial services consulting firm in the San Francisco area, Weinberg is the only single parent in the 10-employee firm. By being upfront about family obligations, he avoids resistance from colleagues, which means he's able to say no—even to a monthly weeknight dinner everyone else in the firm attends. "When they know the kids are on the other end of it, they understand," he says.



Managing travel is the biggest challenge, Weinberg says. "I typically have my kids a week on and a week off and travel an enormous amount. I do have flexibility in scheduling most of my travel when I don't have my kids." He and his ex-wife set the schedule for the kids annually so he plans his travel around the times he has his sons, whenever possible. When urgent travel arises, he adjusts the schedule with his ex-wife, though it's inconvenient and the two swap out days on trade.



Weinberg practices what Carter calls healthy assertiveness. "It means you are addressing your personal needs and convictions while at the same time, maintaining dignity toward the individuals involved." The sign of a person with good boundaries? "You know you're probably at a good balance with your boundaries when you have a reputation for being flexible and being principled," says Carter, author of *The Anger Trap: Free Yourself from the Frustrations that Sabotage Your Life*.

Being flexible often means taking a harder look at priorities. In 2002, Suzanne McGann was in the early stages of helping build St. Paul, Minn.-based Voyageur Web development firm when she returned from a short maternity leave after having her first child. Faced with mounting work pressures, she had to dial-up the limited work hours she set. "I was underestimating my work hours and had the feeling I had one foot in both doors," McGann recalls. As a result, McGann expanded her limited hours during that transition and learned to make harder calls in assessing work- and career-related priorities.

Married and now the mother of two children, ages 1 and 6, McGann has found that initial priority lesson is still with her. "I got rid of anything that was extra and I really made a much more concentrated effort to really be at work when I was at work." She also more firmly scrutinizes committee and board opportunities, curbing her level of involvement in these extracurricular activities.

McGann attained majority ownership of the firm a few years ago. As president of the firm, she works hard and plays hard by keeping Monday through Thursday office hours with Fridays off, though

her clients and staff know they can call her cell phone with important matters that come up on Fridays. She says asserting your decisions, pertaining to boundaries, is key. "People have to see that you are confident in your decision or they won't agree with it."

Author and psychologist Jane Adams says it's even harder to observe or respect boundaries when you are self-employed. Creating

and honoring office hours as well as separate phone lines that aren't answered at certain times are tactics to separate work from home.

McGann has found staying agile helps, whether it's addressing the extra attention a client project requires or the needs of her oldest child when she arrives home. "My first objective is to be with my family and create a warm, welcoming evening when I walk in the door." At the office, she wants employees and clients to feel they have her full attention. She tries to be mindful of signs indicating employees need a little more TLC—spending a moment for small talk as a prelude to discussing client matters, for instance. "I do a mental checkup asking myself if I managed to spend 10 minutes of quality time with each person," she says.

McGann's personable management style allows her to get back to business, without alienating employees with an abrupt transition. But, many people have trouble staying on track. "For women, our usual mode is relational. We talk about subjects like children and family to make people feel comfortable with us," says Adams, author of *Boundary Issues: Using Boundary Intelligence to Get the Intimacy You Want and the Independence You Need in Life, Love, and Work*. "It can make it harder for us to be considered serious professionals. There's a fine line between chitchat in making people feel relaxed and comfortable versus making it your modus operandi."

Providing some framework for chitchat is helpful, she says. If it's unsolicited, "the simplest thing to do is say, 'I really need to hear more, but I need to get back to work now. Can we set a time to get back to this?'"

If you're the manager, Adams suggests acknowledging the need for water cooler talk before a meeting, for example, and telling everyone to take 5-10 minutes for it before starting the agenda.

"What you don't want to do is say personal life has no place in the work environment," Adams says. "Rather, it's about putting it in its place." **S**

You've reached a good balance with boundaries when you're known as being flexible and principled.

BOUNDARY-SETTING STRATEGIES

- **Listen to your emotions.** Frustration, annoyance, anger, disillusionment, among other emotional states, can be signs you haven't done a good job of setting boundaries.
- **Weigh your options.** Make transitions easy for others. Particularly when children are involved, consider their needs first.
- **Honesty is the best policy.** Be up front about family constraints with your co-workers and clients early on. As well, be transparent with your children.
- **Say no.** Saying no to work-related events which conflict with your family's evening or weekend schedule isn't a career killer.
- **Compromise works.** Leaving a client dinner early for a personal or family obligation is OK.
- **Zip it.** Boundary pushers usually know they're crossing a line. Don't respond with accusations.
- **Church and state.** Separate your work life from your home life, even when you work at home. During off hours, honor your office hours by staying unplugged and limiting intrusions.