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COACHING

BOUNDARIES: Part 1

When I first came across the concept of boundaries, it dramatically changed the way I related to people in my life and how I stood up for what I knew was right for me. I now often see the same powerful effect when I coach my clients on this subject. I think this is because whilst everyone has their own boundaries, they are usually invisible to the person themselves. Learning about them is like opening your eyes to a universal truth: and it usually hits home very powerfully. Let me tell you more about boundaries so you can make yours stronger which will help you grow in your personal development. There is a lot to tell you, so this is the first part, the last part will be in next month's tips.

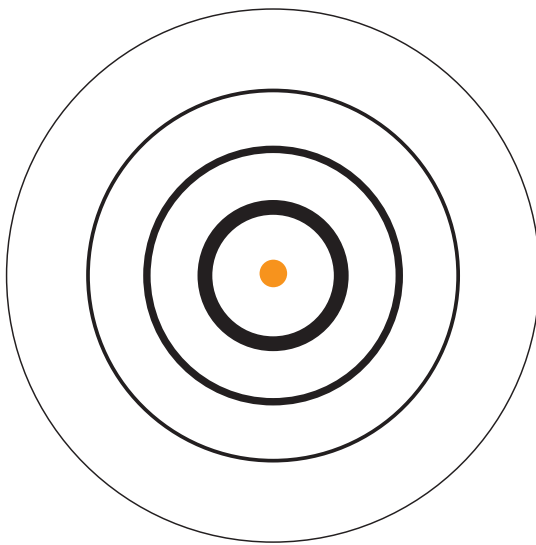
What are boundaries?

Have you ever felt uncomfortable when someone did or said something to you? Or shocked, angry or felt like the wind was taken out of your sails? Or even vulnerable? Does that 'someone' do or say this to you on a regular basis? Most of us can instantly think of one person who gets under our skin in this way, and chances are it's because they are breaching one or several of our boundaries. *So what are our boundaries?* They are the lines we invisibly draw around ourselves for protection. They protect us physically, mentally and emotionally. But not being able to see them makes life tricky to say the least. When a boundary is breached, we experience a whole variety of negative emotions, but we often don't understand why we are feeling like this. Also we don't know how to put it right, so most of us don't do anything, often putting up with that person's behaviour towards us for weeks, months and sometimes even years.

Our boundaries then are the behaviours of others in regard to us. Our boundaries are the lines we draw around ourselves, lines in the sand that we believe should not be crossed. They are words, actions and deeds which we find unacceptable to us. In essence they are what we instinctively want to say "No!" to. Our boundaries define who we are, what we stand for, and define how we view our place in the world. Some of our boundaries are inviolate, yet others are easily breached. To help you better see what it looks like, let me show you in this diagram.

Red Dandelion • 33 blithe place • bicester • oxon • OX26 2GH • UK
telephone 44 0 1869 321188 • email jennie@reddandelion.co.uk • www.reddandelion.co.uk

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The orange dot in the centre of the circles, represents you. The first circle, the one closest to you, represents your innermost boundary. This is your strongest boundary and usually the one that remains intact. This boundary will include things like: no-one may hit me; no-one may abuse me; no-one may harm me, etc.

The circles radiating out represent more of your boundaries with the ones furthest away from you being of lesser importance to you in terms of protecting yourself. These are the ones which are more likely to be

breached, yet when they are crossed they still trigger lots of negative emotions. These boundaries are very personal to you: there isn't a definitive list of what is and isn't acceptable. What I think is really important to me, may be insignificant to you. Let me give you some more examples of boundaries that people may have: no-one may intimidate me; no-one may touch me without my permission; no-one may belittle me for my beliefs; no-one may make me the butt of their jokes, and so on.

What are your boundaries? Try writing them down. Notice which ones get you hot under the collar. These are ones that probably need working on.

No boundaries: no power

Let me use an extreme case to demonstrate how boundaries can be crushed to the point where a person has effectively no boundaries left and with it, no power over their life. We have all heard about wife (and sometimes husband) battering. No doubt you've also wondered why they didn't simply walk away. There are many reasons why this happens, but in part it's because they have no boundaries left. Let me tell you how this happens. Early on in the relationship there is unlikely to be any battering (and just to make this story easier to tell, let me use a woman as the victim). But at some stage in the

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relationship the husband will cross an outer boundary. Perhaps he cruelly pokes fun at his wife. The wife doesn't like this, but doesn't know what to say or do, so she does nothing. Later on he crosses another boundary by making her the butt of his joke in front of friends. Over time the wife comes to accept this behaviour as part of their relationship. As time passes the husband has more and more power over how he can treat his wife because she has effectively let him do this. He moves on from verbal abuse to physically threatening her, to being rough with her then finally losing control and beating the woman he supposedly loves. When the relationship has reached this point, the wife has no boundaries left and with it, no self-esteem nor self-confidence. The effort to walk is simply too much. In cases like this both the husband and the wife need help. Sadly that often doesn't happen and even if this relationship breaks up, without help both parties will often end up in the same place again with different partners.

We would like to think that if we were in this situation, we of course would be stronger than that, but there is often much more going than this simply story shows. Intertwined with the abuse there is often love, tenderness, over-the-top gift giving and begging for forgiveness. By the way if any of you are Corrie fans, look at the way the relationship between Shelley and Charlie is going. Charlie is slowly crossing more of Shelley's boundaries. Shelley keeps accepting the verbal and psychological abuse that he doles out, allowing Charlie to become more and more abusive in his treatment of her. It will be interesting to see how far down the road the script writers take this story.

Shoring up your boundaries

Thankfully most of will never be in a situation where our boundaries are so violently crossed. Yet I'm willing to bet everyone of you have some of your lesser boundaries crossed on a regular basis. So how do you deal with these crossings? The first step is to be come aware of them. Notice next time you're feeling strong negative emotions – is it down to something that someone said or did? What exactly was it that triggered this reaction in you? How did you react? Did you just let them do or say it without any recourse? Or did you try and say something but it just went even more pear-shaped? Then believe me you are not alone. Most of us have been there at sometime, so don't beat yourself up, there are ways of dealing with it. Becoming aware is the first and most

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important step. Start really noticing both what the person has said and done and how you reacted to it.

The next step is to learn how to communicate what is happening in a firm but graceful way, followed by learning how to extend your boundaries and raise your standards. How to do this effectively will be covered in next month's Tip for a Tiptop Life.

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