

Oh, You Don't Have Boundaries?



By Darcel Lobo

I recently did a presentation for the KCBA Solo and Small Firm section on time management. And during that presentation, I touched briefly on boundaries. There were quite a few comments that came in during that portion of my presentation, as well as some “a-ha” moments, so I thought those who missed the presentation might be interested in reading this article.

When discussing boundaries, people often refer to boundaries as something used to control others. But that isn't how boundaries work. For example, your boundary won't stop someone else from doing something. A bound-

ary is for you; for you to uphold, for you to respect, and for you to honor. We create boundaries for ourselves. To protect our time, to protect our peace, to protect our minds. So let's dive right in, shall we?

It's important for everyone, not just lawyers, to have boundaries. As lawyers, we give, and give, and give. We are constantly providing for those around us. We take care of our clients, our staff, our families; we take care of so many other people in our day to day lives, and unfortunately, many times, we take care of ourselves last. We are our last priority. Sometimes, we're not even a priority at all and we neglect ourselves without even realizing it. But this is not sustainable. We can't fill other peoples' cups when our own

cups are empty. It eventually leads to complete burnout.

Signs that you lack boundaries:

Have you ever experienced any of the following?

- Feeling immediately irritated when someone calls you;
- You say yes to things you don't actually want to do;
- You feel like you're always annoyed or irritated;
- You're in a constant state of overwhelm that you can't seem to get out of; or maybe,
- Feeling like you don't have time for yourself.

There are so many other examples; these are just a few to get you thinking. Here are some areas where I used to lack boundaries:

Examples of where I used to lack boundaries (in work and personal life):

- I used to say “yes” to attending all of my kids' school events. I thought that was what it meant to be a “good mom”: to be present always for PTA meetings, fundraisers, etc. I didn't have boundaries for myself; I was always overcommitting to what I thought I could do. Even when I knew that I was over-extending myself. But doing these activities was completely overwhelming and I would end up feeling like I failed if I wasn't able to attend something. It was a never-ending negative cycle. But that was pressure I put on myself. No one else told me I must do that, or that was how I should define being a good mom.

- Trying to keep up with the other families and enrolling my kids in multiple sports/activities. Again, I did this to myself. I thought my kids would be devastated if I said they could only do one sport at a time. But guess what? They weren't. Again, pressure I put on myself. I had no boundaries. A few years ago I finally decided each kid would only do one sport at a time. This made my life much easier, which in turn meant that I was happier. Which in turn, made for happier kiddos and husband. Talk about a win-win-win.

- How about a work example? I'm a solo, so I have complete autonomy over what cases I do or don't take. However, I wasn't using that autonomy to my best ability. I would regularly take on cases I didn't want to; maybe I felt bad for the client, I ignored red flags (if you don't have a list of red flags for potential clients this is something you must do ASAP!), or maybe I negotiated my fee down (this absolutely doesn't happen anymore).

How to create boundaries:

Boundaries are for you. We're not trying to change or “fix” anyone else. We can only control our own actions, and we have to take ownership of those actions. The expectation is not that other people will respect our boundaries, we have to respect and uphold our own boundaries. While we can't create more time, as we all have the same 24 hours in a day, we can start to lighten our load. And the boundaries we need to create and uphold, they aren't just for work. The same rules apply in our personal lives as well. Here are five steps you can take to start creating and implementing your own boundaries:

- 1. Identify your limits.** This applies to both work and personal life. What are things you no longer want to tolerate? This can be in terms of your time, your energy, your emotions, and your physical space. Once you know your limits, you can communicate them effectively to yourself and also to others.



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2. Be clear. This is not the time for you to have a “grey” area or beat around the bush. You have to be willing to be direct. It may feel tough, but you can’t have a boundary if you don’t even understand what it is or why you have it. For example, instead of saying “I’m not sure if I can make it” (when you really just want to say “no”), say “I’m not available at that time.” Again, we’re communicating in a way that’s not rude, not disrespectful, but very clear to the other person. In this example, if I say “I’m not sure I can make it,” it leaves the door open. The other person thinks it possible I could attend their event. But if I say “I’m not available at that time,” my message is clear. There’s nothing grey about it. It makes it less open to negotiation. Because my boundaries, and your boundaries, are non-negotiable.

3. Say no. While it can be hard to say no to people and things that you used to do, keep in mind that by saying no to these things, you’re opening yourself up to saying yes to the things you do want in your life (more time with family, time for yourself, happiness, etc.). When saying no to people, try to use “I” language. It’s not about them, it’s not their fault. You’re saying no for yourself, and for your benefit. And, sometimes, an explanation isn’t necessary. “No” can be a complete sentence.

4. Be Consistent. This isn’t something we can do arbitrarily. Are we going to be perfect on this 100% of the time? No. While we want to be consistent, we don’t need to hold ourselves to perfectionism (another article for another day!). We’re human, and doing something consistently doesn’t mean we always do it 100% of the time. Just strive for your best. As you begin to see the results you’re looking for, you’ll

get even better and become even more consistent.

5. Remember, this is about you and your needs. Prioritizing your own needs will bring about a calmness, a sense of peace, which you probably haven’t had in quite a while. This too is a form of self-care; something which many of us neglect.

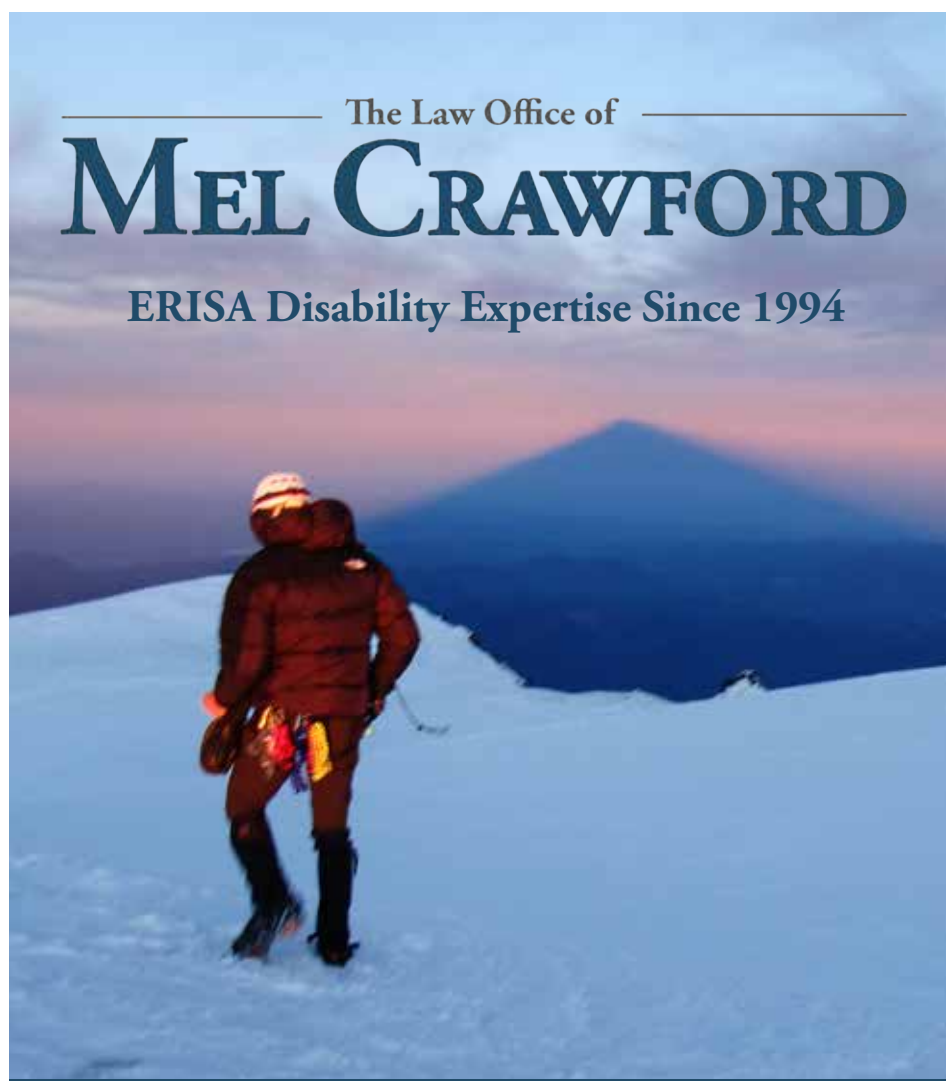
Once you’ve gone through these steps (and reduced or eliminated some guilt you may initially feel), you’ll need to decide what the consequence will be. There has to be a result that occurs. It should be something like: “If so and so does X, then I will do Y.” You went through the steps above to determine X, now what will your Y be? What action are *you* going to take? This can be challenging. But it’s not enough to set up boundaries, there has to be a consequence to the boundary being violated.

Let’s create an example to illustrate: Say you have a co-worker who likes to come into your office and chit chat. You don’t want to be rude, but at the same time, you have work to get done and the distraction of chit chatting really slows you down. But maybe you’ve gotten into the habit of listening to their stories and as a result, your efficiency with your work decreases. Setting a boundary could be as simple as letting your co-worker know that now is not a good time to talk; instead, you’d prefer to catch up over lunch when you can give them your undivided attention (or

some other time that is better for you). This is a simple example, but sometimes, we need to start with something simple and easy to get some momentum going as we make changes in our lives.


In conclusion, having boundaries is essential for our own well-being; whether at work, with friends, or at home with your family (which is a must, especially with kids!). While the thought of implementing boundaries with others can seem a bit daunting, the cost of not setting and upholding your own boundaries can be significant. Just starting out with a few boundaries in certain areas of your life will open up the door to regaining control and reclaiming your time for other things that are more important in your life. By knowing your limits, being clear, getting comfortable saying no, and being consistent, you will begin to form boundaries that work for you and your relationships. This will be an ongoing process, and will take some time to work on this skill, but it’s something that will serve you, and those around you, very well. ■

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