



# Communication Boundaries for the Equine Practice

# An Introduction

## To the Practice Owner:

The following publication helps serve as a general guideline for leading a conversation with your team about boundaries. First, we define boundaries and help you identify scenarios where boundaries may be crossed. Then we provide examples of different boundaries so you can have a candid conversation with your team. We encourage you to utilize this exercise with your team during your next staff meeting.

## To the Associate:

The following publication helps serve as a guideline for initiating a discussion with your employer about setting new boundaries in the workplace setting. It may feel awkward to broach this subject, but in the long run, an open discussion will help create a healthy and lasting work relationship. We recommend you share this document with your employer and encourage them to schedule the exercise for your entire team. At a minimum, you should work through the exercise yourself and be ready to discuss pain points/boundaries that need to be better defined.

## Let's Define

### **Boundaries:**

*“A way to communicate our needs to others via words and actions.”*

—Nedra Tawwab

*“The limits and rules we set for ourselves within relationships.”*

—TherapistAid.com

*“Healthy boundaries are the limits you place around your time, emotions, body, and mental health to stay resilient, solid, and content with who you are.”*

—TheScienceofPeople.com

## Situational Examples:

### CLIENT COMMUNICATION

- Calling/Texting/Emailing employees after business hours (especially on weekends off).
- Asking an Associate to sign off on a health certificate for a horse they haven't examined.
- A client called at 4 PM on a Friday with a non-emergent case that has been going on for over a week. They want the horse seen today!

### TEAM COMMUNICATION

- The front office asks questions of doctors when they are not at work.
- The more experienced veterinarian gives their opinion to an owner before discussing it with the current doctor managing the case.
- Your colleague asks you to cover a Sunday of emergency duty at the last minute. You already have plans, and this request is becoming a regular occurrence.

## An Important Note

*The idea of Psychological Safety is imperative to creating a safe, comfortable space for discussion of ideas around boundaries and protocol changes.*

Psychological Safety can be defined as the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.

At work, it's a shared expectation held by members of a team that teammates will not embarrass, reject, or punish them for sharing ideas, taking risks, or soliciting feedback.

It is important to understand this concept and work toward creating an environment where it is safe to speak up in your practice if you hope to have full participation in the exercise of creating communication boundaries.

*Please see the worksheets provided at the end of this handbook.*

# Identify The Pain Points

## Team Exercise

Schedule a time for your team to work through this exercise together (during paid business hours!) You may want to start off with a veterinarian group first and then include the support staff in a follow up meeting.

*Ask your employees to consider the following questions:*

1. Think of an example where you have felt resentful at work recently.
2. Think of an example where you have felt guilty at work recently.
  - a. Perhaps you couldn't provide service for a client when they wanted you.
  - b. Perhaps a co-worker asked a favor of you that you weren't able to help with.
3. What aspects of work do you find the most draining?



Be willing to share your answers to break the ice! If the staff isn't ready to open up, start by asking them how they would like to handle the previous situational examples or think of some complicated scenarios that you've experienced in your practice and work through those as a team. This may provide a more straightforward discussion or easily applied boundary implementation.

**Once you and your employees have identified the pain points,  
you can define the problem.**

**Once the problem is clarified,  
you can create a solution to help solve the problem.**

## Remember!

A boundary is made up of two parts:

1. What you say
2. Your actions to back up what you've said

**#2 is KEY in equine practice.**

Follow-through from all team members (including leadership) is imperative to re-train our thought processes and those of our clients.

# Specific Examples

**Let's go back to the examples that were listed on Page 2 and work through solutions to those specific pain points.**

## Boundary Setting Examples for Client Communication

- Auto-Reply Email
- Standard Voicemail Greeting on Work Phones
- Workplace protocol on ethics of health cert evaluations that everyone in the practice agrees to
- Verbiage that is created by the entire team and endorsed by leadership regarding what constitutes an emergency

## Boundary Setting Examples for Team Communication

- Refrain from contacting employees after hours or on their days off. This will require that all doctors complete their medical records and document client communications so the entire team is aware of the plan and can execute it.

*Consider using messaging software (Slack, WhatsApp, etc.) that allows employees to silence notifications.*

*Alternatively, provide employees with a work-specific phone that they leave off when they are not working.*

- Pull a colleague aside and say, “When you interjected a different treatment protocol for my patient, it made me feel as though you didn’t value my opinion. I felt as though the client had less faith in my skills. I would appreciate it if you would talk to me privately before doing that.”



*If this is not something you feel comfortable or safe to say in your practice, management needs to establish a forum for sharing concerns or ideas for change.*

*Consider using the 15five program, an anonymous comment box or google survey form or specific office hours for management to be available for discussion.*

- Say no. You have trained this colleague that you are willing to drop your plans regularly. Explain that you are happy to help cover in extreme circumstances but that on-call switches need to be made with a certain amount of notice.

*Ask management to set up a meeting to establish timelines for advance notice of changing on-call days.*

*Create a mantra to support yourself and your personal time. For example: “My time is valuable, and I will protect my personal activities knowing that I give my all while I am at work.”*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



# Practice Agreement Form

## Our Practice Norms:

## Our Practice's Protocols – Boundaries to Protect Employee Well-being:

*By signing this page, I agree to uphold the team's protocols and follow through on the boundaries we have set. My active respect for these guidelines and encouragement of my teammates to follow them will cultivate a culture of mutual respect and well-being amongst the team and our clients.*

Name:

*Date:*



## Personal Boundaries Form

## **Our Practice Norms and Important Boundaries:**

**I agree to do the following things in order to uphold our practice's norms and boundaries and to support myself in this work.**

*By signing this page, I agree to uphold the team's protocols and follow through on the boundaries we have set. My active respect for these guidelines and encouragement of my teammates to follow them will cultivate a culture of mutual respect and well-being amongst the team and our clients.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

*Date:*





[aaep.org](http://aaep.org)