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HOW GOOD DO I HAVE TO BE?

Draw Boundaries When Enough Is Enough

Martin started in the oil business straight out of the Marines, working his way up on the rig. He is now considered one of the best drillers in the business. After a long shift, Martin crawls into his bunk and pulls out his unfinished development plan. It's overdue. He needs to send it shoreside tonight or risk an escalated round of pestering.

Item 23b: *Please list your personal goals for the coming year. Include benchmarks for how you will measure your attainment of those goals.*

Martin groans. *After thirty-one years in the business, I need yet another round of hungry new goals?* He smiles and writes: "My goal is to complete another year safely and productively. And to get you to leave me alone about my goals."

No benchmarks necessary.

FINDING BOUNDARIES, SETTING BOUNDARIES

Most of this book explores how to get better at receiving feedback—taking it in and understanding it fully before deciding whether to accept it. But this raises a question: Is it okay not only to turn down feedback, but to say, "I don't even want to *hear* it"?

It is.

In fact, being able to establish limits on the feedback you get is crucial to your well-being and the health of your relationships. Being able to say no is not a skill that runs parallel to the skill of receiving feedback well; it's right at the heart of it. If you can't say no, then your yeses are not freely chosen. Your decision may affect others and it will often have consequences for you, but the choice belongs to you. You need to make your own mistakes and find your own learning curve. Sometimes that means you need to shut out the critics for a while so you can discover who you are and how you are going to grow. Writer Anne Lamott puts it this way:

. . . Every single one of us at birth is given an emotional acre all our own. You get one, your awful Uncle Phil gets one, I get one. . . . And as long as you don't hurt anyone, you really get to do with your acre as you please. You can plant fruit trees or flowers or alphabetized rows of vegetables, or nothing at all. If you want your acre to look like a giant garage sale, or an auto-wrecking yard, that's what you get to do with it. There's a fence around your acre, though, with a gate, and if people keep coming onto your land and sliming it or trying to do what they think is right, you get to ask them to leave. And they have to go, because this is your acre.¹

This chapter is about that acre, fence, and gate, and how and why you might ask your givers to step outside on occasion.

THREE BOUNDARIES

Rejecting feedback can be as easy as saying no thanks or walking away or simply saying nothing. They offer, you decline, and it's over. But sometimes it's more complicated than that. You say no, but the unwanted feedback keeps coming. It's not just bothersome but destructive. This is when it helps to be explicit about boundaries. Here are three kinds of boundaries to consider:

1. I MAY NOT TAKE YOUR ADVICE

The first is the softest: I'm willing to listen. I'll consider your input. But I may not end up taking it.

Is this any fence at all? If the choice is always yours, why would you need to describe this first boundary out loud? Because the person giving

you the feedback or advice may not share your opinion that it's optional. You ask your future mother-in-law to suggest florists for the wedding. You choose a different florist, and she gripes: "Why do you even ask my advice if you don't care what I say?" In the dance between receiver and giver, when you don't follow the giver's lead, you may step on some toes.

It can be confusing terrain. If you reject my advice, are you rejecting *me*? Some advice givers hear it that way, even if it doesn't mean that to you. When you solicit suggestions you know you may not take, you can avoid heartache by saying so up front. Don't say to your mother-in-law: "Which florist should we use?" Be more precise: "We're thinking about several different florists. Are there any you'd add to our list?"

Another challenge is the line between a suggestion and an order. Choosing to disregard feedback may have consequences. You can continue to turn up late for your shift at the hospital . . . and your boss can fire you. If you're unsure if the coaching is optional or mandatory, discuss it explicitly. And if you decide not to take the coaching, don't assume the giver knows why. Explain your reasons carefully.

2. I DON'T WANT FEEDBACK ABOUT THAT SUBJECT, NOT RIGHT NOW

With this second boundary, you are not only establishing your right to decide whether to take the feedback, you're establishing your right to be free of the topic altogether: "I don't even want to hear it. Not right now (and maybe not ever)."

Your sister has badgered you to quit smoking for years. You've tried and failed and tried and failed. Now that your uncle is dying of a smoking-related illness, the whole family has joined the chorus. You understand where they're coming from, but right now you need them to back off. There just isn't anything more to say on the subject, and you don't have the emotional energy to continue the conversation.

3. STOP, OR I WILL LEAVE THE RELATIONSHIP

This third boundary is the starkest: If you can't keep your judgments to yourself, if you can't accept me the way I am now, then I will leave the relationship, or change its terms (I will come home for the holidays, but I'm not staying with you). Simply being in the relationship, buffeted by your judgments, is doing damage to my sense of self.

HOW DO I KNOW IF BOUNDARIES ARE NEEDED?

It starts with an agitated feeling or thought: *I'm overwhelmed; I'm a failure; this isn't working; this is too much; I can never do anything right; I'm not good enough.* And then a question: *Should I draw a boundary here?* But how can you tell the difference between someone who is genuinely trying to help you (or trying to share a real concern about how you are in a relationship) and a relationship that is in some fundamental way out of whack or unhealthy?

There is no pat formula for determining the difference between a legitimate request for change and one that indicates a deeper problem. The feedback giver may not mean harm, may not be trying to control you, and may even care deeply about you. They may not know any better, or may have issues of their own. But that doesn't change the feedback's impact on you, as it eats away at your self-acceptance bit by bit.

Below are a set of questions that will help you sort out your own thinking about whether a boundary is needed in a particular context or relationship.

DO THEY ATTACK YOUR CHARACTER, NOT JUST YOUR BEHAVIOR?

They don't say, "I found that frustrating," or, "Here's an idea that would help." Instead they say, "Here's what's wrong with you," or even, "Here's why you'll never amount to anything." Whether or not it's explicitly spoken, the message is that you are not attractive or ambitious or good enough, you are not worthy of love, respect, and kindness the way you are now.

IS THE FEEDBACK UNRELENTING?

Your executive coach is trying to help you feel more comfortable hobnobbing with the bigwigs in the C-suite, but he is making you more self-conscious and anxious, not less. You've discussed the fact that it's not helping, but instead of adjusting his approach, your coach opens the spigot wider.

Unhelpful feedback is useless; relentless unhelpful feedback is destructive. You've asked the person to stop, cease, desist, shut up, go away. Yet the coaching and advice pour forth.

WHEN YOU DO CHANGE, IS THERE ALWAYS ONE MORE DEMAND?

Some feedback givers are always looking for the next thing to fix, whether it's about the house or the car or you. But more ominously, it may be that the act of telling you what to change is the end in itself. They are in charge, you are their charge, and those clear roles keep things in order.

This need for control could be motivated by their own fear: If your partner didn't always have you scrambling to be worthy of their love, you'd notice there was nothing in the relationship for you. If your supervisor didn't withhold his respect, you'd realize that he's not particularly worthy of *your* respect. Or maybe they need to feel in charge because they just don't know how to play any other role. Whatever the cause, the effect leaves you in a constant state of not good enough.

DOES THE FEEDBACK GIVER TAKE THE RELATIONSHIP HOSTAGE?

The formulation here is this: Of course it's your choice whether or not to take my feedback, but if you don't, it means you don't love or respect me. They tie something small to something big, which is a ploy to get their way on every small issue that comes along. This tactic strips you of your autonomy while pretending you're free to do as you please.

Your mother-in-law conveys an implicit message: If you don't choose the florist I recommended, you're the one who ruined our relationship. It sounds ludicrous because it is. But it's worth being aware that the intention behind this approach is not always manipulative. People sometimes seek attention by holding the relationship hostage because they don't have the skills to express their feelings of insecurity, anxiety, or hurt in any other way. You can be compassionate about the giver's needs without becoming their hostage.

ARE THEY ISSUING WARNINGS—OR MAKING THREATS?

Here's the difference: A warning is a good-faith attempt to explain possible legitimate consequences ("If you're late to dinner, the spaghetti will be cold"), whereas the purpose of a threat is to manufacture consequences that will induce fear ("If you're late to dinner, I will throw the spaghetti at you"). These are warnings:

"If your people management skills don't improve, we can't keep you in this position."

“If you don’t disclose this in the filing, I’m required to inform the commission.”

“If you come home drunk again, I’m moving out.”

As you can see, the variable is not whether the consequences warned of are severe; it’s whether they are legitimate. In some cases, the warnings are final; they’re ultimatums. It is not a happy situation that things have come to this. But the other person is giving you information about real consequences so that you can make informed choices.

Threats have the same “if-then” structure, but spring from a different motive: to induce fear or dependence, to lower self-esteem or confidence, to control or manipulate. And the consequences are manufactured for that purpose:

“If you don’t do as I say, I’ll see that you never work in this industry again.”

“If I leave you, no one else will ever love you.”

A warning is when someone tells you the other shoe may drop; a threat is when they make sure it will squash you.

IS IT ALWAYS YOU WHO HAS TO CHANGE?

Things seem okay until you notice a troubling pattern. Whenever there is conflict between you, whenever you need to solve a problem that has arisen, you are the only one who takes responsibility for anything. You apologize, you stay late, you absorb the budget overruns. If you are always the one who has to change, who has to give in, who has to go the extra mile, then your roles may be stuck. Negotiating a shift from blame and one-way feedback to mutual accountability and willingness to look at the system between you is fundamental to the sustainability of a relationship, whether it’s based in work, love, or friendship.

ARE YOUR VIEWS AND FEELINGS A LEGITIMATE PART OF THE RELATIONSHIP?

This may be both the simplest and most important of the criteria. Re-

ardless of anything else, is the feedback giver listening to you and working hard to understand how you see things and how you feel? And once they know, do they *care*? Are they willing to modify how they share their feedback, requests, and advice based on how it affects you? Do they respect your autonomy to make up your own mind and to reject their advice? If your feelings and views aren't part of the relationship, there is a problem.

WHERE BOUNDARIES WOULD HELP: SOME COMMON RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS

The relationship doesn't have to be certifiably dysfunctional for you to decide that feedback within the relationship is not working for you. Let's look at three examples of how the challenges described above form common relationship patterns.

THE CONSTANT CRITIC

Constant critics provide running commentary that is a stream of evaluation—sizing you up and letting you know the score. They are your father, your older sister, your best friend, your devoted coach, your demanding boss. They just want to help. And they do this with all the subtlety of an auctioneer.

Conversations between Hunyee and her mother have always been fraught. As a child Hunyee was relentlessly corrected, coached, and chastised. As an adult she knows that the minute her mother arrives she will begin assessing the state of Hunyee's closets, cooking, weight, and wardrobe. Hunyee knows that her mother loves her, and even recognizes that her constant criticism is the way her mother expresses that love. In fact, it's the way her mother expresses everything; without criticism, there would be only silence.

But it still leaves Hunyee feeling raw and hurt. Even in her mother's absence, Hunyee hears her voice in her head, goading and condemning. This is not the legacy her mother intends, but without some change, it is the one she will inevitably leave.

There are constant critics at work as well. Jake, a successful investment adviser, prides himself on his mentoring relationship with Brodie, a young analyst. Jake's standards are uncompromising, but he's lavish

with coaching and advice, rare commodities at this particular firm. Unfortunately, this is not how Brodie sees it. He feels like he can do no right. Every move he makes is criticized, every report is ripped apart, every effort inadequate. Brodie, a pretty tough character himself, now dreads coming to work.

HATE-LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIPS

Psychologists tell us that the most addictive reward pattern is called “intermittent reinforcement.” Video games and gambling use this approach. We win just often enough to keep us playing. When we do win, we’re desperate to win again; when we lose, we are even more desperate to play until we win. Winning love and approval may be the reward we crave most.

Jasmine is caught in a relationship in which approval is dangled and promised but withheld. Just when all seems lost, approval is briefly bestowed—and then withdrawn again, starting the cycle afresh. This is one important reason why someone might stay with a damaging partner, coach, boss, or family member. They hate the hate, but it makes their need for the love even more intense. Feedback giver and receiver are both caught up in a powerful dynamic that is not healthy for either and is particularly damaging to the receiver.

RENOVATION RELATIONSHIPS

Henry was thrilled by all the attention Isabella paid him. Even her little “suggestions” had an intoxicating effect; they were, after all, evidence of how much she cared about him. He’d found love, and all this self-improvement was a bonus.

Until it wasn’t. At first her suggestions for change seemed reasonable. She had ideas for how he could “freshen up his look,” and he figured it wouldn’t hurt to be a sharper dresser. But then the feedback spread to other aspects of his life: work out more, stop reading those comics, don’t act like such a nerd in front of my friends, don’t take things so personally, have some ambition, make my hobbies your hobbies.

Henry tried. He was genuinely eager to be the person Isabella wanted him to be. But in time he grew anxious and unhappy and told Isabella so. She explained that she was just trying to help him grow, noting that Henry wasn’t making it easy since he was so hypersensitive to feedback.

Henry decided to get some outside perspective and discussed the relationship with his friend Rollo:

Henry: I mean, maybe she's right. Maybe I am too sensitive. If I'm going to be in a serious relationship maybe I have to be more mature myself. Maybe I really do need to change. Maybe I'm being selfish or maybe I'm kind of stuck.

Rollo: That's possible. But what I'm struck by is how unhappy you are. Have you told Isabella how all her advice and criticism is affecting you?

Henry: Yeah, I've told her. Several times.

Rollo: How does she respond?

Henry: She said the real problem is that I'm just too sensitive to feedback.

Rollo: And you were honest about just how unhappy you are?

Henry: I was. The whole thing is really eating away at me and I've told her that.

Rollo: To me, that's the big problem here. From what you've said, it sounds as if she's trying to turn you into someone else. But even putting that aside, it sounds like your feelings are not part of the equation, and what you need is not part of the relationship.

Henry: Hmm. So you're saying that regardless of whether she's too critical or I'm too sensitive, it's a problem that she doesn't seem to care how I'm feeling.

Rollo: It's a giant red flag.

Henry has become so preoccupied by whether he is able to please Isabella that he isn't noticing just how little his needs and feelings matter to her.

Keep this front and center: No matter what growing you have to do, and regardless of how right (or not) the feedback may be, if the person giving you the feedback is not listening to you and doesn't care about its impact on you, something is wrong. Rollo has this exactly right. It's fine to try to figure out whether the giver is too critical or you're too sensitive, but if the other person isn't listening to you and your feelings, the answer is beside the point. You are worthy of love, acceptance, and com-

passion—right now, as you are, full stop. This may be tough to see from inside an unbalanced relationship. But it's the bottom-line truth.

BUT WAIT, DOES THAT MEAN . . . ?

Is there something wrong with hoping your significant other does pick up some better habits, loses some weight, or finally finishes college? No. It's fine to wish that for them, and to coach and support them so they can get there. The key question here: Is it something *they* want? Or something only you want? If they genuinely do want this change, you're in the clear. Make your intentions discussable, and most of all, make sure to listen.

TURNING AWAY FEEDBACK WITH GRACE AND HONESTY

The biggest mistake we make when trying to create boundaries is that we assume other people understand what's going on with us. Surely they know we're overloaded or unhappy or struggling, and that their feedback is making things worse. But often they don't. We may not have told them, or if we have, we were indirect or unclear or they just weren't listening. It's true that they haven't exactly gone out of their way to figure us out, but that's not within our control, and frankly, it's par for the course. They'll never be as interested in figuring out our boundaries as we are.

BE TRANSPARENT: ACTUALLY TELL THEM

With increasing frequency, Dave, a cop in his mid-forties, asks people to repeat themselves and misses what is said in meetings. His coworkers have started to notice. "My partner kept nudging me to get my hearing checked, so I finally did," says Dave. "Turns out my hearing has really deteriorated, and I need a hearing aid."

Yet six months have passed, and Dave hasn't gone back to be fitted for one. "I've been wrestling a bit," he admits. "I'm having trouble thinking of myself as someone who needs a device that, fairly or unfairly, I've always associated with the elderly. I know my resistance isn't rational. I'll get there. I just need time to update my self-image."

Dave hasn't told anyone on the force about the test or the result. He doesn't feel that he needs to: What matters is that he's on top of things and is dealing with it.

But his coworkers don't know that. So they're left with the impression that he's ignoring them. When they repeat their concerns, Dave responds to them—in his head. *It's being handled*, he thinks to himself, *so why do you keep bothering me about it?*

All he needs to do is explain things out loud: "I got checked. I need a hearing aid. I'm going to get one. It's a hard adjustment to make. I'll do better if I'm not pestered." That won't fix his hearing problems, but it will go a long way toward fixing his feedback problems.

BE FIRM—AND APPRECIATIVE

Dave's story is an example of someone *taking* feedback. It's at least as important to be explicit and clear when we reject feedback. We can do that best by being both firm and appreciative.

PJ struggles with severe stage fright, and her university department head has a habit of rushing up to her just as she is about to begin lecturing and whispering, "Don't be nervous!" Which makes PJ panic. But she handles the feedback conversation well:

PJ: Anxiety is a real struggle for me. I know you're aware of that, and when you say "don't be nervous" I know you're trying to help. The impact, though, is it actually makes me more nervous, rather than less.

Department Head: Well, of course I'm trying to help. Anything to give you that extra boost of confidence! So when you get up there, there's no need to be nervous!

PJ: Okay, but that does end up making me more nervous.

Department Head: Well, it shouldn't. You're fabulous!

PJ: Here's the impact it has on me. It reminds me that I have this anxiety problem. What would help me is to hear how you've been able to cope with anxiety when you speak publicly. But I'd like to hear about that on days when I'm not lecturing.

PJ does a graceful job of acknowledging and appreciating her department head's good intentions, while being firm in her request that she not get coaching right before she lectures. Being firm and being appreciative are not opposite ends of a continuum. You can be clear about both.

REDIRECT UNHELPFUL COACHING

Sometimes we assume we need the starkest kind of boundary because of the pain we're in. Our instinct is to shut it all down: No judgment. No coaching. No nothing—or it's good-bye.

But you may have noticed that PJ does something that can make drawing boundaries easier: She redirects her coach's energy and interest toward something that may actually help.

You might experiment with loaning your giver a corner of your acre, and tell them what you'd love to see there. Hunyee to her mother: "I have so much to learn from you. When you visit, would you teach me to make your amazing dumplings?" This suggestion is good for Hunyee, of course, but it might meet her mother's interests as well. Her mother yearns for a role in her daughter's life, and her criticisms may be a misguided attempt to establish such a role. She wants to be useful and to feel valued by her very capable adult child.

Letting givers know what they *can* help you with may be the incentive they need to cut down on the advice you don't want to hear about. And it lays a helpful foundation for erecting other boundaries if you need them.

USE "AND"

In setting up boundaries, you want to reject feedback clearly and firmly, while at the same time affirming the relationship and showing that you appreciate the intention.

The temptation is to link these two thoughts with the word "but." Hunyee to her mother: "I love seeing you, *but* if you're going to come to my house you need to stop criticizing every single thing." "But" suggests a contradiction between the two thoughts. The first part would be true, but for the second. *You love seeing me but what?* "But you criticize me too much." *So therefore you don't actually love seeing me.*

Human emotions don't necessarily cancel each other out. I can love spending time with you and still be anxious that you're coming. I can genuinely appreciate your mentoring and decide not to take your advice. I can be sad that I'm hurting you and proud of myself for doing the right thing. Contradictory feelings sit side-by-side in our hearts and minds, clacking against each other like marbles in our pocket.

Using “and” to describe our feelings isn’t just about word choice. It gets at a deeper truth about our thoughts and feelings: They are often complex and sometimes confused. We figure we can draw clear boundaries most easily with a simple bottom-line message—yes, no, not right now—and so our impulse is to keep the complexity or confusion hidden. But often sharing complex feelings along with the message actually makes establishing the boundary easier.

Raul’s parents believe that an engineering degree will give their son a secure life, without the hardships they have endured. His passion for music? A “frivolous hobby.”

Raul respects his parents and has worked hard to understand their perspective and worries. He shares many of those worries himself, profoundly so. And still, he has decided to pursue music. But how to tell his parents? “When I tried to imagine having the conversation,” he says, “my blood ran cold. Rejecting their advice would mean turning my back on them; following their advice would mean turning my back on myself. I don’t want to be the ungrateful, wayward son. And I don’t want to be an engineer.”

Nothing was going to make this conversation easy, and Raul couldn’t control how his parents would react. What unlocked the dilemma for Raul was realizing that he could share both sides of the “and”—the multiple, competing, and confusing thoughts and feelings that are no less true for being simultaneous. With his heart in his throat, Raul sat down with his parents and held forth with a series of ands: “I’ve been afraid to talk to you about this *and* it’s important to me to be honest with you.” “I’ve decided to major in music *and* I know this makes you worry about my future.” “I’m also very fearful of the struggle I may face *and* I need to try.” “I know this is hard for you *and* I hope you will still be supportive of me.”

He braced for their reaction. If this were a Hollywood movie, his parents would have smiled and offered a cheerful embrace. But there was no swelling soundtrack. In his father’s face there was disappointment, in his mother’s there was worry. Raul himself was anxious—but at peace with himself. He’d made a hard decision that felt right to him and had explained it to his parents as clearly and respectfully as he knew how.

When you share the complexity or confusion, you are adopting what we call the “And Stance.” It’s a powerful place to stand, and you can use it

in any situation where you've listened to someone's input and have decided to go in a different direction: "I think what you've said makes a lot of sense. *And* I've decided that those aren't the skills that are the most pressing priority for me right now." Fill in your reasoning and be willing to field questions to make it a two-way conversation. It's your boundary, but the conversation belongs to both of you.

BE SPECIFIC ABOUT YOUR REQUEST

Hunyeer ultimately says this to her mother: "Mom, I love you and I know you want the best for me. And your comments about my weight and housekeeping and clothing are incredibly upsetting to me. If you're going to stay with me, I need you to keep them to yourself. Is that a request you can honor?"

Hunyeer is making a specific request. She's not saying, "Quit being so critical," or "I need you to back off." These requests would reflect how she's feeling, but they are unlikely to help, for two reasons. First, they set up the terms of a fight. She's giving her mother feedback but tripping all her truth, relationship, and identity triggers at the same time. Her mother will be likely to argue about whether it's "true" that she's critical, or switchtrack because she feels unappreciated. She'll be distracted as she wrestles with whether she's a "good mother" and a "good person."

And second, the request is too general. "Back off" and "Quit criticizing" are too vague, especially since Hunyeer's mother may not be aware of her behavior in the first place. Remember that some of this is habitual behavior that's probably in a blind spot, and as such needs more than just a label.

So when setting boundaries, be specific about three things:

- **The Request.** What, exactly, are you asking of them? Are you putting a particular topic off limits (my new spouse, my new weight), or a behavior (my ADHD, my football watching)? If they need examples of what you're talking about, describe them as you recall them, along with their effect on you.
- **The Time Frame.** How long is the boundary likely to be in place? Do you need time to sort things out for yourself, to adjust your self-image, to take care of other priorities

first, to find your feet as a new stepparent or new leader? Let them know if the boundary is time limited, and if not, how they might check in with you about it without violating the boundary. (“Can I ask how things are going with that thing I’m not supposed to mention?”)

- **Their Assent.** Don’t assume that they understand you or agree. Instead, ask. When they say, “Yes, I will honor your request,” it’s not just about you anymore. They’re making a commitment, and that enlists their identity and reputation in living up to their promise.

These conversations are harder in hierarchy, but with some thought, you can often find an acceptable way in. At the investment firm, Brodie probably isn’t going to say to his boss Jake, “Now you listen here, pal. I’ll have no more of your constant criticisms!” But he might feel comfortable saying that he appreciates having a mentor who cares so passionately about his progress, and at the same time, is feeling a bit banged up as a result of their conversations. Or he could request that Jake focus on one or two skills rather than on everything.

DESCRIBE CONSEQUENCES

Finally, it’s only fair to let them know what’s at stake. You are telling them to keep their judgments to themselves, or else.

Or else *what*?

Earlier we talked about the difference between threats and warnings. Your purpose here isn’t to make a threat, it’s to issue a clear warning. You need to let them know what happens if they can’t or won’t observe the boundaries. They are free to accept your request, or not—you can’t control their choice and shouldn’t try. But you are free to make adjustments to the relationship on your end, as needed. Here’s an example of how you might describe consequences:

“You know I’ve struggled with smoking, and I’m all too aware of the causes of Uncle Marv’s illness. Right now I’m overwhelmed with my new job and I can’t also handle side comments and knowing looks and disapproval when I step outside to have a cigarette. I know you mean it to be caring, but that’s not how it’s feeling. If you can’t leave the issue behind for now, I’ll make sure to visit Marv at times when I know you won’t be

here.”

With any boundaries you set, don't be surprised if others stumble here and there as they work to honor the boundary. Don't lie in wait for a single slipup. They've had lots of practice being critical of you—they should receive a lifetime achievement award, in fact—and those habits are hard to break. Expect to have to give a couple of firm reminders, try to keep a sense of humor about lapses, and appreciate progress where they are making it. Of course, if they can't or won't work at it with you, then it's up to you to protect yourself.²

YOU HAVE A DUTY TO MITIGATE THE COST TO OTHERS

You've decided not to change. You've listened carefully to your children, but are not yet ready to move out of the home you've lived in for sixty years. You've heard the concerns from your team and are still going forward with your plan to reorganize the department. Your husband's ex-wife wants you to get rid of your “germy” cat out of concern for her visiting children, but you've decided to keep both the cat and the germs.

End of story?

Not so fast. We don't always get to go our merry way, and bollocks to those who don't like it. Being in a relationship—whether at work or at home—means being cognizant of the cost of our behaviors and decisions to those around us. If you're not going to change, you still have a “duty to mitigate.” That means you need to do what you can, within reason, to reduce the impacts of your actions (or inaction) on others.

INQUIRE ABOUT, AND ACKNOWLEDGE, THE IMPACT ON THEM

Ask how your choice affects others you live and work with. After much thought, and discussions with several doctors, Larry decided that, for now, he is not going to take medication for his ADHD. This has consequences for him, of course, as he struggles to organize his life and get things done. It also has consequences for his family and for his coworkers at the construction site. Talking with them about the implications will, in large part, determine the success of his efforts and of these relationships. In what ways will his decision frustrate his family as they need to prod, prompt, and remediate? What concerns do his crew members have for efficiency or safety, and what processes can they put in place together to ensure a secure work environment? The decision to

take or not take the medication is Larry's; the consequences of that decision are shared.

COACH THEM TO DEAL WITH THE UNCHANGED YOU

Jackie knows she can dominate any discussion, and that she should leave more room for others. After working at it—fruitlessly—for the last year, she decides to give up for now. “I know I can be overbearing,” she tells her teammates. “I tried to change. It was a lot of effort for almost no benefit. So I give you all permission to cut me off. Red-card me, or throw me in the penalty box. I don't mean to dominate discussions but I imagine I'll continue to do it without realizing it. I promise I won't think you're being rude; I need the help, and I'll appreciate it.”

PROBLEM SOLVE TOGETHER

The idea isn't to shut down discussion, but to open it up and to problem solve about how to minimize the cost of your decision not to change.

Your children don't want to worry about you living alone. Making modifications to the house, moving a bedroom downstairs, hiring some help, or getting a life alert system may help reduce their anxiety and make you safer. Your staff is concerned about the impact on customers while you're all in the middle of a reorganization, so sit down together to map out how you'll ensure continuity of service.

Consider the issues between Mark and his younger brother, Steve. For three decades Mark has been on Steve about his flakiness. The latest clash concerns Mark's season tickets for the Steelers: “When I offer you one of my tickets, you're always like, ‘Yeah, man, I'll be there!’ But half the time you show up late, and sometimes you don't show at all.”

Steve can't argue with his show rate, but he knows himself well enough to know that there's little chance he's really going to change. Mark could keep knocking his head against the wall, or he could stop inviting his brother to the games.

But there's a third option: Mark and Steve decide to assume that Steve *isn't* going to change, and problem solve about how to minimize the aggravation to Mark. These days when Mark extends an invitation, they discuss specific details regarding Steve's assurances that he'll make it on time (“Are you double-booking yourself? What else is going on that day? Do you need a ride?”), and the cost to Mark if Steve bails. Sometimes

Steve thanks him for the invite and suggests Mark ask someone else. At other times, recognizing that Mark is really only asking him so they can spend some time together, Steve makes an alternate suggestion that they go golfing or out for a beer instead.

So Steve has set his boundary—I really don't think I can change—and he's worked with his brother to reduce the impact on Mark. This allows them to move on from the fantasy future of a changed Steve and to enjoy who each of them is now. Paradoxically, the clarity of Steve's boundary has made it easier for the brothers to spend time together.

Summary: SOME KEY IDEAS

Boundaries: The ability to turn down or turn away feedback is critical to healthy relationships and lifelong learning.

Three kinds of boundaries:

- Thanks and No — I'm happy to hear your coaching . . . and I may not take it.
- Not Now, Not About That — I need time or space, or this is too sensitive a subject right now.
- No Feedback — Our relationship rides on your ability to keep your judgments to yourself.

When turning down feedback, use “and” to be appreciative, and firm.

Be specific about:

- The request
- The time frame
- The consequences
- Their assent

If you're not changing, work to mitigate the impact on others.

- Ask about the impact
- Coach them to deal with the unchanged you
- Problem solve together