Resolving Issues with Your Boss (Part 7):
The Art of crossing boundaries

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Summary of Part 6

Part 6 explored the critical role of asking the right questions in communication, particularly in relation to emotional states, drives, and the broader goal of fostering understanding. It examines how emotions and psychological drives influence how we ask and answer questions, shaping interactions in personal and professional contexts.

It highlights the importance of framing questions thoughtfully, recognizing the impact of emotional states on responses, and understanding when leading questions can manipulate outcomes. Ultimately, it emphasizes that asking the right questions is essential for effective, empathetic communication.

The Psychology of Boundaries

While it has long been understood that individuals and groups develop boundaries, it is still not understood how humans operate in groups, often nested in multilayered collectives (De Dreu et al., 2024). There are just too many variables.

The popular and well-known Eliyahu Goldratt (1984, p141) quote, "Tell me how you measure me, and I will tell you how I will behave," probably holds true when applied to a single

individual. However, this assertion warrants closer examination of its underlying assumptions. Specifically, the Goldratt assertion implicitly assumes: 1) individuals can accurately predict their future behavior under all circumstances, and 2) individuals are always completely honest. When applied to individual behavior in the modern workplace, the situation becomes more complex. Neither of these assumptions can be universally proven true at all times or for all people.

The evidence for this complexity is all around us, reflected in the statistical distributions of human behavior. Populations exhibit significant variability in responses to the same situations, highlighting the unpredictability and diversity of human actions. These variations are a key factor in understanding how individuals behave in different contexts, especially in complex organizational environments.

The factors driving human behavior are profound and subtle, particularly within the modern workforce. Individuals from diverse races, belief systems, group affiliations, life experiences, and personality traits—often with varying emotional states—are brought together and, out of necessity, expected to work cooperatively and productively toward common goals. This occurs within the framework of a leadership hierarchy. Human boundaries, both individual and group, form the invisible yet powerful frameworks that define how individuals engage with their work, colleagues, and the organizations for which they labor.

Various factors converge to shape individual workplace experiences and outcomes. In today's organizational structures, psychological dimensions such as trust, psychological safety, role clarity, emotional boundaries, and equity are crucial in determining how individuals respond to the same work environment. These factors influence day-to-day interactions and performance and affect teams' well-being, mental health, and interpersonal relationships. While the physical setting or organizational culture may appear uniform on the surface, individuals within that environment often experience it differently due to these psychological variables.

Understanding these factors is essential for enhancing productivity, fostering well-being, and improving overall organizational effectiveness.

Boundaries can be physical, emotional, cognitive, or even historical, and each type plays a distinct role in maintaining a healthy, functioning workplace. They shape interpersonal dynamics, task performance, and overall organizational effectiveness.

Getting Permission to Cross

Social boundaries discourage specific actions, especially when crossing or challenging the established norms within a group. When ignored or accidentally blundered through, they can cause tensions and conflict escalation, triggered by feelings of fear or mistrust.

To crossover always requires a request to pass over to the other side. As an outsider, any permission granted is always conditional.

The well-known conflict theorist Bryant Wedge once explained his method for gaining access to an urban neighborhood where he was a stranger. The conversation occurred in the summer of 1974, years after he published his case studies on student political violence (Wedge, 1969). He described his process briefly, and I take the liberty of filling in some of the detail holes five decades later:

1. Identify the physical boundaries of the group you wish to engage in dialogue with.

2. Position yourself visibly and conveniently as close as possible to the identified boundary, without actually crossing it.

3. Ensure you are easily observable by individuals on the other side of the boundary.

4. Eventually, someone may approach you, asking you to identify yourself, establish your social role, and explain your purpose and the specific group role you wish to communicate with.

5. Your social role and purpose must be perceived as legitimate and non-threatening.

6. The individual may return to their side of the boundary and later come back to either inform you to stay away or escort you to meet a group leader or influencer for further validation.

7. Be aware that there is a possibility of receiving a warning that may include threats of violence, or actual violence, to emphasize the message. Therefore, ensure you have a valid reason for being in that location.

While Wedge focused on gaining access across violent political group boundaries, his boundary navigation framework offers valuable insights for probing the delicate territories that separate people within communities, organizations, or even informal social settings. At its core, the method emphasizes the importance of visibility, patience, and legitimacy. It's a process that mirrors the ways people cautiously gauge the intentions of newcomers or outsiders, seeking to

understand whether the newcomer poses a threat or whether they can be safely integrated into the existing group structure.

In a workplace setting, these social boundaries can manifest in hierarchies, departmental divisions, or even through more subtle cultural norms that govern acceptable behaviors and communication. Crossing these boundaries is rarely as simple as just walking into a room or emailing. The approach must be thoughtful, ensuring the intent is clear and not misinterpreted. The first step always involves identifying these boundaries and establishing physical or symbolic proximity to them without overstepping.

Visibility plays a critical role. Someone from inside the group must invite you to cross boundaries. If you are not visible, you cannot be approached.

Once visibility is established, the next step involves interaction. The critical moment here is when someone from the group reaches out to assess you and understand your motivations and intentions. In the workplace, this could be a colleague approaching you with questions, a superior asking you to clarify your role, or even a team member trying to ascertain whether you share their goals. The explanation of your social role and intentions must be framed in a way that aligns with the group's goals while also being sensitive to the norms that may already exist.

Offering something valuable— an idea, a resource, or simply a willingness to contribute—can establish credibility and mitigate fears that you may disrupt the group dynamic.

As Wedge pointed out, the response to your presence may not always be warm. The people on the other side of the boundary may issue warnings through indirect communication or more overt threats. In a workplace, this could manifest as resistance to your ideas, dismissiveness, or exclusion from key conversations. Understanding that these reactions are a natural part of boundary negotiation can help you stay composed and strategic.

At this stage, remaining calm and respecting the warning signals is most important. Should the response be unfriendly, it's essential to reflect on your approach and evaluate whether your position within the group needs to be redefined. Engaging in dialogue to clarify misunderstandings or to offer reassurances can help turn the situation around. The threat of exclusion or conflict is a sign of tension. Still, it also presents an opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to understanding the group and its dynamics while reaffirming your place within it.

Ultimately, navigating social boundaries, as Wedge's method illustrates, is a process of mutual recognition. It requires a balance of patience, clear intent, and the ability to adjust one's

approach based on the responses of those on the other side of the boundary. In both professional and social environments, this negotiation—of visibility, legitimacy, and respect—creates pathways for meaningful interaction and, eventually, integration.

Timing is Everything

My 50 years of professional experience have established to my satisfaction that most working adults do not see themselves as in the sales profession. While we will discuss this in much greater detail in subsequent article parts, for now, I will assert that conflict resolution and tension reduction are all about sales.

In the preceding part of this article, we have discussed the importance of not only asking questions but also asking the right questions. One of the key components of sales is discovering what the other party needs. We are not negotiating. We are merely probing for areas of mutual interest and gain.

This requires asking the right questions for information to build conditional trust and to create a shared understanding. Without a shared understanding, the other party may tell you they are not interested in giving you any more time to discuss it further.

Conclusion

As we have seen, boundaries—whether they are emotional, cognitive, or social—are central to how individuals interact within groups and organizations. These boundaries, often invisible but powerful, shape the way we communicate, collaborate, and resolve conflicts. One of the key takeaways from this exploration is the critical role that asking the right questions plays in identifying and understanding these boundaries.

The process of asking the right questions allows us to approach boundaries with curiosity and respect. Instead of imposing ourselves on a group or assuming we know what others think, we invite them into the conversation, creating space for mutual understanding. When we ask thoughtful, open-ended questions, we not only gather information but also show a genuine interest in the perspectives of others. This helps to build trust, reduce defensiveness, and open the door for meaningful dialogue.

Ultimately, the art of asking the right questions is about more than gathering facts; it's about creating an environment where people feel safe to share, clarify, and negotiate boundaries. By doing so, we can move from confrontation to collaboration, from misunderstanding to mutual respect. In a world where boundaries often define the limits of interaction, the ability to ask

the right questions is the first step toward breaking down barriers and fostering a more inclusive and productive dialogue.

* Note: A pdf copy of this article can be found at:
https://www.mcl-associates.com/downloads/resolving_issues_with_your_boss_part7.pdf

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