

# Beyond Balance to Boundaries

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## Work-life balance

Work-life balance - A phrase used to encapsulate the desire by workers to have (what they perceive as) a healthy mix of time and attention spent on work, their personal lives, and rest. While an important concept, it can come with unintended baggage as modern workers struggle to ascertain what “balance” looks and feels like.



To find a healthy mix, it would be advantageous to use more descriptive tools and concepts to guide us. One option is boundaries.

## Boundaries

Boundaries – “a psychological demarcation that protects the integrity of an individual or group or that helps the person or group set realistic limits on participation in a relationship or activity.” (APA Dictionary, 2018)

Unlike the vague notion of “balance”, having boundaries creates personal and realistic limits that enable autonomy.

“Boundaries define us. They define what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership.” (Cloud & Townsend, 1992)

Having healthy, realistic boundaries with our work involves understanding what we want our boundaries to be and what our leadership/organization expects our boundaries to be. If these are out of sync, we must advocate for ourselves and our workplace culture to have realistic limits.

“This is something business first learned a long time ago. In the 19th century, when organized labor first compelled factory owners to limit workdays to 10 (and then eight) hours, management was surprised to discover that output actually increased – and that expensive mistakes and accidents decreased. This is an experiment that Harvard Business School’s Leslie Perlow and Jessica Porter repeated over a century later with knowledge workers. It still held true. Predictable, required time off (like nights and weekends) actually made teams of consultants more productive.” (Carmichael, 2015)

Once we establish our boundaries, it is essential to politely, but assertively communicate them with our supervisor and coworkers.

Examples:

- A meeting with a supervisor to align projects, priorities, and boundaries.
- A clear away message when you have taken leave.
- An understanding with coworkers that you don’t check email or chat in the evenings.

Boundary setting:

- What do I need to do? What do I want to do? What was I hired to do? What is **essential**?
- What are the pain points of my day/week/month?
- What is expected of me by myself? Others? What do I expect from others?
- Which expectations are communicated and which are not?
- What would I like to adjust and what does that look like?

(Tawwab, 2021)

But how?

## Time & Attention

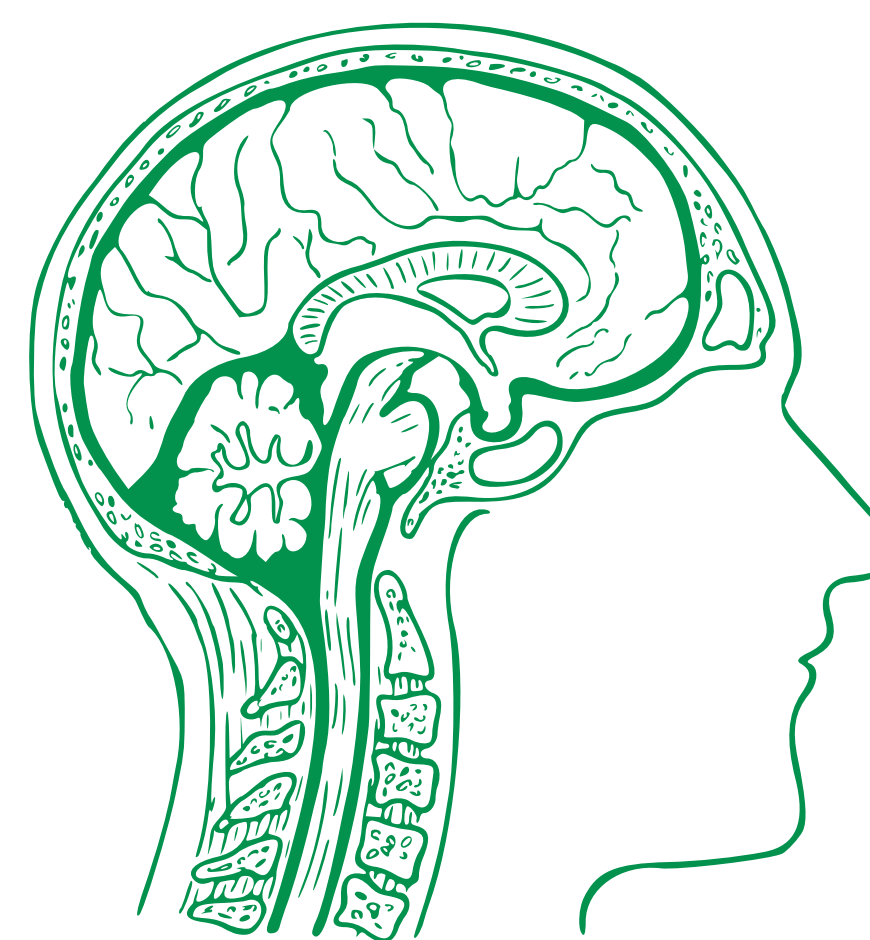
In the modern world, it is essential to place boundaries on our time and attention.

### Time

Time is vital to our work, personal lives, and rest. As a result, we should set boundaries around each to make the most of our time. While at work, we should carve time out of our schedule to work deeply and focus on projects. If projects come that don’t fit our available time to dedicate, we should clearly communicate when that time will be available, possibly even saying no. (McKeown, 2014)

“...When I was at work, I worked. And when I was with my family, I concentrated on them. The change in focus cleared and refreshed my mind so that when I went to work, I was efficient. Many think they must work long hours to be competitive; that is not necessarily true. One performs better when one embeds work in a balanced life: *professio sano in vitam sanam*. Five to eight hours per day of clear thinking and concentrated work five days per week produces more impressive results than the coffee, chit-chat, and various displacement activities that often fill the time of many of those who think they are working seventy or eighty hours a week.” (Stearns)

### Attention



Even if we have the time for work and our personal lives, failing to set boundaries on our attention will rob us of the ability to do the best work or leisure that we can. Modern tools make it possible for us to be on the clock 24/7, but also to be involved in our personal lives in an instant. This is why it is important to set boundaries to enable us to have periods of “deep work” (Newport, 2016).

Deep work allows us to focus on tasks and accomplish them without constant context switching that slows our progress and hampers our thinking and producing. To work deeply, we should set times to do so and eliminate distractions during those times. These may be a few hours a day to start, but can improve as we reduce distractions and as our ability to focus grows. Deep work also gives us the autonomy to engage with email, workplace chat, etc. outside of those periods of focus. (Newport, 2016)

This also applies outside of the workplace. While away from work, our attention should be focused on our personal lives and rest by setting clear and realistic boundaries with work. For example, this may mean not checking emails in the evenings or setting a fixed schedule when we will, rather than impulsively checking when receiving a notification.

The autonomy that boundaries offer means we can turn our attention to address aspects of the changing seasons of life or our daily/weekly/monthly needs.

Examples:

- A few days of staying late to finish an important work project.
- Taking extra PTO or working a flexible schedule when caregiving for children or aged parents and family.

## Conclusion

Installing realistic boundaries with our time and attention can be difficult and often imperfect, but it is a good first step to moving work, personal lives, and rest closer to where we would like them to be.

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