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Four Steps to Better Work Boundaries

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Want to advance your career? Saying "no" may be the key.

"It's wonderful to be the go-to person to a point -- until you find you're totally overwhelmed, exhausted, resentful and in a time crunch," said Susan Newman, author of "The Book of No: 250 Ways to Say It -- And Mean It and Stop People-Pleasing Forever." "Setting workplace boundaries means you will be doing better work and not spreading yourself all over the lot."

Here's how to get there:

1. Track your yeses.

You can't set a boundary you don't know you have, so watch yourself for a week, Newman said. Where do you say "yes"?

- Do you agree to lunch with that coworker on the day of a major presentation?
- Do you accept another project on top of the eight you already have?
- Do you volunteer to change the printer's ink cartridge for a harried coworker?
- Do you work on the Saturday of your daughter's recital?

2. Figure out your priorities.

"Every time you say yes, you're giving up something," said Newman. So get your priorities straight:

Do you need to be everyone's best friend or be the last person to leave work each day? Or is it more important to choose projects that will advance your career and give yourself time to do them?

"You should always ask yourself, 'Are these things moving me forward and gaining me respect, or is it just one more piece of busy work?'" she said.

3. Share them with your boss and coworkers.

Now that you know, let everyone you work with know in a clear, friendly way, said Debra Mandel, author of "Your Boss is Not Your Mother: Eight Steps to Eliminating Office Drama and Creating Positive Relationships At Work."

"It's valuable to inform people that you're changing your approach to work," she said. "You can simply say, 'I know I've been overworking myself and so I'm going to start taking a little more time.'"

Scared to say it? You're not alone. Some changes may be easier than others. Declining lunch with a coworker may be less frightening than declining a project from your boss.

So invite your boss into the decision-making: Of the 10 projects on your plate, which are highest priority? Can you work late during the week in return for having your weekends to yourself? Keep reminding your boss that you're doing this to improve your work performance.

4. Keep doing it.

Now that you've set your boundary, your work is done. Right?

Wrong.

Expect your boss and coworkers to test you. Can't you come out for drinks after work just this once? Can't you take 10 minutes -- OK, maybe 30 -- to talk your coworker down from her latest crisis -- even though you have work to do?

Can't you take on this one extra project? It's a one-time thing, your boss swears.

"Keep setting boundaries," Mandel said. "Usually people want to have healthier relationships, and they'll adapt."

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