



Episode 67: How to Set Better Boundaries

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today, let's talk about boundaries. There are a few topics in coaching that are common to most of my clients, and boundaries are at the top of the list.

Simply put, boundaries are places in our life where we get to say Yes and No. Researcher and author Brene Brown describes boundaries as what's OK and not OK for us.

We all have places in our life where we set or have an opportunity to set a boundary. We have boundaries around our body – for example, we get to decide what's ok and not ok for us to do with or ingest into our body.

We have boundaries around money – and choosing what's OK and not ok for us to spend money on.

We have boundaries around relationships – and choosing who to spend time with and who not to spend time with.

Professionally, we set boundaries around where we choose to focus our energies. At work, when you are clear about what you say Yes to and No to, you are setting a boundary.

If you think about it, most of our daily life involves navigating and negotiating boundaries.

The reason it's important to be aware of your Yeses and Nos is because when we're clear about our boundaries, it's easier to make decisions and move forward with more confidence, ease, and peace.

When we're unclear about our boundaries, or if someone violates a boundary, it feels bad. We get upset and frustrated. We feel like we're at the mercy of others. And this manifests as stress in our body, thoughts, and behaviors.

What I know is that most of us want to feel like we have choice. We want to have agency in our life and we want to determine what's OK and not OK for us.

We want to be clear about our boundaries, communicate them, and then ideally make choices to hold them.

Often, this is easier said than done. We might have the best of intentions to stop working at 10 pm, or to take a lunch break, or to say No to being on another committee. And then what happens? Our No turns into a Maybe or even a reluctant Yes, and we're back where we started.

There are two main reasons we might give up a boundary.

First, we might say Yes when we want to say No because of a relationship: We care about others and want them to like or depend on us. Saying Yes is one way we build up our relationship bank.

Second, we're often our own worst enemy, and we sabotage our boundary setting efforts. Our inner critic tells us that if we say No, we won't be seen as a team player. It tells us that if we say Yes to something, we'll be seen as selfish.

Most everyone I talk with – and I'm including myself – has work to do with setting boundaries.

So let's talk about some coaching tools – in the form of coaching questions – that you can use with yourself to strengthen your boundary setting muscle.

I want to illustrate how to use these questions by telling you about a client.

This leader was smart and had a strong work ethic. He had been in his field for a while and although he really enjoyed his work, he was starting to feel like working too hard was taking a toll on his health.

At work, he was in meetings all day, and because of that, he worked most nights to do his substantive work. Because he was thorough and responsive, he was asked to do things that belonged to someone else. He rarely said No, because he believed that in a start-up company, it was important to help out.

He came to coaching when his boss told him that he needed to delegate more so that he could focus on big picture thinking. In other words, he needed to set better boundaries.

In our conversation, I asked him about his process for choosing what he said Yes to and No to at work. He replied that he hadn't thought about the idea of choice and that his default was simply to say Yes to everything.

If you can relate to saying Yes to everything, I invite you to reflect on the same questions I asked him:

One: If you think about all the work you do, which responsibilities and decisions are important to continue to say Yes to? Which might you say No to, in order to give someone else an opportunity?

Question two: If you think about all of the meetings you currently attend, which ones are a clear Yes? Which might be a No or a Not as often, again, so that someone else can have an opportunity?

The coaching tool that helps you clarify your boundaries is getting clear on what your Yeses and Nos are for that boundary.

Boundaries are an opportunity for intentional choice. When we set a boundary, we are choosing thoughtfully what we will do, who we will be with, and where we will invest our valuable thinking, caring, and energy.

For example, when you choose to engage with social media or choose not to engage with social media, you're setting a boundary. When you choose your weekend activities, you are choosing your Yeses and Nos.

We get clear on our boundaries by asking ourselves these questions:

What do I want to or need to say No to? What do I want to or need to say Yes to?

The big idea to remember with boundaries is that when you say No to something, there's always an underlying Yes. Recognizing and honoring that underlying Yes helps make it easier to communicate and follow through with a No.

That's because our underlying Yes often reflects a value of ours.

If I say No to working past 9 pm, then I'm saying Yes to honoring my value of health and sleep.

If my client says No to a meeting that his direct report also attends, then he's saying Yes to empowering that person.

Here's a personal example of one my Nos and the underlying Yes that made it easier for me to set and communicate a boundary.

A friend of mine asked to have a conversation around something upsetting that happened in the news. While I like and respect my friend, I didn't want to talk about that topic. I could feel my body resisting having this conversation. I knew it was a No for me.

I thought about my underlying Yes. If I said No to this conversation, what was I saying Yes to? I realized my underlying Yes was about keeping my nervous system calm. My underlying Yes was giving my attention to topics I was excited to think about.

After I got clear about my boundary with this situation, it was easier than I thought to communicate my decision to my friend. I explained my No and Yes, and what worked and didn't work for me. Because I was clear in my own mind, it was also easier to let go of feeling guilty or the thought that I was a bad friend.

When we're clear about our Yeses and Nos, we can communicate more directly and then move on. When we know our underlying, values-centered Yes, we can have more peace of mind and move forward more easily as we make choices in life.

Let's bring this to you. I invite you to think about a part of your life where you want to or need to set a boundary.

Ask yourself, what pieces of this do I want or need to say No to?

What's the underlying Yes that I want to honor?

Thinking about your boundary from the perspective of the underlying Yes often makes it easier to communicate and make choices, even hard ones.

By clarifying and communicating your Yeses and Nos, you'll be role modeling to others what an intentional life looks like. You'll be honoring your authenticity and integrity. And you'll know that you are spending your valuable energy toward what and who really matters.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you want help setting important boundaries, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!