

Confront Client Boundary Issues BEFORE They Overwhelm You

*By Sandra Lim, CPRW, CECC
A Better Impression – Toronto, ON
www.abetterimpression.com
email: newcareer@abetterimpression.com*

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by unrealistic client demands? Certainly, we all want to make sure that our clients are thrilled with the services we provide, but when it starts to wear us down, we need to consider whether we are maintaining appropriate career professional / client boundaries. Our client management strategies should include an understanding of boundary errors, boundary violations, and our role in setting and maintaining boundaries.

Boundary errors often start on the part of the client, and may escalate to **boundary violations** over time if you play a part in enabling this behavior by **failing to consistently act in congruence with a boundary** after you have attempted to correct or educate the client.

This article describes commonly encountered boundary issues, accompanied by the cost for failing to take appropriate interventions, and potential solutions. These client scenarios could apply to the provision of résumé writing or career coaching services.

Client Scenario #1: Time Boundaries

Client #1 is 36 years old, and this factor seems to bother him a lot in terms of his career development because he feels he should be more established by now. He has a history since university graduation of staying at jobs for no longer than a year, and yet still lacks focus as to what he really wants to do. The career objective he mentions at our first session is sales, yet he is unsure if he even likes, or is suited to, sales. He relays that his friends have told him that he would be good at sales, so that was what he has gravitated towards, but he is still unsure about his abilities and ambivalent towards this career choice. This tendency towards an external locus of control is a recurring theme with this client, and his entire demeanor is one of desperation to fix his career situation.

As the career professional, you feel the client used the session time to pour out the story behind his unhappiness. It turns out that the time you spend with him exceeds the time budgeted, as well as the time that would be normally required to be spent with other clients.

Boundary Issues:

If you were so taken aback that you did not attempt to educate him to respect your time boundaries, this would be an example of a **time boundary error**. However, if you do assert yourself and inform him that your time is valuable and that you have clients other than him, and the next time you meet with him he shows no signs of winding down, this would be an example of a **time boundary violation**. On the other hand, if you do set a boundary, but do not enforce it at the next session, then this just negates any benefit from setting the boundary in the first place.

Costs and potential solution:

The costs for not setting a boundary are unnecessary stress, frustration, and extra time spent with the client that could be put towards other income-generating activities as a private practitioner. In order to focus the client, you could ask him to email you, in advance, an agenda of what he would like to work on at each subsequent session.

Client Scenario #2: Professional Boundaries

Client #2 almost immediately starts to confide in you about various personal issues, such as never having emotional support from her family, a recent breakup of a romantic relationship, and past boyfriends. She also asks you many personal questions unrelated to your work together.

In subsequent sessions, she mentions that she talks to her best friend about you all the time, and she says that her best friend would really like to meet you. Expecting a referral, you are speechless when she invites you to a party where her best friend will be in attendance.

Boundary Issues:

If you were so surprised that you do not set boundaries upfront, then this is an example of a **professional boundary error**, and reinforces the client's view of you as a "friend," rather than a professional, leading to a **crossing of personal and professional boundaries**. If you do set a boundary, but she continues to her talk about her personal life, this would be a **boundary violation**, and as a result of the client viewing you as a friend, it may be hard to hold her accountable to complete assigned homework for subsequent sessions.

Costs and potential solution:

The cost of not defining the professional boundaries between client and career professional leads to feelings of discomfort on your part, time lost while listening to her talk about unrelated topics, and frustration from the inability to hold her accountable.

If you clearly and firmly delineate career professional and client roles upfront, the benefits would be less time spent listening to her talk about her personal life and more respect for your time.

Client Scenario #3: Information Boundaries

Client #3 has referred several friends of hers to you who have become your clients, but during sessions with her, she talks freely to you about their personal lives.

Boundary Issues:

If you were so caught off guard that you fail to set boundaries upfront, then this is an example of an **information boundary error**, thus encouraging her to continue in this type of behavior. However, if you do let her know that since these individuals are now your clients, and it is not appropriate for her to talk about them with you, and she continues to do so, this would be an example of an **information boundary violation**.

Costs and potential solution:

The cost of not setting this boundary raises an ethical issue, as well as leading you to feel uncomfortable every time she talks about one of your clients.

Explain the issue of confidentiality to her, letting her know to limit speaking of her friends that are clients are yours to professional successes (such as landing a job, etc.) **but only with their permission**, instead of their personal lives. The benefits would be avoiding a sticky ethical issue, and more time spent concentrating on the session at hand.

As one guilty in the past of being a "client pleaser," I have come to recognize that *we cannot take care of others' feelings and set our boundaries at the same time.*