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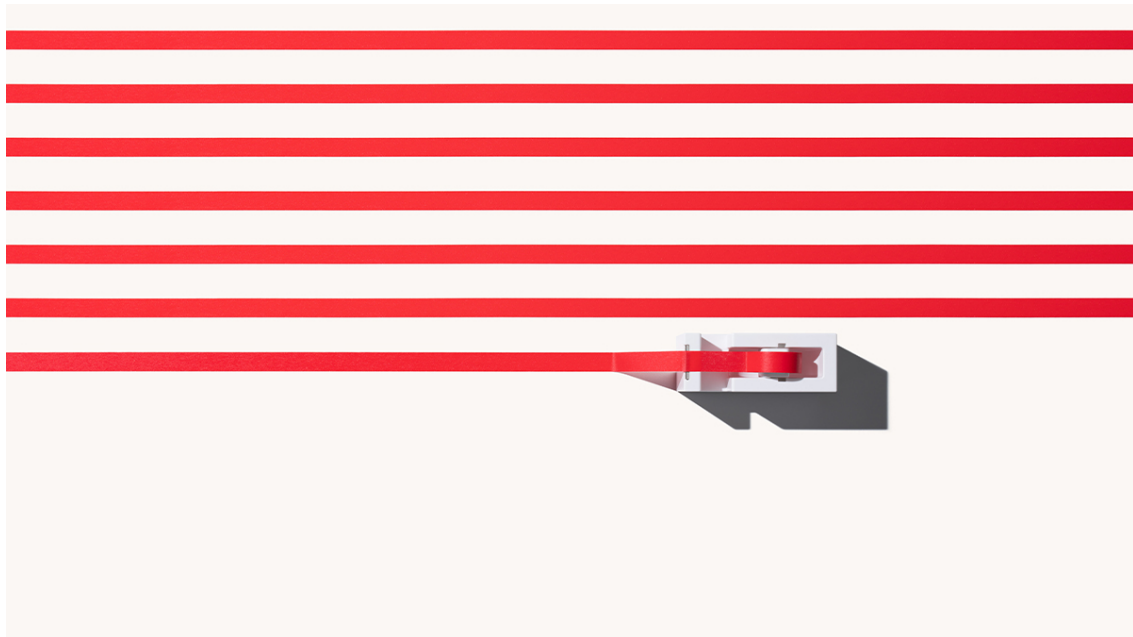**Career Transitions**

How to Set Healthy Boundaries When Starting a New Job

by Melody Wilding

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Summary.   Failing to set boundaries early on in a new job is not only exhausting, but it also traps you into high expectations that you need to continually live up to, which can be demoralizing and unsustainable. The author offers strategies on how to set healthy... **more**

After a long and arduous job search, Anna was overjoyed to receive an offer from a top marketing agency. She eagerly accepted, excited by the prospect of expanding her career by working on bigger accounts. Anna went to great lengths to ensure

she left her previous job on a positive note, after which, she dove headfirst into preparing for her new role. A lifelong high achiever, she spent her three weeks between jobs studying the agency's clients, strategizing goals, and brushing up her skills in social media advertising — a skill her new role would require.

By the end of her first week on the job, Anna realized her well-laid plans weren't going to unfold as she expected. She had come from a corporate marketing background with a traditional hierarchy and established procedures. Anna's new company, on the other hand, operated like a startup. It was a fast-moving, matrixed environment with few processes and less-defined responsibilities.

During our next coaching session, Anna confessed that she was struggling. "I'm too much of a people pleaser," she said. "I'm saying 'yes' to everything and I'm not putting my ideas out there. I stress about each conversation with a colleague, worried I'll step on someone's toes." The fear was driving Anna to overwork. "I feel in over my head with this job, so I work later and later nights trying to catch up. I'm afraid I'm going to burn out before the 90-day mark."

You may relate to Anna's story if you're one of the millions of workers who have started a new job recently in search of better work-life balance. Many high-achievers have a tendency to push too hard in their first days in an effort to prove themselves. If you have ever done this, then maybe you volunteered for additional tasks to appear helpful, answered emails after hours to be perceived as responsive, or otherwise overextended yourself to justify you were a worthwhile hire.

Failing to set boundaries early on is not only exhausting, but it also traps you into high expectations that you need to continually live up to, which can be demoralizing and unsustainable. Here's how to set healthy limits in the first days of a new job so that you can balance your own needs and make a good impression in the process.

Identify what's driving you.

Reflect on what underlies your desire to prove yourself. Many of your motivations are probably positive, such as having passion for the job or wanting to show you're hardworking and conscientious. But it's also likely that certain fears are driving you to self-sabotage. Unhelpful beliefs typically start with phrases like:

- I should...
- I must...
- I have to...

Through coaching, we identified that an unhelpful belief driving Anna was "I have to be easy going so that others will like me." This belief, while unconscious, was influencing her behavior in major ways, namely causing her to hold back innovative ideas — the very attribute she was hired for. Consider what implicit rules govern your performance. Naming your fears reduces the hold they have over you and empower you to reframe beliefs around your self-worth and your work.

Consider the upside.

Anna initially balked when I told her that she needed to set stronger boundaries in her new job. This is a common response from high-achievers who assume that saying no or setting limits will make them appear weak, difficult, or demanding. In actuality, self-management — an emotional intelligence skill associated with regulating your time and energy — is an essential leadership skill that accounts for up to 90% of career success. Setting boundaries proves you have self-awareness and possess strong time management, prioritization, and communication skills.

Setting boundaries when starting a new job means you not only display important leadership capabilities, but it also allows you to teach people how to treat you. In other words, your behavior signals to others what is acceptable or unacceptable. In Anna's case, she realized that her people-pleasing tendencies were

beginning to teach others that she was a pushover. This insight inspired her to start diplomatically speaking up whenever she thought there was a better strategy or alternative.

Articulate and share your personal preferences.

Think about the physical, mental, and emotional boundaries you need to be at your best. That may include defining:

- What time you will start and end work
- Response times for emails and messages
- Calendar blocks for focused work or "no meeting" time
- The frequency and duration of breaks during the day
- Resource or training requirements needed to do your job
- The type of work you enjoy doing the most and what you have bandwidth for

Be proactive about communicating your boundaries with your manager and team. As Anna was onboarding, she carved out time to have a "how we work together" session with each of her stakeholders. In this meeting, she outlined her work style and preferences and elicited expectations. Doing so gave her confidence and made a positive impression on her stakeholders, who appreciated Anna's transparent communication.

Apply your energy strategically.

Your first few weeks and months on a job undoubtedly contribute to your reputation. It's important to go above and beyond, but to do so selectively and strategically. You want to make sure you're devoting energy to the highest impact areas. Suss out your boss' goals and expectations and then align your efforts with those top priorities so you can provide value.

Likewise, focus on recruiting your bench of advocates and supporters. Use the "grace period" of being new to ask as many questions as possible. This doesn't make you look "stupid" or

uninformed. Rather, it serves to build relationships because it helps others feel valued and appreciated.

Create and follow through on new habits.

A new job offers a new beginning and a chance to reset. In psychology, this is known as the fresh start effect, or the tendency to take action toward a goal after a special milestone, occasion, or key date has passed. Use this time period to your advantage and put bad habits behind you. Anna, the client from earlier, never took proper lunch breaks in her previous role. She committed to making a change, and now just a few months into her post at the marketing agency, she makes meals in advance, blocks out lunch on her calendar, and eats away from her desk.

Holding yourself accountable to your boundaries is key. Perhaps you schedule a check in with yourself once a week to assess your progress, or maybe you create a tracker to log your achievements. Finding an accountability buddy who you meet with periodically can also increase your chances of success by up to 95%.

Starting a new job can be both nerve-wracking and invigorating. By setting strong boundaries from the start, you set yourself up for sustainable success over the long-run.

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