

## **Know Your Boundaries at Work**

Your ability to carry a conversation is crucial in building relationships with fellow employees, but boundaries must exist. The border separating professional and personal relationships is not easy to patrol. Conversational boundaries help to determine the reputation of an employee. Simply put, boundaries preserve integrity.

Whether you are a student, faculty, manager, or staff, taking the following advice will help to ensure that conversations with co-workers never distract from a productive, positive workplace.

### **Beware of feeling informal**

For most, it is easy to determine when behavior is overtly inappropriate. However, personal interpretations lead to a gray line on what is subtly inappropriate. A good rule of thumb is to avoid issues that might make someone uncomfortable. Such topics of conversation may include romance, physical appearance, health, race, religion and personal finance.

Refrain from gossip. Remember: Those who talk to you about others will also talk *about you* to others. Most gossip and other inappropriate conversations occur in places that feel informal, such as elevators, hallways and bathrooms. However, you should never get the false sense of security when you are off duty in these locations.

Making an unsuitable remark damages how others perceive you, and the negative effects on reputation and future advancement can be long-term.

If you are the receiver of inappropriate gossip or conversation you can aim to prevent the behavior. While it's natural for employees to show interest in one another's lives, you can be courageous enough to cut off a co-worker when warranted.

### ***Strategy One***

One strategy is to turn off-topic conversations back to work-related issues as quickly as possible. An unwillingness to reveal too much personal information — or to listen to another person reveal it — shouldn't be seen as unfriendly. By smiling and simply saying, "Let's not go there," you can stick to suitable discussions.

### ***Strategy Two***

Just as informal places can get co-workers into trouble, so can seemingly informal methods of communication. You should treat email as broadcasted words that can be read and printed. As state employees, we are all held to high ethical standards including how we use our electronic equipment. We must adhere to computer and electronic usage policies such as the [Electronic Monitoring Statement](#). Passing around rumors,

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## HUMAN RESOURCES

gossip and tasteless jokes to multiple people via email rather than by word of mouth are still violations of UCHC policy and can also influence how others perceive you. As you would think before you speak, don't forget to think before you hit the 'send' button.

### **Forge office friendships with care**

Many studies show the benefits of office friendships. Employees with a best friend at work are more likely to have a higher work engagement level than those that do not. When you're at the office for around 2,000 hours a year, you're bound to develop friendships with co-workers. Some may become confidants with whom you share personal details.

However, you should forge these friendships with care. Make sure you know and completely trust this kind of co-worker friend. It is a risk any time someone has knowledge about details you do not want to make public. When co-worker friendships fizzle, the parties often have to see each other daily. Also, keep in mind that office walls and especially cubicle walls are literally thin. If you want to share personal information, do so offsite during non-working hours.

### **Expect boundary differences**

The workplace not only combines people of different backgrounds, ages, talents and skills but also people with different boundaries. People with "overdeveloped" boundaries often are brash and do not notice they are sharing too much information. While people with "underdeveloped" boundaries often believe it is not OK to protest such communication.

An often occurrence at work is office humor. Because boundary differences are widespread and subjective, office humor is risky. Most people want to laugh, but you never know who you may offend. Regardless of your intention, be aware of the possible impact of your behavior.

### **Employ tact**

If you have a problem with a co-worker, address what you can do to solve it. Talk to the offending person directly and privately. Talking behind someone's back makes the situation worse. Choose a neutral place away from your work area, such as over lunch or in a quiet area during a break.

If a co-worker says something that offends or upsets you, try to respond instead of react. Reaction is immediate and emotional. When we react to something, we are more likely to say or do things we might later regret. A response is planned and controlled, and it leads to fewer communication issues.