Habits of RESILIENT LEADERS

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Foreword by Dominique Smith

Personal Practices That Drive Professional Impact

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Build Boundaries, Not Walls

Monique, a middle school principal beginning her third year, sat in her office and felt her heart begin to race. There were emotionally charged parents outside yelling at the administrative assistant. Through the door she heard enough to know they were demanding to see the principal. In several minutes, Monique's leadership team would be arriving to begin their weekly language arts instructional rounds together. She winced, realizing these had already been postponed from the previous week when she had to cancel to support the Assistant Principal in a delicate student conflict that was likely to upset most of the teaching staff with its outcome. Monique wanted nothing more than to prioritize her instructional leadership, and yet she struggled to do so as she was constantly reacting to the emotional needs of others. Thinking about her goals of student academic growth and achievement in reading made the overwhelm grow even deeper. Her phone pinged, and a text from the administrative assistant appeared. Did she have time to see the frustrated parents? Did she remember that her leadership team was also waiting for her to do language arts instructional rounds? In a moment of clarity, Monique decided to send the parents home and schedule a meeting with them after school. She called in her leadership team and let them know that instructional rounds were going to become a high priority. Moving forward, these would not be interrupted unless it was a true emergency. Later, meeting with the upset parents after school, she realized that because she had allowed some time to pass before meeting with her, they were not as emotionally charged. In fact, everyone was calmer and able to discuss the student concerns more rationally. As she reflected on the drive home, Monique realized that by communicating some simple boundaries with staff and parents in this instance, she had arrived at a better outcome for everyone, including herself.

WHY HEALTHY BOUNDARIES IN LEADERSHIP MATTER

In the context of education, professional and personal boundaries are becoming an essential habit for leaders to understand and maintain. Over the last decade, the pressure for school and district leaders to give more and more of their personal time has grown extremely prevalent. Technology has allowed leaders to become more accessible and to build relationships with stakeholders but has also created more access to work twenty-four hours a day, every day of the week. Through our extensive coaching and collaboration with schools and district leaders in action, we have observed patterns emerge that distinguished those education leaders who are becoming burnt out from those who continue to demonstrate job satisfaction. These fulfilled administrators have developed the skills of establishing, communicating, and maintaining boundaries in both their professional and personal lives. Boundaries are best described as the invisible lines that help us to effectively function in a manner that sustains our personal agency. Dr. Sharon Martin, a psychotherapist, describes how "with every relationship, personal or professional, comes the need for boundaries. Boundaries are the invisible lines that keep us physically and emotionally safe while effectively functioning. They govern what we are willing to do and not do, say and hear, and give and receive. Boundaries come in many forms." (2018).

> *Boundaries are best described as the invisible lines that help us to effectively function in a manner that sustains our personal agency.*

Despite being widely recognized as an important practice for leaders (Weiss et al., 2018), the habit of setting healthy boundaries is not commonly discussed in educational leadership circles or journals. Rather, in the field of education, leaders (like teachers and others working in schools), may find themselves susceptible to a societal perception that they are expected to meet the needs of their entire community at all times—even at the cost of their own well-being. Further, education leaders may be attracted to the work because of the profound potential for being rewarded by helping others. Education is a profession known to draw the interest of individuals who aspire to impact the lives of others and to have a positive influence on society by shaping the futures of

young people. By the very nature of the work, educators are often appropriately categorized as "servant leaders." With this prevalent mindset grounded in giving toward others, the profession is also at risk for positioning leaders as those who are easy to take advantage of by demanding unusually high outputs of time, attention to the needs of others, and even personal resources. Applying boundaries—a form of limits on external influences that serve to protect your needs—may feel unnatural or counterintuitive for leaders whose personal beliefs are grounded in taking care of others before themselves. However, learning to consistently and effectively apply boundaries serves to protect the capacity for fully giving love, attention, care, and expertise to a leader's community. Without them, no one is humanly capable of meeting all of the needs of every single stakeholder and burnout is inevitable.

Boundaries for all leaders are a critical habit that must be prioritized to ensure preservation of mental health, utmost effectiveness as a leader, and capacity to influence utmost high levels of student learning in classrooms. However, administrators, like many other professionals, may hold misconceptions about the purpose of defining and utilizing boundaries in the workplace. Consider the following characteristics that define what boundaries can, and cannot, offer school and district leaders for application in their setting (Figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1 ● Characteristics of Boundaries

WHAT BOUNDARIES ARE . . .	WHAT BOUNDARIES ARE NOT . . .
Boundaries allow you to prioritize your professional and personal needs and time.	Boundaries are not intended to control others' time.
Boundaries are a gate that allow those who are more responsible to gain more access to you.	Boundaries are not intended to control others' actions.
Boundaries allow for healthy communication.	Boundaries are not used to shut others' opinions or voices down.
Boundaries help to prioritize and protect your professional and personal goals.	Boundaries are not used to dictate others' goals.
Boundaries protect your happiness.	Boundaries do not stop others from acting irresponsibly.

Pause and Reflect

Read and reflect on the characteristics of boundaries in Figure 1.1 while responding to these questions.

Which of the statements from Figure 1.1 align most closely to your own *positive* experiences with boundary-setting (either using boundaries yourself or experiencing boundaries set by another individual)? Why do you believe that to be true?

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LET BOUNDARIES BECOME YOUR SUPERPOWER!

Utilizing boundaries is not typically encountered in traditional leadership development courses, nor in educator certification programs. Further, the act of defining a boundary around one's personal needs, goals, interests, or preferences may feel downright uncomfortable to some. Establishing a boundary first requires understanding how it feels when your subconscious beliefs and assumptions about right and wrong are affronted and why those feelings occur in each situation. Examples of boundaries that may be crossed might include intrusions on your time, a conflict with your internal expectations about how a project should be accomplished, or a colleague consistently taking advantage of your perceived willingness to take on more of the difficult tasks at work. While your role is one that involves supporting others, setting limits is both necessary and healthy. Creating a boundary is not about making yourself unavailable; it's about managing your time and energy so you can be at your best for those whom you lead. When faced with an experience that feels like an intrusion on your unspoken expectations, a boundary can help! Specific practices that enable the creation of healthy boundaries can include the following:

1. Clarifying your priorities: When you are certain about what must happen to ensure success (for any type of scenario),

you can better ascertain what will hinder progress and more easily say "no" to those requests or tasks.

2. Communicating directly and kindly: Setting boundaries by telling others "no" can cause feelings of guilt. With clear communication as to why you are not able to accede to a request you avoid misunderstandings or assumptions and establish fair, clear expectations.

3. Setting boundaries before intrusions occur: You may notice patterns in your interactions with others wherein they seem to make assumptions about how and when to interact with you. Preemptively establishing boundaries that will diminish these instances, such as clear blocks and open spaces on your calendar for when you're free for certain things, can fend off unintended dissonance from having to decline meetings or appear uninterested in collaborating.

While your role is one that involves supporting others, setting limits is both necessary and healthy. Creating a boundary is not about making yourself unavailable; it's about managing your time and energy so you can be at your best for those whom you lead.

Consider this scenario about VaShawn, an experienced Deputy Superintendent and former principal who ascribes to the belief that his purpose as an educator is to help all students achieve their potential, no matter what cost:

VaShawn left the meeting with the team of middle school principals with a deep knot in his stomach. The discussion had circled for two hours around the data suggesting the Emergent Bilingual population of students in the district were not growing academically from year to year; worse, they were declining in achievement for the third year in a row. The school leaders identified dozens of contributing reasons for the disturbing data, and VaShawn countered them with a long list of solutions he had prepared in advance of the meeting. Leaving that day, not one principal had agreed to adopt any of his solutions. He was adamant that he would never force the principals to do something against their will, but he was equally certain the family engagement program he had designed was one of the best solutions to the challenges at hand. Begrudgingly, he now landed on the notion that he would have to spearhead the initiative through his office and not burden the principals with his ideals. He felt the uncomfortable sensation of resentment growing in his conscience against the principals he began to judge as lazy and apathetic, yet it would be inappropriate to confront their

(Continued)

resistance directly. As he arrived home, he spent much of the evening venting his irritation to his partner. The next day, he initiated the first steps toward launching the family engagement project on his own.

While VaShawn is a talented and effective leader in many ways, he's apprehensive at establishing several types of boundaries in his work with his team of school principals, and this places him at risk for adverse outcomes that may cause his own well-being and job satisfaction to suffer. For example, the problem being discussed with the leaders was a set of data that belonged to everyone in the room, not just a few schools and not just VaShawn. His approach to offer a selection of solutions to the administrators was honorable, reasonable, and efficient. VaShawn also arrived at the meeting with an assumption about the outcome he desired to achieve: the leaders would assume responsibility for the data and elect the most effective interventions to adopt and implement in response. For VaShawn to effectively achieve his goals for an action plan, protect his own need to relentlessly pursue what is best for the district's students, and respect the rights of the group of principals to preserve their integrity and lead their buildings according to their expertise, he could shift the experience altogether by deploying his superpower boundaries! Consider the examples in Figure 1.2 describing ways VaShawn might use boundaries to achieve the environment most likely to ensure successful outcomes.

FIGURE 1.2 ● Boundary Examples

DESIRED STATE	EFFECTIVE USE OF BOUNDARIES TO ACHIEVE THE DESIRED STATE
VaShawn and the principals collaboratively develop an action plan for interventions in response to the data.	Clear definition of roles at the onset of the meeting. Implement meeting norms with the group to ensure equal participation, collective responsibility, and shared outcomes.
Principals retain agency over their respective school sites and implementation plans.	VaShawn preemptively determines a few *nonnegotiables* as well as explicit opportunities for individual choice.
VaShawn sustains his personal purpose of adapting to the current environment and responding effectively to meet the needs of all students.	VaShawn leads the meetings with frequent reiterations of the district mission and vision—the "why" for all decisions made. At the meeting conclusion, VaShawn communicates a long-range framework for implementation that incorporates regular feedback cycles from principals.

Pause and Reflect

As you journey through this chapter and those coming afterward, reflect on your own shifts within unique leadership experiences. These reflection questions may guide your examination of when boundaries may have been a superpower you could have deployed to achieve your desired state!

What assumptions or hidden expectations do you hold of others as you initiate a new decision, initiative, program, or other action as a leader? Why might others need to know those expectations?

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What emotions might you experience if not all of the stakeholders involved in your next project or initiative respond in accordance with your expectations?

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How might defining explicit boundaries for yourself and for others *before* beginning the project or initiative foster success for everyone involved?

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REAP THE REWARDS OF HEALTHY BOUNDARY-SETTING

It's crucial when learning to improve your habit of boundary-setting that you understand the different types of boundaries, how they might appear in the education setting, and the risks and rewards you may incur if you do, or do not, apply them. We created Figure 1.3 to guide you in this endeavor.

FIGURE 1.3 ● Types of Boundaries

TYPE OF BOUNDARY	BOUNDARY VIOLATION EXAMPLES	IMPACT WHEN BOUNDARIES ARE NOT APPLIED	BENEFITS OF APPLYING THIS TYPE OF BOUNDARY
Emotional Boundaries: What, where, and how much a person shares their emotional life and how your own and others' emotional needs are handled.	Staff expect you to always know, without being told, what they need and attend to those needs so that they feel supported when managing student behavior.	Leaders feel as though they are constantly disappointing their stakeholders, leading to frustration and diminished self-worth.	Clearly sharing with teachers that you cannot know their needs unless they are shared explicitly, then affirming efforts to share needs with positive support.
Material Boundaries: Treatment of possessions and property and how possessions and property are shared or withheld.	Colleagues assume because you are an administrator that you earn a substantial income and should always cover the bill for social outings.	Conceding to others' expectations when it comes to finances easily harms your personal budget and can lead to resentment toward others.	When a boundary is established, respect is formed and everyone involved is able to enjoy being together without hidden judgments or assumptions.
Time Boundaries: How you relate to your own and others' time and how time-related needs and preferences are treated.	Parents aren't sure how you spend your time and draw conclusions you are always readily available, becoming disgruntled when you don't respond to their needs as immediately as they are presented.	Giving your precious time to anyone who demands it and at the moment they demand it ensures you will never have enough time to attend to the demanding work of leading the entire school toward its vision.	Creating systems and structures, and then clearly sharing them and upholding them consistently, offers a healthy framework under which all stakeholders know the *rules* and can operate reasonably within them, thus you remain in control of your time.

TYPE OF BOUNDARY	BOUNDARY VIOLATION EXAMPLES	IMPACT WHEN BOUNDARIES ARE NOT APPLIED	BENEFITS OF APPLYING THIS TYPE OF BOUNDARY
Personal Limit Boundaries: How often you place your personal needs and desires as the last priority, making sacrifices of your time and effort predominantly to meet others' needs.	Your predecessor established the unwritten expectation that the principal should attend every single after-school activity, even traveling with student teams to events. Doing so means you have zero time for personal health pursuits, least of all your family.	Upholding high demands by others on your personal time for fear of disappointing stakeholders puts your own health at risk—both mental and physical—for being *hands on, mind on* beyond healthy levels for a job.	Ensuring meaningful engagements at some events as opposed to attending every single one shows stakeholders you care for the entire community, yet protects your nonwork time and models healthy work-life balance for your staff.
Social Boundaries: Alignment of your words and behavior with your values, and your responses to others when this alignment is violated.	Fellow administrators constantly disparage their district bosses and the superintendent whenever you are together, bringing down your optimistic attitude and calling into question your commitment to the work.	Allowing those around you to control the narrative of every conversation in a negative or disparaging direction drains your happiness, diminishes your confidence in your own leaders, and fractures trust at all levels.	Defining the impact of such behavior with peers informs them that their actions are harming you. Withholding your presence from their conversations preserves your mental attitude and sustains focus on areas that bring hope, joy, and optimism.

HOW SCHOOL STAKEHOLDERS BENEFIT FROM LEADERS' BOUNDARIES

While setting boundaries is generally a healthy practice, there are unique circumstances through which to consider the impact of boundaries differently for different members of your community. For example, setting a clear boundary with fellow administrators that you don't wish to spend time disparaging your supervisors together is likely to be unnecessary with the teachers in your school. Modeling boundaries with parents around how they are able to set time to meet with you, however, is likely a fantastic opportunity to model healthy boundary practices for those same teachers to use in their own practice. In this section, you'll examine

strategies and practices for setting healthy boundaries with the following groups:

- your leadership team
- classroom educators whom you lead
- students and families

Consider the intersections and distinct practices throughout each section as you look for opportunities to amplify your own growth journey within this habit and look forward to opportunities for deepening this work while practicing other habits such as upholding high expectations for all and the art of getting feedback.

MODELING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES WITH BUILDING LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Modeling boundaries with your leadership team helps demonstrate what good leaders say, do, and how we respond to others. As an education leader, you set the tone for your team's culture, so demonstrating how to establish and maintain boundaries is key. Start by being transparent about your own boundaries—for example, let your team know when you're unavailable for non-urgent matters, such as during family time or dedicated focus blocks. This helps others understand that it's okay to prioritize personal time without guilt. Another strategy is to be clear about meeting expectations—set agendas, keep discussions focused, and honor agreed-upon end times to respect everyone's schedules. Encourage team members to take regular breaks and respect their need for personal time, especially during high-stress periods. By modeling these practices with consistency, your team will understand their importance and be more likely to apply the approaches themselves.

Another area where leaders have an important opportunity to model healthy boundaries is in how you navigate experiences that are out of your control. For example, it is inevitable that in an era of great change someone will dislike any change you or the district makes and they will become angry. It is in those moments that you may want to just make people happy or become a people pleaser. However, not maintaining healthy professional boundaries in your response may briefly allow that one negative nagging voice to be happy, but you run the risk of violating the vision, goals, and needs of the rest of your staff and students. Further, you may find it comforting to process difficult experiences by verbalizing your frustrations or

disappointments with others as a way of fostering relatability and empathy. The absence of a boundary around how you communicate and with whom may invite your stakeholders to feel equally negative about an experience or, worse, convey your opinions to others as though they are concrete information. In the face of disruption, change, or uncertainty, support your team and your own needs instead by establishing space and time for courageous conversations, inviting others to have a healthy conversation so they can feel seen, heard, and valued while establishing those clear boundaries of how we talk about district decisions, staff, and students.

SETTING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES WITH CLASSROOM EDUCATORS

Relationships between principals, educators, and school support staff can be polarizing at times. A principal plays many distinct roles as a building leader, which can complicate the delicate dance of creating healthy boundaries with school staff. Principals operate with a collaborative stance, a coaching stance, and a directive stance. However, they must also build trusting relationships with all staff members regardless of the role they are playing. "There is not a singular action that will lead to developing a trusting relationship, but rather multiple actions over an extended period to earn that trust" (Medor, 2019, p. 1). In other words, building relationships through a variety of actions with healthy boundaries takes time.

One action step that helps establish clarity and trust in professional relationships is a Clarifying Roles and Tasks workflow chart. This chart helps educators and principals determine who is responsible for tasks that may arise. The key is to clarify the roles of each task and identify which person is the key responsibility holder. By articulating each of these areas, team members are empowered to understand when they are expected to take action and each individual is aware of where the others are focusing their effort. These boundaries, or established rules of engagement, instill the confidence for all to move forward and trust that the goals are clear and other areas are not being ignored or left undone.

> *These boundaries, or established rules of engagement, instill the confidence for all to move forward and trust that the goals are clear and other areas are not being ignored or left undone.*

Pause and Reflect

Use this chart to brainstorm specific ways that the roles different individuals might be defined when a group or team is focusing on different day-to-day tasks. Examples of tasks have been provided (though you may choose to create your own), and the subsequent columns provide space to journal your ideas.

Sample Clarifying Roles and Tasks Workflow

TASK	PRINCIPAL	EDUCATOR
Communication with students about before and after school procedures		
Communicating when a child is bullied		
Communicating academic celebrations		
Communicating PLC agenda		
Communicating expectations around implementing the new curriculum		

TASK	PRINCIPAL	EDUCATOR

SETTING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES WITH STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Boundaries are an essential element of trust. When you have no boundaries, it leaves the other person guessing what the guardrails are (Lofgren, 2021). It is evident that in all relationships within the school that leaders must work hard to develop trust. Students and families come from many backgrounds and may have faced lots of trauma and overwhelm over the last decade. Now more than ever it is essential for leaders to help clearly define the guardrails or boundaries that will help all parties effectively function. We have more trust in those who help us by articulating the guardrails. For example, consider Monique's successful experience establishing a clear and simple boundary with the help of her administrative assistant to always ask parents to come back later in the day when she has availability on her calendar. Consider the merit of the formal structure for this boundary that adds further clarity for all involved: create a standing open time such as *office hours* exclusively to handle any parent or student challenges that may have arisen earlier in the day. Such a practice can serve to provide those clear guardrails so that parents and students can't constantly march into your office and command your attention at any time of their choosing. In the following chart, consider more opportunities that could steal time from your calendar and how you will want to handle those. Providing these guardrails to each member of your community will help build a trusting atmosphere.

Pause and Reflect

Use the chart to identify possible challenges and plans for boundaries when managing the relationships of students, families, and the school.

POSSIBLE CHALLENGE	DESIRED OUTCOME	BOUNDARY: GUARDRAILS TO SUPPORT THE DESIRED OUTCOME
Example: A teacher persistently arrives to team meetings several minutes late, commonly reporting being *stuck* with students after school.	All staff respect the sanctity of team meetings and one another's time by being punctual and prepared. Staff don't consume extra time with you to catch up on missed information from arriving to meetings late.	1. All-staff reminder of the purpose of punctuality for all team gatherings. 2. Individual conference with the specific teacher describing clear expectations and the impact of their behavior on you and the team. 3. As needed, prompt emails addressing the missed expectations following the communication, ensuring they are aware you *inspect what you expect*.

POSSIBLE CHALLENGE	DESIRED OUTCOME	BOUNDARY: GUARDRAILS TO SUPPORT THE DESIRED OUTCOME

As you develop your skills at identifying, utilizing, and upholding good boundaries, remember "Boundaries are only effective when we set and enforce them with ourselves and others. These

are the rules, and we have to be willing to accept the consequences of enforcing them, because the consequences are far greater than when we don't. We are not victims of our circumstances. Boundaries give us the power to choose and the responsibility to decide" (Cloud, 2013, p. 7). Putting the habit of using boundaries to work is an investment not only in yourself, but in the impact you may have on the students and staff in your school.

The Big Ideas

In this chapter, you explored the idea that identifying and applying boundaries in your personal and professional life can be a crucial practice toward ensuring that you are able to bring your best self to the work you want to do: elevate learning for every single student in your school. As you begin to move through forthcoming chapters, recall how you connected the strategies described herein to the people and structures in your current role. Chapter 1 laid the foundation to understand the importance of boundaries in creating realistic expectations of yourself and for others and shared ideas for communicating this intent across each of your school or district's different stakeholder groups. Prepare to examine the intersection of these practices and the range of skills you will develop in the chapters ahead on your journey toward becoming a resilient leader.

Let's Reflect

1. What new ideas have extended your prior knowledge on the concept of boundaries to support your professional growth and development?

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2. Who might you collaborate with as a learning partner or for additional support in your practice around utilizing boundaries to foster your professional and personal well-being?

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3. What strategy from Chapter 1 might you first apply to your daily work? How will you utilize the chapter content to gauge your progress thereafter?

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What's Next?

In Chapter 2, you'll examine the importance of investing energy and time into being fulfilled in all areas of your life, rather than being overly consumed by the demands of your role as a leader. By learning about boundaries first, you'll be equipped to apply the explicit strategies found throughout Chapter 2, such as effectively using feedback, as you investigate skills in leading the learning in your school or district. Look to Chapter 2 for ways to use boundaries to help foster an identity that is robustly developed with passions, hobbies, and relationships. But don't forget to check back to Chapter 1 for cross-application possibilities and watch your growth and impact as a resilient leader multiply!