

Standing in Your Truth and Setting Boundaries

With LaShelle Lowe-Charde

When you think about standing in your truth, your thoughts might turn to supporting particular social justice or political actions. If this is true, then you likely have worked hard to identify what you think will truly be of service to the greater community. You've developed a part of yourself that speaks out and takes action in these realms.

And yet, when it comes to a particular personal relationship, you might find that you are losing yourself. You let things slide or try to harmonize when someone is behaving in a way for which you would set boundaries in any other context. You are shocked when someone points it out because you value respect and consider yourself to be an outspoken person with good boundaries. How can this be happening? What happens in this one aspect of your life that causes you to show up differently?

The most common trigger for this anomaly is that the relationship somehow mimics a situation from your family of origin. For example, imagine that you have experienced a feuding pattern of relating in your family of origin. Often in this pattern, family members fight and argue and then don't speak to each other for years. Imagine that you moved to the other side of the country in an attempt to extricate yourself from this dynamic, but somehow you now find yourself in a very similar situation at work. It's so similar that you can name the roles each person is playing — your coworker Anna is playing the part of your aunt who triangulates, your supervisor is playing the part of your mom who overworks and then blames others for it, etc.

In situations like these, it is all too easy to find yourself in your own family of origin role. The reactive dynamics of family sweep up each person into an unconscious enactment. Though it seems like this is your family enactment, it's likely that it also represents someone else's family. This is what makes it incredibly difficult to use all of the skills, consciousness, and strengths that you've cultivated. Seeing the reactive pattern clearly, you have a chance to wake up from your family trance. You can locate yourself in the strengths and skills you've cultivated and bring them to this particular relationship. Let's look at a few practical steps to achieve this.

The first step, as you might have already guessed, is getting empathy for yourself from someone outside of the situation. Ideally, this person can help you see the situation more clearly by taking the following steps: reflecting back your observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs; compassionately naming the patterns they see; and affirming the validity of your needs and the truth of your skills and strengths. This affirmation helps you wake up out of the family trance.

The most common element in any family trance is enmeshment, a lack of adult differentiation. In your care and compassion for another person, you imagine, as you are in the family trance, that if only you did the right thing you would be able to change their perspective and behavior. You imagine that somehow you can regulate their emotions (for example, by helping them stay calm or keeping them happy) and then they will treat you in a way that you enjoy. This is an example of enmeshment.

It's essential to see all the way through this delusion and release it completely. Seeing through delusion is often a process of naming and observing all of the ways you enact it. You can make a list in your journal or talk it through with a compassionate friend. The important piece is that you have very specific behaviors and thoughts to watch for in yourself and interrupt. Each time you interrupt the pattern of enmeshment, you can engage your anchor and then set a boundary. Let's look at some possible boundary setting behaviors.

What you do inside yourself to set a boundary is the same in any situation. It's about becoming very clear about what's true for you. This necessitates releasing your judgments, analysis, and "shoulds" regarding the other person. As long as your focus is on why they do what they do or how they should or shouldn't behave, you can't get clear about yourself. Whenever a student asks me for help regarding a particular relationship and they talk much more about the other person than themselves, I consider it a sign that they are likely caught in enmeshment. Focusing on the other is not only a distraction from your truth, it is also a sign that you are still caught up in the idea that if only you understood them enough and did the right thing, you could change them. When you completely release this idea, you naturally attend to your own needs and speak from what is true for you, without reference to them.

What a boundary looks like or sounds like depends on the context of your relationship with the other person. For the sake of our example, let's imagine the other person is a coworker at the same level as you in the hierarchy of responsibilities at work.

Triangulation

Coworker: "I can't believe John didn't follow these instructions. Now I have to go over his work! Don't you think ..."

You: "Whoa, Tricia, I feel very uncomfortable talking about John when he's not here. Please speak to him directly. Let's talk about the project we're working on together."

Broadcasting

(Employees that you supervise are within earshot.)

Coworker: "I can't believe how many times I have to tell them. They keep ..."

You: "Hang on Tricia. I value respect and focus for our staff. If there is something you need to discuss, come to my office." (You walk to your office.)

Personal Criticism

Coworker: (In a volume above average conversational volume) "You spent way too much time on this project! You can't seem to ..."

You: "Tricia, pause." (In an initial matching volume). "I won't talk with you at that volume. Would you be willing to lower your voice volume and tell me what your request is, rather than what you think I am doing wrong?"

Harsh Tone of Voice

Coworker: "I have to do everything around here. Nobody can get it right. If people would just listen ..."

You: "Tricia, wait. I feel tense when I hear your tone of voice. I'm wanting peace in our workplace. Please shift your tone and tell me what it is you want from me right now."

Notice in these examples how each response to the coworker includes either a feeling, need, or implied need, and then a direct request or a decision. When you are making a request, it's important to

know what you will do if the other person escalates. It is in this moment of escalation that you may be tempted to revert to the old dynamic. Escalation is neither a “yes” or “no” to your request, it simply signals an inability to engage in negotiation. Of course, you are in the position of discerning what constitutes escalation.

Here are some typical signs of escalation:

- Criticism about your request: for example, “You think everyone has to do it your way.”
- Name-calling: “Damn, what are you so uptight about?!”
- A “why” question such as, “Why do you think I’m upset about this?”
- Defending their behavior: “I can talk however I want to. You don’t have any idea ...”
- Attacking you: “Do you think you’re perfect?! You raised your voice last Friday!”
- Accusations of “power over” or arrogance: “You just think you’re a perfect communicator because you’ve taken those classes. Well I say things honestly ...”

It is highly probable that the other person will escalate in response to your request or boundary. If a particular reactive dynamic is expected in which you previously tried to calm them down or harmonize, the other person will unconsciously seek to return to that dynamic. Boundary-setting can seem to make things worse at the beginning. During this phase of change, standing in your truth is essential. The list of escalating symptoms above will hopefully cue you to return to what’s true for you, rather than being pulled into defending or engaging the content of what the other person is saying. To stand in your truth, you can simply walk away or repeat your statement and request. When the other person sees that they cannot hook you into the old dynamic, they will typically make a resentful comment and walk away themselves. Of course, they may escalate further. It’s important for you to walk away before your nervous system shifts you into freeze, fight, or flight mode. You want to teach yourself that you can walk away while still being grounded in your truth, rather than walking away out of fear.

As you stay self-connected in the face of a challenging relationship, you break with the legacy of your family in which feuding or stonewalling was the solution to conflict. You stand in the possibility that you can stay connected in your heart while communicating what’s true for you, and knowing that even though you invite the other person into connection, you can never control how they will respond or what they will do.

Practice

Take a moment right now to reflect on an example in which you weren’t hooked into a familiar reactive dynamic, but rather stayed with your needs and requests. What did it feel like to do that? What did you remember or believe in that moment? What forms of external support were present?