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The Look & Sound of Leadership
PODCAST

Hosted by Tom Henschel

How to Set Boundaries

Kindness is killing a leader's ability to set and hold effective boundaries. She works with her coach to find her voice and along the way discovers an empowering image about boundaries.

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"Why can't I speak up?"

Mandalit felt like a victim of her own success. The leaders at her company moved her wherever a team was under-performing. She'd become known as someone willing to do whatever was asked of her – a loyal team player, good at her work and uncomplaining.

I experienced Mandalit as smart, action-oriented and extremely kind. Sometimes her kindness became a liability. Often she avoided advocating for her team or herself. Now, several months into our coaching, she wanted help with speaking up.

She said, "I'm not certain but I have the feeling the leadership team is going to ask me to move again."

"Wow," I said. "They have a lot of faith in you."

She nodded and gave a tired smile. "They do. But this time, I don't want to go. I want to stay with this team. I've really fallen in love with them. And the work is great. I'm not ready to leave."

I asked, "What do you think they'd say if you told them that?"

"That's the problem. I'm not sure I have the guts to tell them. I think what's going to happen is that they'll ask me to move, and I'll be a good girl and say, 'Sure, anything you want.' I'll move and hate myself afterward."

I said nothing. I was interested to see where her thoughts would lead her.

She was silent a long time, then looked at me and asked, "Why can't I speak up?"

I replied, "That's the question I was going to ask you, Mandalit. Why can't you speak up?"

Frozen with fear of upset

She said, "I guess I'm worried about upsetting them. I don't want them to think I'm ungrateful or not appreciative for everything they've done for me."

"So," I reflected, "if you tell them you don't want to move you'll upset them."

"I could! They're used to me jumping whenever they say jump."

"Okay. You might upset them. That's one reason you might not tell them what you really want. What else?"

"I don't want to be selfish," she said.

She said, "I don't want to be selfish. They wouldn't ask if there wasn't a need."

"Got it. So if you told them what you want, it would be selfish and upset them. What else?"

"Those are the two biggies. At least for now!" She rolled her eyes sadly.

"Alright. That's helpful. And not unusual, Mandalit. A lot of people struggle with this."

"They do?" she asked.

"They do," I assured her. "When I talk about this with people, there's an image I share. Can I tell you?"

"Sure," she said.

The circle game

"The image I have begins with circles. Every person on the planet is standing inside their own circle. The circle goes with them everywhere they go. The circle represents all the things a person is responsible for.

"Suppose I'm in my first job out of college. I'm living with roommates. I'm single. I have

money to spend. I don't have a whole lot I'm responsible for, so my circle's going to be pretty small.

"But suppose I'm a single dad with a job. My circle just got a lot bigger. Same if I'm taking care of a sick parent. Or I'm in charge of a project at work. My circle can get bigger and bigger.

"In order to protect the responsibilities inside my circle, I have to make sure my circle is big enough to fit them all. I need to be sure my circle has space. But everybody else's circle needs space, too. So it's not surprising that sometimes my circle bumps up against other people's circles.

"Suppose I'm that young guy just out of college, and I want to party all night. My circle might butt up against some of my roommates' circles. Or if I'm the dad who needs to pick up my kid every day before five. My circle might butt up against my company's circle."

She said, "Or if I want to read quietly but my husband has the TV up loud."

Boundaries are self-care

"Perfect. Yes. Your circles butt against each other. And that's not bad, that's life. It's healthy. And it brings us to the next part of the image: boundaries. Circles have edges. Where the edge of your circle touches the edge of someone else's circle, that's a boundary. Boundaries are critical. You cannot be a healthy human being without boundaries. If you don't have boundaries, your circle shrinks and shrinks to the size of a pin. It's not a healthy way to live. Every person on the planet deserves a circle that they can stand in comfortably. That requires boundaries. When people set a boundary, they protect what's inside their circle. Boundaries are self-care."

Boundaries are self-care

"But usually at someone else's expense," she said.

"You think?" I asked.

"I do," she said. "And I don't want to fight with them about my boundaries."

"Fight about what, Mandalit? With whom?"

"If they ask me to move and I say I no. They don't want to hear 'no' from me. I think they'll be angry with me."

I nodded. "True. They might. They might have any number of feelings about you saying no. But their feelings – whatever they are – are not in your circle. Their feelings live in *their* circle.

They're responsible for them, not you. You're responsible for *your* feelings."

"Oh, I so don't agree," she said. "Look, I know when I've upset people. They've told me I have. How can I not take responsibility for upsetting them?"

I nodded and said, "I completely understand, Mandalit. People say all the time say, 'Oh, she made me so upset.' Or, 'He is so intimidating.' I don't think those statements are accurate. To me, those statements are thinking errors. They're errors because no one has the power to 'make' you anything. I can't 'make' you angry. I can't 'make' you like me. I can't 'make' you quack like a duck. I can try, but I'm responsible for my actions and you're responsible for yours. I can't 'make' you do anything."

"But wait, Tom, think about it. If I'm trying to provoke you and you get provoked, how am I not responsible?"

"I understand the question. I really do! But here's what I've observed in my life. Let's suppose you and I are co-workers. I know how to push your buttons and you know how to push mine. Sometimes you do something and I'll get provoked. But not every time. Sometimes I barely notice. You might even be *trying* to provoke me, but my reaction might be anything at all. Are you responsible for my reaction no matter what it is? If I laugh it off? If I'm upset? Are you responsible? I don't think so. You're responsible for *your* feelings and actions, but not mine."

You're responsible for your feelings, not mine.

"Maybe," she said, "but that doesn't help me much if I tell them no and they suddenly lose trust in me."

"Mandalit, if you believe they might lose trust in you, that's something we should talk about at some point. But now, I'd like to stay focused on the first half of your sentence – the half you have some control over – whether or not you tell them no. What do you think? Can you imagine yourself telling them you don't want to move?"

"You know what I imagine?" she asked. "Guilt. A whole big pile of it. Ugh!"

Frozen with fear of being selfish

"You'd feel guilty because why?" I asked. "Because you set a boundary?"

"Because I'm being selfish," she answered. "This is all about me shoving people off my circle. 'Get off my circle, please! That space is mine!' It feels like the height of selfishness."

I nodded again and smiled. "I've been there, Mandalit. I know exactly what you mean. I didn't want to appear selfish either, and do you know what? When I had any boundaries at all, they leaked like sieves. I didn't want to upset people. I wanted to be liked. I didn't mind putting my own needs second. But you know what I learned? I learned that my needs count, too. Just like everyone else's. If I don't take care of my needs, who will?"

"I know this isn't what you mean, but isn't that the very definition of selfish?" she asked.

"Oh, I hope not, Mandalit. I'm not putting my needs before anyone else's. Or that's not my intention. But I am being intentional about what gets to stay inside my circle. And that means I have to decide where I set my boundaries and how to hold them."

She jerked a hand to her heart. "That makes me cringe just thinking about it."

"That anxiety is *good*. Move towards it."

"Cringe why?" I asked.

"I'd have to ask for what I want. Maybe it's turning down the TV. Maybe it's not moving from this team. Telling people stuff like that makes me anxious."

"Of course, Mandalit. How could it not? But I'd like to suggest that the anxiousness you're feeling is actually a good anxiety. It's an anxiety to move towards, not away from. The anxiety is telling you that you're on your growth edge. It's telling you, 'Hey, you're doing something new. Pay attention.'"

She fingered the chain on her neck. Finally, she looked at me and asked, "How would I get better at this? Do you have homework or something?"

"You've actually started the homework, Mandalit. The homework is to teach yourself to look for boundaries. Begin to notice what has been invisible. And if you can spot one, recognize it as an opportunity for self-care."

"That's helpful. Okay, I'll try. But then there's something else."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Suppose I set my boundary. I say, no, I don't want to move. Or I'd like you to turn the TV down. Suppose I get that out of my mouth, I'm guessing that's not the end of the conversation. What happens next?"

"Ah," I said, "step two! You and I have been talking about step one – setting a boundary. What happens after that is step two – holding a boundary."

"I think I have to learn that," she said.

My conversation with Mandalit about holding boundaries is next month's episode of *The Look & Sound of Leadership.*

Core Concepts

- When upset, ask yourself if your worry is something you can control

- Assess responsibility: What is yours, really? And what is someone else's?

- Setting boundaries is self-care. It's appropriate.

- When you set a boundary, your intention is not to upset others – although they may be upset. And if they are, that is not your responsibility. Their upset is outside your boundary.

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