

How to Set Boundaries With Dominant Bosses: Case Study

The Power Moves | 1 July, 2018 | by Lucio Buffalmano

Setting boundaries can be difficult.

But it's much more difficult when you are dealing with individuals who are more dominant and who have more authority.

This article deals with that worst case scenario: setting up boundaries with a boss, who also happens to be a dominant bully.

As our case study we will be using Trump and Comey.

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Boundaries With Bosses

Setting up boundaries with your boss is difficult.

And that's why it's paramount you learn how to push back against any bullying.

Donald Trump VS James Comey is a great example of how to set boundaries with powerful people. Trump was annoyed by the FBI continued investigation over the Russian interference in the US presidential election.

And according to Comey's autobiographical book [A Higher Loyalty](#), Trump was pressuring him to drop the investigation and to confirm his allegiance to him.

Not an easy position, but a rather common one.

Theoretically the FBI is independent of the president, but most power struggles are independent of what the law and regulation dictate.

Furthermore, the president can appoint and fire the FBI director, which makes that independence even more theoretical.

When Bosses Encroach Our Boundaries

Comey's position is nothing unique.

The whole world over, many people find themselves in the exact same situation.

Here are just a couple of examples from the workplace:

Credit Manager Pressured For Returns

Imagine you are a credit risk manager who theoretically should only make sure your company's portfolio is safe and sound.

You are the one responsible for financial viability of the outstanding loans and you are the one who underwrites the credit lines.

But maybe you have a pushy boss who needs to show end of the quarter growth. And he's pressuring you to approve far bigger credit lines you'd be comfortable with.

Same situation as Comey VS Trump: your allegiance is theoretically to the company's financial only, but your boss can still pressure you with final authority on your job and with "soft power".

Consultant Pressured To Work Against Client's Best Interest

Or you might be a consultant, working alongside your customer.

Supposedly you should have the best interests of your client in mind.

That's what the internal regulations of your own company say as well.

But then your boss starts putting the screws on you and on your team to recommend to your customers a provider he is friend with.

You don't particularly like that provider, but your boss is making it clear he "would really appreciate it" if you could all recommend it and "they are good anyway".

Again, same situation where, out of personal ethics and values, you need to enforce your boundaries while also avoiding a full escalation.

Let's see how Comey did it in a famous recorded video.

Case Study in Setting Boundaries

We know from his autobiography that Comey was hoping not to be called or singled out by Trump on his inauguration with the highest brass of law enforcement.

And I personally believe him. It fits well with the whole story and with what eventually happened. And he was also standing very far away, which a clear sign he wanted to stay distant.

But of course, Trump knew he had a riotous, difficult man on his team. He either wanted to send a signal of his power, or he wanted to offer another olive branch.

The way he spoke and moved, I believe it was a power display more than olive branch.

1. Trump Power Move: Testing Boundaries

Trump calls Comey over to him.

Comey is on the opposite side of the room and has to walk all the way to greet him.

It's as strong a sign of power as one can have.

Trump even open his arms, resembling Jesus welcoming the disciples.

As Comey walks over, Trump makes the joke:

| You're more famous than me

This is a typical power compliment.

As he pretends to build him up, he implies he might not like that. And of course, by saying that, he sets himself up as the yardstick to which everyone else must measure against.

2. Comey Power Move: Show Disagreement

Comey starts his walk with a slight bow of his head, which is a strong deferential sign.

But as soon as he Trump makes his power joke, he slightly shakes his head.

Awesome, awesome move:

Shaking his head Comey shows, in a subtle way, that he disapprove of that joke.

And since flunkies don't disapprove, he is showing that he is willing to keep a critical stance of the president.

That's a subtle, yet very strong public display that he is confident of his own means and that he can defend his agency.

How insubordination works

Small acts of insubordination are great to send the message that you are were willing -and possibly able- to defend your boundaries.

A slight critical remark, not laughing at your boss jokes... These are all great way to subtly and semi-publicly reaffirm your independence.

Notice that small acts of insubordination while you are still overall complying are [examples of passive aggression](#).

But that's OK: [passive aggression is terrible in close relationships](#). But in the workplace and when you need to stand up for yourself, everything goes.

Small acts of insubordination reaffirm that you:

- are not afraid
- keep your independence
- are a strong character yourself
- you're not be trifled with

3. Reaffirming Own Boundaries: Body Language

As they shake hands Trump puts a hand on his back. It seems he might have been trying to make it more friendly than it ended being.

Comey indeed shows all the signs that he wants to keep the distance instead. He:

1. Extends his arm while still far away
2. Doesn't use his other arm to pat Trump
3. Keeps his eye contact brief and moves to the next person
4. Says "thank you", but no more
5. Tight-lipped smile: only a facade smile
6. Says hi to the vice president as well, another sign this is not personal
7. Goes quickly back

Everything Comey does scream “this is strictly business, we are not friends”.

Notice that physical distance is also a sign of emotional distance and, possibly, of dislike.

If Comey had been too friendly and gotten too close, he would have sent the message, to Trump and to everyone else, that he was submitting and that Trump was going to have influence over him.

This way, with physical distance and “cold professionalism”, he shows that he is adamant to keep his independence -and, by extension, FBI’s independence-.

4. Showing Your Independence

Finally, Comey is very quick with his salutation and goes back to where he was coming from.

Another sign that yes, he will go to say hi because he’s the president and he has to.

But that’s it about his involvement with Trump.

Quickly going back to his position is another strong signal that he doesn’t want to be too close to Trump and that he will hold to his position.

Example of NOT setting boundaries

Just look at the huge difference between how Comey behaved and how this other man behaved on that same day, just a few seconds earlier:

Isn’t it obvious that Trump can easily influence that first man, but not so easily influence Comey?

Don’t you have that same feeling?

Yep, guessed so.

How to Set Boundaries

To set your boundaries with meddling and powerful people, you also need to show some distance and to display your independence at every opportunity you get.

Since more powerful people can fire you, harm your or otherwise cause troubles, you want to keep your displays of independence under wrap.

Overall, you say hi, you respect their authority and their position and you comply with everything you’re supposed to comply with.

But at the same time you need to show that you are not for sale, that you won’t bend down and that, yes, they better fly straight too because you’re not that harmless after all.

If they try to get too close like Trump did, operate similarly to how Comey did:

1. Show respect for his position, but:
2. Keep your relationship strictly professional
3. Avoid looking like friends in public (company parties, lunches together etc.)
4. Keep distance, physical as well

What Will Happen When You Hold Boundaries

If you enforce your boundaries effectively and it’s clear you will hold to your autonomy, two things can

happen:

1. They will try to get rid of you (/fire you)
2. They relent, then leave you alone, then secretly respect and admire you

Whichever the case, you will earn the respect of everyone. Not least, you will earn the respect with that one person that matters the most: yourself.

Whether you end up with option one or two, depends on a host of things. Not least your [social skills](#), the number of allies on your side and how strong your position is.

SUMMARY

Having to set your boundaries and defend your autonomy from a powerful individual can be annoying. It means that someone is trying to push you around and force you into a power struggle.

As much as it's tiresome, you will learn how to assert yourself and you can take pride in doing what's right. And you will [grow your self esteem](#) in the process.

This article gave you an example of setting boundaries and a few guidelines you can follow.

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