

Your Personal Policies And Procedures

By Ramona Creel

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Imagine a store that doesn't bother putting together any policies or procedures. No one has ever decided what their business hours will be, so the customers don't know when the shop will be open -- it could be 10-2 one day and 6-6 another day. No one has decided what the store will sell, so customers don't know if they will get flowers or salami when they walk in the front door. And the owner has never bothered to set a policy about the type of payment the store accepts, so a customer who paid with a credit card on Monday might be told "cash only" on Tuesday. People have to guess how this shop is going to function from day to day, and no one ever knows what to expect or how to behave. I would have to imagine that both the shop employees and the customers are going to get pretty frustrated and irritated at the situation.

It's the same way with your personal life -- if you don't tell people how you operate, they won't know how to interact with you in a way that you both find mutually satisfying. Too often, we expect other people to read our minds, to automatically know how we need them to act toward us during every minute of the day. And when they behave differently than what we had hoped, we get angry -- when what we really should do is communicate our needs a little better. Unfortunately, we don't always exactly know what we need -- we just know what we don't like, don't want, and are fed up with. But that's a great start!

WHAT ARE YOU TIRED OF TOLERATING?

Think about all of the times in your life when you have interacted with another person and felt invaded, violated, or disrespected by the experience. Maybe you thought that person took advantage of you. Or perhaps you felt as though you didn't stand up for yourself like you should have. Those incidents felt uncomfortable and frustrating because you allowed the other person to cross a very important line with you. Each of us has developed a set of unconscious rules about how we want to be treated -- how we want our time, space, belongings, and personal qualities to be respected by others.

The problem is that on a conscious level, we are unwilling to assert these demands. And this happens for many reasons -- we don't want to cause an imposition for someone else, we've convinced ourselves that we are wrong, we've fallen into a habit of disregarding our feelings, or we think that this is just how life is supposed to work. So we continue to tolerate unacceptable behavior -- usually because it just seems like too much work to try and change things. Take a few minutes to make a list of all the things that you are tired of tolerating. The following are some examples from my clients' lists. Do any of these sound familiar?

- I'm tired of my boss throwing an "urgent" project on my desk at 5 PM on a Friday afternoon.
- I'm tired of feeling like I'll lose my clients if I'm not at their beck and call 24 hours a day.
- I'm tired of never seeing my kids because I have to work all weekend.
- I'm tired of my co-workers interrupting me while I'm trying to get some work done.
- I'm tired of staying at the office late every night while everyone else goes home on time.

IT ALL STARTS WITH YOU

If you will look closely at each of these complaints, they all have to do with the way that one person allows another person to treat him or her. Notice that I didn't say "it has to do with how other people treat you." It is your responsibility to let people know exactly what you expect from them -- what is acceptable behavior and what is not. When someone crosses a line the first time, it's their fault. When it happens again, it's your fault. And while you can't change other people's behavior, you absolutely can change what you are willing to put up with!

But let me offer a word of warning before you start laying down ground rules. You have to be willing to back them up with action. If you decide that you are not going to work past 5:00 anymore and your boss insists that you stay late, are you willing to stand up to your boss and be true to your convictions? And if the fact that your boss continually insists that you work late becomes a real problem for you, are you willing to look for another job? If your family members don't put their clothes in the laundry basket before wash day like you agreed upon, are you willing to let everyone walk around in dirty underwear? How committed are you to your own needs and desires? This is not an exercise for the faint-hearted!

LAYING DOWN THE GROUND RULES

Once you decide that you are really ready to dig in, the first step is to think about the kinds of rules you would need to set up in your life to keep each of those "tolerations" from ever happening again. Go ahead and write them down -- they will seem more concrete and easier to implement if they are on paper. For example, if you are tired of having to put your own plans aside at the last minute because someone in your office failed to tell you about a deadline, you might decide to lay down the following rules: We will have a office planning meeting once a week on Monday morning.

- During that meeting, each individual will discuss any upcoming projects or deadlines they have for the week.
- We will write each project on a centralized calendar.
- If you need supplies, assistance from a co-worker, something bought, or anything else for an activity, bring it up at the meeting.
- If you don't mention it at the meeting and then need something at the last minute, it is your responsibility.

This might sound harsh and rigid and fascist, but if you look at the CHAOTIC way that some people operate, a little fascism might be in order! You don't have to be incredibly hard-nosed with your rules, but it's important for people to know what you are willing to do and what you are not willing to do -- up front. That way, when Jim in the next cubicle runs in at five minutes to 5:00 with something that he has known about for a week but never gave to you, you can explain to him why you will

tackle it the next morning. And the next time, he'll learn to plan ahead a little better. You are actually helping the people around you to learn valuable time management skills -- while you create a little more sanity in your own life.

MY OWN STORY

When I first started my organizing business, I most assuredly did not practice what I preached! I felt like I had to give every spare minute of my time to my clients, or I wouldn't be successful. So I worked weekends and evenings and I would schedule clients at whatever time (and for whatever length of time) worked best for them. I had no time to get any of my administrative work done or to attend other business functions, and I gave up any semblance of a personal life. I essentially allowed my clients to dictate my schedule -- to run my life. I finally decided that if I wanted to have a healthy life, and a healthy business, I needed to set some policies and procedures -- some boundaries -- around how I used my time.

So I thought about what I wanted and what I didn't want. I didn't want to work more than 8 hours a day -- including travel time to and from clients. So I decided that I would see divide my day into 2 three-hour blocks -- a three-hour organizing session in the morning and another in the afternoon. This would leave me plenty of time for lunch, travel time, and I would get home no later than 5:30 each day. I would no longer schedule appointments for evenings and weekends -- but I lined up a number of other organizers who could take those clients that I wasn't able to service (for a small referral fee, of course!) I would be happy to run extra errands for clients -- shop for supplies, take their donations to a local shelter, etc. -- but I increased my hourly rate to cover the time I would spend. And I would leave one day free per week for administrative work.

I put sticky notes in my calendar to remind me of the rules I set for myself. I blocked off my admin days in my calendar, and I even highlighted the times of day that I had committed for client sessions (so that I wouldn't accidentally schedule someone at the wrong time). I stopped asking clients, "When do you want to get together?" and started saying, "I'm free Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings -- which of those works for you?" I regained control over my schedule. And I'll be honest, it was hard making these changes -- not for my clients, but for me. My clients were happy to work within whatever framework I offered them, and I never got one complaint about these new policies. In fact, people respected my choice to have a life again, and asked me to help them do the same thing. And over time, these "policies" have become second-nature to me -- I don't even have to think about them. And all it took is making up my mind that I didn't want to live that way anymore. Imagine that! I can do it, you can too!"

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