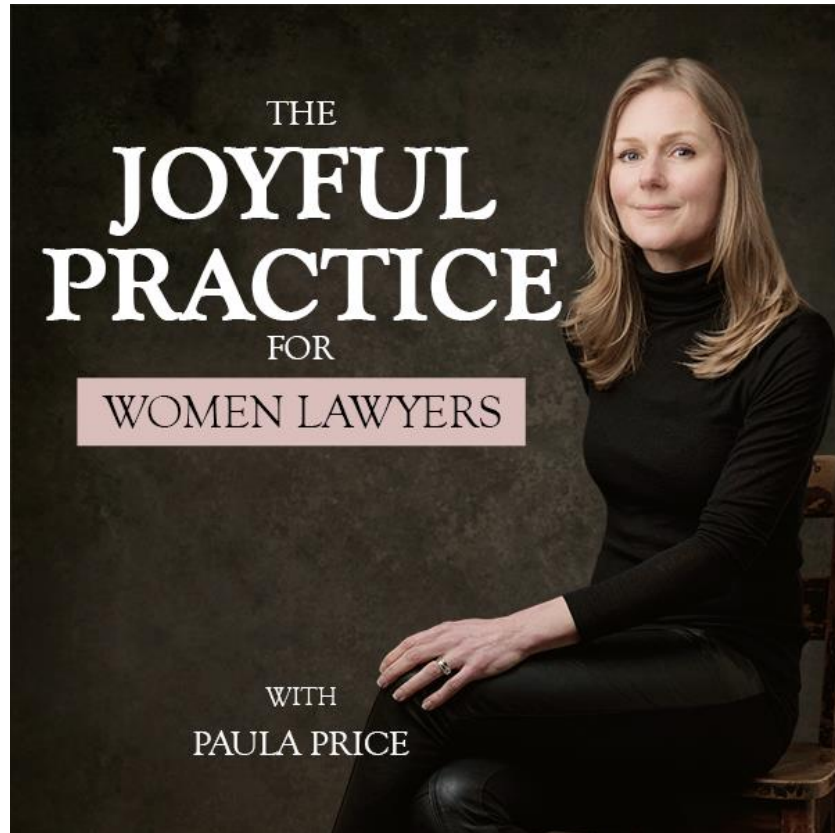


Ep #37: How to Set Boundaries with Ease



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Paula Price

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You're listening to *The Joyful Practice for Women Lawyers* Podcast episode number 37.

Welcome to *The Joyful Practice for Women Lawyers* Podcast. I'm your host Paula Price, lawyer turned certified executive coach. This podcast was created to empower women lawyers just like you to create a life and practice you love. Join me every week for a break from the hustle so we can focus on you, what you truly want, and how you can create it.

If you're over the overwhelm, done with putting out fires, and ready to create a life and practice that brings you more joy, you're in the right place. Ready for today's episode? Let's dive in.

Hello my friends. Welcome back to the podcast. Today we are talking about boundaries. Particularly how to follow through on setting boundaries. Before we jump into the episode, I just want to say with love that lawyers are not always very good at setting boundaries. Now it's not that you don't know that boundaries are healthy. It's not that you don't know what words you can utter to set those boundaries. It's that's in the moment when it comes time to setting the boundaries, there's something that holds you back.

I know that this happens because it has happened to me when I was practicing law. It still happens to me. It happens to clients. Some clients come to me and they're practice is very difficult to keep up with. They find that they are overcommitted, over extended. They are stressed and not doing their best work. Often one of the problems in their practice is that they are not asserting boundaries.

So in today's episode we're going to talk about boundaries, what they look like, what happens when you don't have them. What I really want you to pay attention to is when we get to the part of why you would want to set

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boundaries in your practice because I think those are the reasons that will compel you to set boundaries when the time comes.

If you are a long time listener, if you've been following my podcast you'll know that I did an episode right near the beginning. I believe it's episode number six. It's all about a goal setting framework. I call it the GREAT! goal framework. GREAT! is an acronym for different components of a goal. G stands for goal. R stands for the reason for the goal. The reason for the goal is super compelling, and it is what will drive you forward to take action towards a goal even when you don't feel like it.

So that's why today we're really going to focus on the reasons why you ought to be setting boundaries. Because what I'm really trying to do is help you across that threshold of going from wanting to set that boundary to actually setting the boundary even though it may be challenging in the moment.

What does it look like when you don't have boundaries in place in your practice? Well, it can show up in any number of ways. It can be a difficulty saying no to work. So law is a service based practice. Lawyers want to help people. So your instinct may be to say yes to everything. That can result in a very onerous workload and not always doing your best work because you neither have the time nor the energy left to do it.

It may be the way that you allow others to speak to you. You may have a boss or a colleague or a client who you find speaks to you disrespectfully. You haven't had it in you yet to say something about that.

It may be that you have trouble asserting yourself around money. So that may show up in wanting to renegotiate your salary but not having done that yet. It may be that you want to charge higher rates, but you haven't made that move. It may also be that you find yourself writing down your own time. So if you're a lawyer that records time at the end of the day, you may find

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that you're shaving off a .1, a .2, a .5, whatever that looks like because you feel like you can't justify your fees.

It may also be that you take on work outside of your strike zone. Maybe you're trying to move your practice in one direction. You keep getting files in this other direction and you just don't have the heart to say no to it. It may also be that you're taking on a disproportionate share on nonbillable work or admin work or committee work or things that aren't necessarily recognized and things that you don't necessarily value, but you feel like you should be doing them.

Now it's totally natural to not want to assert boundaries. For lawyers, there are a number of reasons, I think, that make it difficult sometimes to assert boundaries. Number one, it is a serve based profession where you are there to help people. So your instinct is to help people. The last thing you want to do is turn people away when you feel like you can help them whether it's a client, whether it's a colleague.

You may also fear repercussion. If there's a client or a lawyer that you work with who is a reliable source of work for you, you may feel that by saying no you are going to damage that relationship and that they will no longer ask you to work with them. It may be that you don't want that other person to feel badly or disappointed or be left holding the bag. If it's a colleague, for example, you may not want them to have to carry on alone without you. It may be that you don't want to come across as not being a team player in your organizations.

There's lots of reasons why you may not be asserting boundaries. What you might be trying to do to cope then it to simply avoid setting boundaries and take on all the work that you can. But that can often lead to overwhelm, overwork. You don't do your best quality work. Maybe you end up with unfinished projects. Maybe you rush through tasks because you don't have enough time to get through all of them. You may find even that people start

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to make comments about the quality or caliber of the work that you're doing.

It maybe that to cope you simply overextend yourself and then find yourself in a position where you're complaining about it and resenting people for having brought you into different files or projects, whatever it might look like. Maybe you suffer in silence until the workload results in a crisis. You miss something important and then it escalates.

So there's lots of things that can happen when you're not asserting your boundaries. Generally it simply doesn't work. Not having boundaries means you're not learning the skill of asserting boundaries. It may lead other people to have this sense of it being okay with you, but when in truth you're actually quite resentful. It may be that you don't then develop the confidence that you would need to develop to assert those boundaries. If you're in an organization where boundaries aren't really the norm then you may be perpetuating that culture.

So what is created is that the quality of your work suffers. You probably suffer as well. You're probably a bit burnt out, anxious that you're not performing at your highest level. You may have your relationships suffer. You may find that there's tension or resentment because you're unable to communicate authentically with those around you. It may also be what we described before that crisis situation. That you let things get to a point where things are missed. That can really escalate and cause problems, especially in your practice management.

Ironically instead of helping people like you set out to do initially, you end up creating crises and problems by taking on too much. Instead of building your confidence by doing good work, you actually start to undermine it because you feel like you're not performing at a very high level. Instead of building relationships with others, you end up alienating them because you don't know if they can trust you.

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So you know instinctively, you know intellectually that boundaries are important. That by setting boundaries, you will actually set yourself up for a more successful practice. Yet it may be really difficult for you to set boundaries to the point that you're not doing it.

So what I would invite you to think about as we go through the five reasons to set boundaries is why you would benefit from creating these boundaries and how you might apply this in your practice. So think about how you might apply one of these reasons in your practice. How you might assert a boundary whether it's at work or outside of work at some point this week just to give yourself a practice and a taste of what that feels like, and to allow yourself to start building that skill.

So what are the five reasons that I would encourage you to start thinking about when it comes to setting boundaries? The first reason is that you get your work done without drama. So when you start setting boundaries, you actually allow yourself to have the time that you need to do your work. You have the energy that you need to do your work.

That, of course, is a good thing. That goes back to what we were talking about before. It's practice management. It's allowing other people to rely on you for their work to get done on time. That in itself is a compelling reason. However, I think instinctively we all know that to be true, and yet it's really hard to set the boundary.

So yes it's number one on my list, but I don't know that that reason alone is going to be compelling enough to help you bridge that gap between knowing that you need to make the boundary and actually implementing it. That's number one.

Number two. Another reason that is important for you to set boundaries is that you teach other people to value you. Now if you go back to an earlier podcast episode, I talk about being your own best boss. One of the key

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messages in that podcast episode is the way that you speak to yourself is critical because it is indirectly teaching others how to treat you as well.

So if you have an internal dialogue where you're constantly berating yourself and speaking will towards yourself, what you may find is that others pick up on that at an unconscious level and they start to treat you that way as well. Conversely if the internal dialogue is one that is more supportive and encouraging and validating of yourself then what you may find is that others pick up on that a well.

So here the reason to set boundaries, number one, is that you're teaching other people to value you. When you start setting those boundaries, they see that you have the confidence to set limits. That, on one level, compels them to value you more. In a second way, this also increases the value that you're able to contribute.

Because when you start setting boundaries around the things that you do not want to do, that do not align with your growth, that do not align with your practice, that frees you up to take on projects that matter to you more. Projects where you may be developing skills that are ultimately more valuable and will contribute more value to your practice and to your client. So these are ways in which you become more valuable.

What I'd invite you to consider here is an image or an analogy to a 7-Eleven versus a fine dining restaurant. If you think of the 7-Eleven, it's open 24/7. It's accessible to everybody anytime. Regardless of what problem you have, what thing you might be looking for, you can probably find some version of it at the 7-Eleven, but it's 7-Eleven, right? It's got the fluorescent lights. It's not all that exciting.

Versus a fine dining experience where chances are the restaurant is only open two hours during the evening and it's closed on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. The menu itself is very specific. It's only the finest quality.

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The individuals that go there are very particular. They know exactly what they want. The staff is very knowledgeable. You can draw the contrast.

What I would invite you to think about is how you can pull yourself in the direction of the fine dining experience versus the 7-Eleven. This, of course, is a choice for you. You may be interested in providing services in a way that are more accessible, and maybe you want some of that to be part of your practice. I would encourage you to think about how it is that you are distinguishing yourself and how setting boundaries will allow you to distinguish yourself even further. As a result of that, you'll be able to serve at a higher level.

So reason number three is a little bit counterintuitive. The reason for setting boundaries is that you teach other people that you value them. Now imagine that somebody comes to you and they ask you to work on a project, and you don't have time really to work on the project. You may not be interested in that project, and you take it on anyways. What ends up happening is you underperform or you don't finish the project on time. That person is then in a position where they don't have what they need.

What would have been more favorable would have been to tell that person at the beginning that you are unable to work on that project. It doesn't mean that you have to leave them high and dry. You might find ways to help them solve the problem. Maybe you find somebody else that can work on that project with them. Maybe you pair them up with somebody who you know is really interested in what they're working on.

So you don't need to leave them and strand them, but I would argue that it's actually a sign that you value them when you are honest with them. When you do not take on projects that you do not want to complete.

This also is true where you have a journal lawyer or an assistant that you are working with. You find that they are overstepping their boundaries with

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you. They keep coming to you with questions that you think that they really should be able to figure out on their own. As long as you're allowing them to do that and answering the questions for them, you're not giving them the opportunity to pull themselves up and to learn that new skill. To answer those questions that they need to learn to answer for themselves.

So by holding them accountable, you're actually showing that you respect them and that you are giving them that opportunity to learn for themselves. So even though it may seem like not having the boundary and doing what it is that that person has asked you to do is the kind thing to do, sometimes it's actually more kind. It's more helpful to assert the boundary and let that person to either find somebody to do the work who is truly committed to doing it or to figure out ways on their own to do that work for themselves.

Another example that I'd like to highlight here is just that feeling that you have when you are in a relationship, whether it's a work relationship or a personal relationship with somebody who never asserts a boundary with you. I don't know if you've had that experience. I've had that experience.

What I have found is that it can actually be really unsettling. On some levels it's nice if there are people out there who always go along with whatever it is that you're doing, but sometimes it just starts to feel a bit unnatural. It feels a bit strange. You don't really know whether or not you are imposing on them because they're not telling you.

So when you actually tell somebody, when you assert a boundary with them, when you let them know what the limits are, it's a lot easier for them to know where they stand. I've experienced this as a parent. Sometimes I have to set boundaries with my children. I often find that they seemed relieved. Even it's a boundary that they don't particularly like, it's almost a relief for them because then they see where the limits are. They know how far they can tread before they are doing something that is going over a boundary for me.

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So in that way as well, it shows other people that you value them enough to trust them with knowing where your boundaries are so that they in turn know how to relate to you.

Now the fourth reason that I think it's compelling to set boundaries is that you teach you to value you. So it can be really uncomfortable to assert a boundary for yourself. I think at the example of writing your time down at the end of the day and debating internally, "Do I bill for that time that I spent or do I write down that time? Because really should I be billing for that? Was it really time well spent?"

There will be legitimate times where you do want to write down your time where you did spend more time than really was suitable in the circumstances. If it's happening to you on a regular basis, then you might start to ask yourself what is going on there. If this is really you not asserting a boundary or asserting yourself.

When you go to set boundaries, it can feel really uncomfortable. If you continue to assert yourself, if you continue to express your boundaries and see how that plays out in the real world, you may have people who express unhappiness if they're used to you not asserting a boundary and all of a sudden you have asserted one. They may not love that. It may interfere with how they thought things were going to go.

The process of you asserting that boundary, dealing with any consequences that arise from that boundary, moving forward, having your own back, developing that sense of trust and accountability with yourself. All of that overtime leads to greater confidence and greater ease when it comes to asserting boundaries. So in this case I think it's really important for all of us to learn how to set those boundaries so that we can really learn to value ourselves.

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What I would invite you to think about is some of the lawyers that you either work with currently or that you've worked with in the past. Think about the ones who you know really value themselves, who are really good at asserting their boundaries.

Then think about the lawyers who were not as good at setting boundaries. I can think of a few who I have worked with over the course of my experience practicing law. Those lawyers who were better able to articulate boundaries tended to have practices that were a little bit more balanced. They tended not to get themselves into those situations quite as often where they were scrambling towards deadlines. They tend to be a little bit more relaxed. They seemed to come across as having more confidence in themselves. Whether or not they did have more confidence, I guess that's subjective.

Versus lawyers who did not have boundaries where the practice is a bit more scambly, for example. Where they may have been more difficult to work with because the expectations were on you to not have boundaries either. So when you value you, it really makes a difference in terms of how you show up in your practice and the experience that other people have of you.

That really ties in nicely to the last reason why I think it's so important for you to assert boundaries and to follow through on those boundaries. This reason, I think, is potentially the most compelling because it's what brings the setting of boundaries well beyond just you and expands the impact beyond. The reason is that when you assert a boundary for yourself, you teach others to value themselves, and you show them how it's done. You show them how to assert a boundary.

Now I think that setting a boundary, giving that example can have a tremendous impact. The reason that I think that is because when I have seen boundaries set by others, it has been a real eye opening experience

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for me in a sense that it makes me feel like I have permission not to go and set boundaries of my own, and I have a role model. A road map that I can follow to set those boundaries.

A recent example comes to mind. I was on a Zoom call. There were four of us on the call, and we were each being asked to deliver our opinions on something that one of the parties had said. In one of these turns, one of the individuals, a woman on the call, delivered feedback to somebody else on the call that was really profound. It was totally honest. It was frank. I thought it took so much courage for her to say what she said.

I followed up with her after the conversation had wrapped up to complement her and to say seeing her express herself in that way was an inspiration to me to go out and do the same thing myself. You don't see it done very often. Especially not in a context like that where there's more than one person being part of that conversation.

I can also think about in my law practice where I was able to witness lawyers who asserted boundaries with clients. I remember having a discussion with a very senior lawyer that I used to work with who, at one point, he gave me permission basically to assert myself with a client who was being disrespectful. Just knowing that he had my back, that this is how that conversation could unfold was really helpful in allowing me to feel like it was okay to set a boundary and to have a roadmap.

When you set that boundary and when others see you set that boundary, they now have you as a model to turn to. They have you as someone who was implicitly giving them permission to do the same. So I would encourage you to think about that the next time you are asserting a boundary. That it's not just for you. That it's for everybody who is around you that will benefit from that boundary.

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So in summary, the compelling reasons that I think are there to help you bridge that gap between knowing that you need to assert a boundary and actually asserting that boundary, following through on it, are as follows. Number one, to get your work done on time without drama. Those are all the reasons that we talked about. Having a practice where you have the time to do what it is you need to do. The energy. You're not missing things. Your practice is running smoothly. You are operating in a way that is in alignment with what your goals are.

Number two, you teach others to value you. So, again, that's going back to the 7-Eleven example versus the fine dining example. I get it. Especially if you're in a busy legal practice, you will need to be discerning. You can't set up so many boundaries that you're not being helpful to other people. However, chances are there is room for you to start asserting more boundaries and to be more intentional about what it is that you're taking on and what it is that you're not taking on. So that is number two is to teach others to value you.

So the third is to teach others that you value them. So by being honest, by helping others find other ways to get their work done, to have their needs met. You may actually be providing a greater service to them by establishing a boundary than you would be by taking on that work and either doing it with resent or not doing it to the standard that it could be done by somebody else.

Number four, you teach you to value you. This, of course, is essential to build that self-trust to withstand the discomfort that you may need to go through if setting boundaries is something that is difficult and/or novel for you. Then finally you teach others to value themselves. So by setting boundaries, you are leading by example. You may be influencing the culture of your organization by showing others how boundaries can be set in a way that is elegant, that is calm, that is respectful and where you still

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manage to achieve the outcome whether it's be enlisting somebody else or by some other means.

Now the reason why I think these reasons will help you to start setting boundaries is that they go to the why of setting boundaries as opposed to the how. If these reasons are compelling to you, then they will motivate you to bridge that gap. There are a number of skills that you will need to apply in order to assert your boundaries.

Number one is that you will need to be brave. Asserting boundaries is not easy, especially if what you want to do is to help everybody and to make life easier for other people. You may feel like you're not going to do that. You may have to engage in difficult conversations. It may be quite different from the way that you're used to proceeding. So you'll have to really draw on your courage to go ahead and set those boundaries.

You will also need to be okay with discomfort. You may take the risk of disappointing people. You may disappoint yourself. You may say no and then you may suffer from a guilt hangover because you feel you should have said yes. You will need to learn how to be decisive about how you want to set the boundaries.

So, again, going back to that example where you think of others who have set boundaries and what that looked like. Maybe there are some role models out there who you admire. Think about what techniques they used. How they showed up in those conversations, and how you want to show up in those conversations and set boundaries for yourself. So you'll need to be decisive about how you want to set boundaries and intentional about what those conversations are going to look like.

Finally you are going to need to learn how to advocate for yourself. Now, I get it. As lawyers, you are advocating for clients all the time. However what

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you may find is that when it comes to advocating for yourself, it's a lot harder for you to do.

So here I would encourage you to recognize your value, to practice standing up for yourself. If you need a bit more help on that score, I would refer you to my earlier podcast episode about having difficult conversations. Thinking about the energy that you want to embody when you go about advocating for yourself and having those difficult conversations.

When you apply these things, the results that you will create is that you will become the brave person who shows others how to be brave. You'll excel in the work that you take on because you will have the focus, you will have the time, you will have the energy to do that work to the best of your ability. You will grow in your skillset because you'll have time to really focus on new skills where you can add more value. You'll grow in your relationships that you have will be more honest and authentic instead of you trying to please others by doing things that you don't really want to do.

You'll feel less resentful. What you'll find is that your practice and your life become increasingly aligned with what you want for yourself and for your practice.

So my friends, that is what I have to offer to you today. I would invite you to go out there this week and find just one area where you would like to assert a boundary and to push yourself to assert that boundary however that may look for you. Baby steps are steps.

As you do that, I would invite you to think about what the most compelling reasons are for you to set those boundaries. Because that is where you're going to be able to help yourself get from that point where you know that you need to start setting boundaries, but you feel paralyzed and unable to do it to that point where you start to feel more confident and setting boundaries feels more natural to the point that it becomes who you are.

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I hope that today's podcast episode has been helpful to you. I think all of you for showing up each week. It is such a delight to have this chance to connect. If you would like to reach out, please do. You can reach me on LinkedIn. You can send me an email.

If you'd like to rate and review the podcast, I would love that. When you do that, it helps other people just like you find the podcast and ultimately helps us build a community of likeminded individuals who are looking to build a practice that they love. Who are looking to create and contribute on the next level? So thank you, all of you, for joining me this week. I look forward to reconnecting with you again next week. Bye for now.

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