Understanding Professional Boundaries

For workers and supervisors

Sandy Bryson
Organisational Consultant
The definition of professional boundaries

• A sense of professional identity and self definition that has consistency and cohesion over time.

• The framework within which the worker-client relationship occurs.

• The line between the self of client and self of worker

• Prescribes a system of limits and expectations
Why are professional boundaries important in our work?

• Provides safety for both the worker and the client
• Reduces client/worker anxiety as rules and roles are clear
• Increases well-being of the worker
• Provides a therapeutic environment underpinned by mutual respect.
Consequences of poor professional boundaries

- Leads to potentially unsafe practice
- Increases client/worker stress
- Undermines the therapeutic relationship
- Can compound clients difficulties
How are professional boundaries established?

• Professional codes of conduct
• By law
• Clinical governance
• Code of ethics
Who Negotiates Boundaries?

- Duty of the worker to act in the best interest of the client

- The client may have a life experience where boundaries have been compromised and/or may not be aware of the need for boundaries, or able to defend themselves against boundary violations

- The worker is ultimately responsible for managing boundary issues
Potential contexts in which boundary violations can occur

- Touching
- Receiving money or gifts from clients
- Loss of respect within the client/worker relationship
- Having dual relationships with clients
- Client confidentiality
- Self disclosure
Factors that impact on professional boundaries

Organisational Factors:

- Roles
- Culture
- Organisational Structure
- Management and supervision
- Appropriate training
Factors that impact on professional boundaries

The Client Group:

• The capacity of the client (ability to communicate and to understand the worker/client relationship)

• Impact of transference and counter-transference, i.e. the feelings that arise in the context of the relationship, both for the client and the worker
Factors that impact on professional boundaries

Personal Factors:

• Dual relationship with the client
• Resilience/personal vulnerability
• Valency, i.e. the tendency to react in predictable ways to certain situations
Models for understanding boundary transgression: the ‘Zone of Helpfulness’
Models for understanding boundary transgression: the Drama Triangle

- Rescuer
- Persecutor
- Victim
The role of the manager and/or supervisor

Primary responsibility is to ensure that the worker or supervisee maintains appropriate professional boundaries in their work

• Understanding how boundaries become compromised
• Ability to provide emotional containment to the worker when work is emotionally demanding
• Willingness to challenge/address boundary issues
Questions to Ask in Examining Potential Boundary Issues:

• Is the worker reluctant to talk about this?
• Is this in the client’s best interest? If not, whose needs are being served?
• How would this be viewed by an onlooker?
• Does the client mean something ‘special’ to the supervisee?
• Is the worker disinterested in or avoiding the client?
• Is the worker taking advantage of the client, or being taken advantage of?
Minimizing Risk of Exploitation and Boundary Crossing: A checklist for managers

• A clear understanding of what is ethical and professional behaviour
• Awareness of organisational factors that can compromise professional boundaries
• Maintain supervision or consultation relationships (isolation is often a major factor in boundary violations)
• Be alert to potential /actual conflicts of interest
• Understand and be willing to address the emotional impact on workers when working with clients in need.