



Joe Moore

# Where is your line in the sand?

**P**art of behaving professionally is figuring out your 'line in the sand'. You need to work out what kinds of things you should let go and what kinds of issues matter. Professional behaviour is about the many daily interactions that you have with others.

The day-to-day business of getting along with people at work defines how you feel about work. Also, the way you respond to others plays a big part in defining their experiences at work.

So what do you do when those around you behave unprofessionally?

You often choose to 'let it go' because you decide that the behaviour, while irritating, is not important. You will also find that, when it comes to your unprofessional behaviour, your peers and bosses will often choose to 'let it go' for the same reasons.

However, there are times when you should not or cannot let things go – where the behaviour crosses your 'line in the sand'.

## Drawing the organisational line

That being said, it isn't always easy to know where to draw the 'line in the sand'. This line can vary from person to person and be operating on a number of different levels; for example, organisational and individual levels.

At the organisational level, 'lines in the sand' concerning workplace performance and behaviour are usually based on values, policies and procedures, with many of the

expectations concerning behaviour stemming from human rights, workplace relations and OHS laws.

Therefore, most organisations will point to their policies and procedures concerning workplace behaviour and performance expectations as their 'lines in the sand'.

But how effective are these organisational interpretations in helping people to understand and meet expectations?

According to ProActive Resolutions data, 31 per cent of employees say their organisations do not have a clear definition of what is considered a respectful workplace and 47 per cent say their organisations do not implement their beliefs concerning a respectful workplace.

These figures are based on responses from some 12,000 employees across all levels of government and the private sector in Australia, Canada, UK and US that have attended ProActive Resolutions workshops since 2002.

At the beginning of each workshop, participants are asked: Do you feel your organisation has a clear definition of what is considered a respectful workplace? Does your organisation implement these beliefs?

The clear message from our research: when it comes to being genuine about drawing organisational 'lines in the sand', as a starting point, organisations need to make sure that their employees and managers have

a clear understanding of the policies and procedures concerning respectful behaviour and performance and that employees see managers 'walk the talk'.

The Board of Directors should hold the CEO accountable for ensuring that everyone knows the organisation's 'lines in the sand'. The CEO should promote these 'lines in the sand', talk about them often and personally meet the expectations set.

As most people want to work respectfully and productively together, most will welcome CEO-led discussions regarding 'lines in the sand' because it will help ensure that those who are displaying disrespectful behaviour or underperforming are supported to change or be moved out if they continue to cross the line.

## Individuals take a stand

Although organisational policies and procedures play a vital role when it comes to determining and acting on 'lines in the sand', how individuals view 'lines in the sand' also plays a vital role.

The way in which individuals distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and performance, make sense of any ambiguity and integrate their own experiences, beliefs and values when interpreting and implementing organisational policies and procedures should be a key consideration.

Importantly, as an individual, the one thing you have control over is how you choose to deal with a given situation.

However, depending on how far you feel the 'line in the sand' has been crossed and the manner in which you chose to address it – either directly with the person/s involved or via official channels – requires careful consideration, as there could be a number of positive and negative consequences for all concerned.

In most instances, you can usually talk directly and respectfully to a

**Drawing the line in the sand isn't always easy. The line can vary from person to person and be operating on a number of different levels.**

colleague, boss or employee to deal with the issue – this would be the professional thing to do and would normally result in a positive outcome.

However, you need to be prepared for a range of responses. In some instances, the other person/s may react poorly to your direct approach, so you may need to try talking directly to them again. If this does not work, you may need to get help from your colleagues, managers or human resources department or those designated to help out; for example, some organisations have grievance officers.

Alternatively, you may feel that the “line in the sand” has been crossed to such an extent that you need to report it straight to your superiors or via your organisation’s grievance procedures.

Many organisations have formal complaint and grievance procedures. In addition, many have protected disclosure policies that are designed to shield individuals from any victimisation that may result from reporting allegations of corrupt conduct, maladministration or significant waste of public monies in government agencies.

However, you need to be confident that these policies and procedures are in place and work effectively before you rely on them. The extent to which the “line in the sand” has been crossed,

however, may be so severe that talking to the person/s involved or even your own organisation could be too risky. As a result, other reporting channels may need to be considered: police, media, union or parliament. However, reporting via these channels may also carry a number of risks that need consideration and discussion with trusted peers and advisers.

That being said, in most instances, your workplace concerns should not be so serious that they require organisational, police, union, media or parliamentary investigation.

Most day-to-day workplace concerns can be resolved between individuals. One of your organisation’s “people and culture” objectives should be: using the organisation’s official grievance channels is unnecessary. Our experience is that the majority of formal complaints and grievances could have been resolved if those concerned had talked directly to each other.

Except in cases of gross misconduct, bringing a formal complaint or grievance without first attempting to talk directly to those involved is disrespectful and unprofessional.

You need to be sure that you are seeking help and dealing with issues professionally and respectfully. Has a “line in the sand” been crossed?

The point here is simple: check the mirror; behave professionally; and think for a moment about how you can help to resolve the problem and who you need to go to for help.

Joe Moore is a Director and Conflict Management Specialist with ProActive ReSolutions Inc. Visit ProActive ReSolutions at [www.proactive-resolutions.com](http://www.proactive-resolutions.com) or follow it on twitter: @buildingrespect

**I only wanted to catch the lift...  
not a virus**



For more information please contact:

**Deb Australia**  
on 1800 090 330

**Deb NZ**  
on 0800 332 695  
[sales@deb.com.au](mailto:sales@deb.com.au)



**Your health is in your hands**

**Don't forget to use  
Deb InstantFOAM™  
hand sanitiser**

