Calling in and boundary setting: Alternatives to avoiding and calling out harmful behaviour

Have you ever wondered how you can respond when someone does something harmful? Has ignoring their behaviour or calling them out made things worse? This resource provides overviews of calling in and boundary setting, two strategies we can use to respectfully and assertively address our concerns with others.

Calling in

Calling in is essentially calling out, but done with care. It allows us to share our concerns in a non-confrontational way. In doing so, we do our best to avoid escalating the conflict and damaging our relationship with the other person.[1] The easiest way to further develop an understanding of calling in is to differentiate it from calling out.

Calling out

Description	Examples
• Righteous and accusatory • Assumes boundary crossings were intentional • Frequently done in public • Usually results in hurt feelings and defensiveness	• I can't believe you just used the R word to refer to something as "stupid." You're ableist! • What you said was messed up. What were you thinking?!

Calling in

Description	Examples
• Educational and conversational • Recognizes boundary crossings could be accidental • Done in private whenever possible • More likely to result in education around the issue and correct behaviour	• I noticed you used the R word to refer to something as "stupid." Did you know that could be hurtful to folks with disabilities? • I know you value our relationship, so when you made that comment, I wonder if you know the impact it had on me.

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[1] Ross, Loretta, J. "Speaking Up Without Tearing Down," Learning For Justice, no. 61 (Spring 2019), https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2019/speaking-up-without-tearing-down.

At the Student Conduct Office, we encourage folks to call in rather than call out whenever possible. That said, there are some situations where it might be more appropriate to call out. For instance, if the situation is urgent and could result in a significant amount of harm, like a physical altercation, calling out would likely be a better fit. You also need to consider your capacity and self-care, and recognize it's not always your responsibility to educate. If you decide to call out, please ensure the harm you create is not greater than the harm you are responding to.

Boundary Setting

Another great alternative to ignoring problematic behaviour or calling someone out is to set a boundary. Boundaries are statements we can make, which communicate our needs and expectations. When we set boundaries, we tell other people how they can treat us – what behaviour is ok with us and what isn't.

Boundaries should be clear, firm and kind. Some folks may be hesitant to be assertive in conflicts because they don't want to come across as rude or confrontational. Therefore, it's especially important to note we can be polite while boundary setting.[2] We can set boundaries in any situation, ranging from responding to an offensive joke to ensuring our time is respected.

Type of boundary	Example
Budget boundary	• My coffee budget is spent for the month, but I would like to spend time with you. Can we go for a walk instead?
Intimacy boundary	• I don't kiss on a first date, but I'm having a nice time with you and would like to see you again.
Offensive communication boundary	• Please don't make jokes about marginalized groups around me.
Social media boundary	• I like keeping my Instagram separate from work, so I don't add colleagues on it.
Time/attention boundary	• Unfortunately, I can't discuss the group project right now because I'm working on an assignment that's due at 4:00 pm. Please let me know your availability after 4:00 pm and I will call you back.

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[2] Sharon Martin, "How To Set Boundaries With Kindness," PsychCentral (blog), 2019, https://psychcentral.com/blog/imperfect/2019/01/how-to-set-boundaries-with-kindness#What-are-boundaries.

If you would like more guidance on boundary setting, there is a popular framework known as the WIN Model, which you can use.[3]

WIN Model	WIN Model Example
• When you _____. • I feel_ _____. • I need _____. • (Otherwise, _____).[4]	• When you write in all caps, I feel uncomfortable. I need you to stop writing in all caps when messaging me. (Otherwise, I will stop reading and responding to your texts).

What can we do when folks have problematic reactions to calling in and boundary setting?

Unfortunately, calling in and boundary setting aren't magic wands. While some folks might have positive responses to these practices, others may have problematic and even adverse reactions. If someone has a problematic response, it can be helpful to think about what our next step will be or how we will enforce our boundary. Depending on the situation, our next step could involve limit setting or disengagement.

Limit setting

Limit setting is a specific type of boundary, which allows us to communicate and enforce the type of behaviour we're willing to put up with.[5] For example, we might say, "I'm willing to speak with you about this, but I can't do that while you're making condescending comments about me."

Disengagement

Disengagement allows us to get out of an unhealthy situation and cool off. It also prevents the other party from saying or doing something they may regret. If we don't have a relationship with the other person, there might not be a need to communicate our disengagement. But if we have a relationship with them, it can be helpful to let them know we're exiting the conversation.[6] For instance, we might say, "this conversation is getting heated and I need a break."

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[3] Recovery College, "Building Better Boundaries" (online workshop, July 8-29, 2021): https://recoverycollegecalgary.ca/course/building-better-boundaries/?filter=online
[4] The "otherwise" portion of the WIN model is optional.
[5] Joan Balmer. *Dealing with Anger*, Ninth Edition. New Westminister: Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2010, pp. 82-83.
[6] Joan Balmer. *Dealing with Anger*, Ninth Edition. New Westminister: Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2010, pp. 83-84.

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