



Boundaries as Christ-Centered Leadership Practice for Human Flourishing

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Abstract

This article examined the critical role of boundaries as a Christ-centered leadership practice for human flourishing and the severe consequences of failing to maintain boundaries. Drawing from research on toxic leadership, human resource development, and organizational boundary setting, it highlights how missing or blurred boundaries lead to dysfunction that stalls employee development, resulting in organizational failure. The case study of Tessa (a pseudonym), an entry-level marketer who left her role under a boundless, overreaching CEO, illustrates how boundary failures can spiral out of control and harm everyone involved. On the other hand, boundary-driven organizations show that clear role definitions and structured oversight are foundational to success. This paper focuses on the costs of boundary neglect: cultures of fear, wasted talent, and failure thrive. Grounded in biblical principles such as Proverbs 25:28, this paper equips leaders to recognize the red flags of boundary erosion and understand the necessity of boundary-based leadership practices so that people and organizations can flourish.

Keywords: boundaries, human resource development, flourishing, toxic leadership

Proverbs 25:28 says: “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls” (English Standard Version, 2001). In the ancient world, a city without walls was vulnerable. It had no protection, no defense, and no sense of order or safety. Anyone could come in, and everything inside was at risk. That is precisely what happens to a leader, and to entire organizations, without healthy boundaries. When there are no walls, when there is no structure, the organization becomes just like that city with broken-down walls—vulnerable and unsustainable.

Cloud (2013) described boundaries as invisible property lines that help people determine what is and is not theirs to own. In a business leadership context, boundaries help establish where a leader’s role ends and another person’s responsibilities begin.

They establish what the leader is accountable for, such as vision, strategy, and direction, and what a leader must be able to trust others to do, such as day-to-day tasks or superficial decision making (Cloud, 2013). Without these clear lines, organizations descend into chaos. The truth is that organizations rarely fall apart overnight. They erode slowly, over time, when leaders fail to establish and respect clear boundaries. Understanding these failure points is essential for leaders who want to design healthy, innovative organizations where people can flourish.

Human resource development (HRD) involves building employees' knowledge, skills, and capabilities to strengthen the entire organization (Swanson & Holton, 2009). Training programs, leadership development, mentoring, and performance feedback all fall under HRD. However, HRD does not work in isolation. Development efforts only really pay off if the organization as a whole has healthy boundaries in place. Think of boundaries as the structure and safety net HRD needs to succeed. For example, role and relational boundaries give employees clarity. They know what they own, where they can make decisions, and when they should take initiative (Cloud, 2013). Without that clarity, people hold back from applying new skills because they fear overstepping or getting things wrong.

Then there are ethical and interpersonal boundaries, which are built on a foundation of trust. If employees believe the environment is fair, respectful, and consistent, they are much more likely to engage in learning and take the risks that growth requires (Edmondson, 2019). However, if they feel like the rules shift day to day, or that speaking up might backfire, all that development work will stall. Finally, it is important to remember time and workload boundaries. Even the best training program in the world will not make a difference if employees are constantly in firefighting mode. People need space to learn, reflect, and practice new skills in their day-to-day work. If the pace never lets up, HRD just becomes another box to check.

When HRD and boundaries work together, organizations and people really start to flourish. Employees begin to innovate, collaborate, and contribute in meaningful ways. Knowledge flows naturally, creative ideas take shape, and people feel confident enough to step up. Engagement rises, turnover drops, and the organization can finally focus on long-term strategy instead of getting stuck in short-term crises. As a metaphor, HRD is the engine of growth, and boundaries are the guardrails that keep that growth moving in the right direction. Together, they create workplaces where people thrive, teams flourish, and the organization achieves its mission. Without the engine, nobody is going anywhere. Without the guardrails, they are driving off the edge.

Case Study

A fish rots from the head down. The head honcho at the top cannot stay in his own lane, but thinks those of us farther down the chain of command are to blame when the things he forces us to do backfire spectacularly. (Tessa [pseudonym], social media marketer)

Tessa was an entry-level social media marketer responsible for crafting content, setting up campaigns, and tracking results. She reported to the content marketing manager, who reported to the director of marketing, who reported to the head of operations, who reported to the CEO. However, despite all the layers of separation, Tessa often found herself in Slack huddles with the CEO, where he would personally review every piece of social media content and provide feedback, approval, and rejections on everything, right down to the hashtags she had selected.

Tessa quickly realized that the CEO had no background or experience in marketing, and he openly admitted he did not understand how to use his own personal social media accounts. His lack of understanding was evident: he would redline posts and replace casual brand language with overwrought technical jargon that the average potential customer would not understand. He would reject graphics for trivial reasons, such as not liking the shade of blue the designer used. He would delay simple campaign launches by days or weeks, tweaking the most minor, most inconsequential details.

In addition to his counterproductive involvement in the content, the CEO would often take it upon himself to edit campaigns late at night or over the weekend and expect immediate responses from the team, even outside regular working hours. He bypassed the chain of command and left Tessa's boss, boss's boss, and boss's boss's boss out of the conversation, going directly to Tessa for changes. Then, when the CEO's ill-informed decisions backfired, Tessa was held responsible for clicking "post." Tessa found the entire dynamic to be very odd and unsettling. After less than 18 months on the job, she quit, taking a pay cut to work for a different organization where the CEO was too busy with high-level strategic decision making to get involved in her day-to-day tasks, which allowed her to work on her content calendars in peace.

The Boundary Failures That Erode Organizations

Contrary to how some organizational leaders might try to paint the situation, Tessa's departure was not the result of some deficiency on her part or her failing to set and enforce boundaries. As an entry-level employee, she was not in a position to push back against the CEO's overreach. It was never her responsibility to manage the most senior leader in the organization or order him to stay in his lane. The responsibility for setting

boundaries should have been on the CEO, but he failed to enforce boundaries for himself. By taking on tasks far below his pay grade, he unintentionally created a culture in which no decision, however minor, could be made without his approval (Irani-Williams et al., 2021). Instead of focusing on high-level strategy or other responsibilities appropriate for his position, he micromanaged people into full-blown burnout.

Boundary failures do not just create headaches for top leaders. When boundaries are missing, their absence is felt at every level of the organization. What they leave behind is often toxicity and dysfunction that can be incredibly difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to reverse (Arifin, 2024; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). Think about what happens when leaders do not have clear boundaries to guide them, when they do not know what they should or should not get involved in. When their inability to delegate causes them to micromanage even their best employees, it is not just the leader who suffers. Everyone feels the impact. This includes the organization's ability to develop people, build capability, and create meaningful learning opportunities, which are at the heart of HRD.

Boundaries are the glue that holds organizations together. When that glue is not there, things start to slowly fall apart (Cloud, 2013). That collapse rarely happens overnight. Often, the decay is slow and subtle. It can take years, and even decades, for things to hit rock bottom. However, over time, the signs are unmistakable—employees disengage, innovation stalls, turnover skyrockets. Learning and development initiatives lose traction because employees are too busy firefighting to take advantage of growth opportunities. Trust between leaders and employees, and even trust between peers, fades away (Joo et al., 2023). The organization stops thriving. Instead of focusing on long-term strategy and meaningful growth, everyone is trapped in short-term firefighting, spending their time putting out fires that could have been avoided a year or even 5 years earlier. HRD cannot thrive in this environment because the focus has shifted from growth to survival.

On top of that, one of the most destructive outcomes of boundary failure is the shift from psychological safety to psychological danger. Psychological safety is the feeling that you can speak up, share ideas, and even make mistakes without fear of retaliation (Edmondson, 2019). It is mandatory for creativity, innovation, and healthy workplaces (Stone, 2015)—the very conditions where HRD efforts can take root and human flourishing becomes possible. Psychological danger, on the other hand, is the opposite. It is the unspoken understanding that nothing good will come from rocking the boat, so it is safer to stay quiet.

Employees who have been conditioned to expect resistance or unpredictable reactions from leadership will not take the risk of speaking up, even if they can see that something is going wrong (Moingeon & Edmondson, 1997). When employees are silent,

mentorship, knowledge sharing, and on-the-job learning, the core tools of HRD (Swanson & Holton, 2009), grind to a halt. Furthermore, here is the real tragedy. When organizations slide into psychological danger, they lose engagement, creativity, and the conditions that enable human flourishing. People cannot thrive in an environment where fear replaces trust and short-term survival replaces long-term growth. In HRD terms, the organization stops building capacity and becomes a place where talent goes to die.

Lack of Emotional Boundaries Leads to Volatility. Leaders who cannot regulate their own emotions often create reactive environments. For example, when a leader has a bad day, it becomes everyone else's problem, and employees feel like they must walk on eggshells. Alternatively, a leader's bad mood in a meeting causes them to abruptly reject all new ideas, shut down discussion, and discourage the team from sharing creative solutions in the future. Even worse, leaders can be so emotionally unrestrained that it trickles down where others in the organization replicate what they see and no longer feel the need to regulate their own emotions (Coker et al., 2025). In those scenarios, workplace hostility runs rampant, and stress levels slowly but steadily climb.

That kind of stress is really harmful. Sustained exposure to stress impacts the brain. The burden of chronic stress disrupts multiple systems, including those responsible for emotional and cognitive regulation (Juster et al., 2010; McEwen, 2007). It does not stop there. The brain often keeps replaying or worrying about negative experiences, which can prolong stress responses far beyond the original event, leading to long-term mental strain. Without boundaries, leaders unintentionally create workplaces that keep employees in a state of near constant stress (Gandolfi et al., 2025). That stress leads to burnout and higher turnover (Jasiński & Derbis, 2022) and directly undermines HRD. Employees experiencing chronic stress struggle with memory, focus, and problem solving, which makes it nearly impossible to benefit from HRD initiatives or to grow as individuals.

Lack of Role Boundaries Leads to Micromanagement. When leaders step into their employees' responsibilities, employees stop taking initiative. Then, the leader feels justified in stepping further into others' domains and taking on more responsibility for themselves, even though others should be handling those matters. This often leads to a vicious circle where the more the leader takes on, the less their teams feel comfortable doing (Atendido et al., 2022). Eventually, the leader becomes so inundated with doing everyone else's jobs for them that they end up dropping the ball on their executive functions, and strategy and direction take a backseat to the mundane tasks they have consumed themselves with.

Micromanagement represents a fundamental breakdown of boundaries; self-determination theory helps explain why its effects are so damaging (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

Employees have three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. All those needs are undermined when leaders step into responsibilities that should belong to their teams. By constantly interfering, micromanagers make it clear that they do not trust their employees to make decisions or perform without scrutiny. This strips away autonomy and eliminates the sense of competence and self-efficacy that drives intrinsic motivation (Fishbach & Woolley, 2022). Over time, this creates a psychologically dangerous environment where employees wait for the leaders' go-ahead rather than taking initiative. A culture of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972) begins to take root, leaving both the team and the leader overwhelmed and shut down.

Lack of Time Boundaries Leads to Fire Drill Culture. Leaders without time discipline turn everything into an emergency. As the adage goes, "When everything is an emergency, nothing is." Just as the CEO in the case study expected immediate responses to trivial matters, many leaders lack an understanding of what to prioritize and how, and end up placing everything at the same priority level. Leaders without time boundaries create a culture of constant firefighting (or constantly ignoring demands from on high), forcing employees to work reactively rather than proactively (Maruping et al., 2015). When everything is treated as equally urgent, teams quickly become overwhelmed or shut down. Over time, constant urgency erodes trust in leadership because teams realize that many so-called emergencies are avoidable and stem from poor planning or indecision at the top.

The toxic "always available" mentality in leadership does even more than just impact emotional and mental well-being. It can take a significant physical toll on employees. When leaders fail to understand how to prioritize and do not take steps to protect their time and their employees' time, they create an environment marked by constant urgency (Kennedy & Porter, 2022). This constant sense of urgency keeps employees in a prolonged state of stress, which eventually interferes with sleep, elevates blood pressure, suppresses immune function, and contributes to long-term health risks, including cardiovascular disease, metabolic disorders, and gastrointestinal problems (Yaribeygi et al., 2017). According to Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory, individuals work to retain and protect their psychological, physical, and social resources. Leaders who lack time boundaries; engage in practices such as sending late-night emails, expecting instant responses; or treat every task as a crisis, deplete these resources, leaving employees vulnerable to burnout and stress-related health issues.

Lack of Relational Boundaries Leads to Overfamiliarity. Leaders who try to act like everyone's friend often have difficulty making hard decisions or holding the proper people accountable for their role in issues. Healthy boundaries require both respect and clear lines of authority, which means delivering tough feedback, enacting consequences, and making decisions that may not be widely popular but are necessary for organizational success and growth (Petitta et al., 2023). When leaders become too casual

or personal with employees, it can lead to inappropriate oversharing or crossing HR lines. For example, it is not appropriate for the CEO of a company to take his HR director to a Coldplay concert—and then spend the evening venting about other executives or engaging in behaviors that blur the line between professional and social relationships. This kind of behavior undermines the HR representative's role as an objective advisor and can also set a precedent of favoritism throughout the organization.

This dynamic is explained by the leader-member exchange theory, which suggests that leaders often form distinct in-groups and out-groups among their subordinates (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Those in the in-group frequently receive perks and personal attention, while those in the out-group feel excluded. Out-group employees hesitate to voice concerns or take risks because they know rocking the boat will only confirm their outsider status. Meanwhile, jealousy and frustration creep into team dynamics as some employees enjoy privileges that others are denied. Blurred relational boundaries can also destroy development pathways. Mentoring, stretch assignments, and leadership development opportunities are often funneled toward the in-group, leaving the out-group at a clear disadvantage. Over time, this inequity hurts succession planning and talent retention, because growth is no longer based on performance and potential. Success is based on proximity to the leader's inner circle.

Lack of Moral Boundaries Leads to Cultural Erosion. When leaders skirt ethical norms in pursuit of "quick wins," both the culture and the organization's long-term viability suffer. The lack of moral boundaries might seem innocuous at first glance: small compromises (such as cutting corners on quality checks or pushing employees to work unreasonably long hours to meet unrealistic deadlines) may even yield short-term gains. Leaders might bypass compliance protocols, such as informed consent for background checks, under the guise of "eliminating red tape" and making the organization more streamlined and efficient. However, these actions quietly set new expectations for acceptable behavior, signaling to employees that results matter more than integrity (Recherche, 1997). Over time, this erodes trust, encourages similar behavior across all levels of the organization, and creates a culture in which ethical lapses are just part of standard operating procedure.

When leaders lack moral boundaries, it often creates a ripple effect where unethical practices are both learned and normalized. Social learning theory suggests that employees typically copy the behaviors they observe their superiors model (Bandura, 1977). When those behaviors appear to lead to benefits for the person engaging in them, employees are much more likely to engage in a "monkey see, monkey do" pattern. When leaders justify questionable decisions for the sake of efficiency, their followers will eventually conclude that they, too, can get away with unethical behaviors. Before long, the phenomenon of normalization of deviance comes into play (Vaughan, 1996).

That means that not only do employees believe they can get away with things, but the things they are trying to get away with are not really that big of a deal. The things they previously found concerning no longer seem so bad, and the company collectively shifts increasingly more into the gray areas. Without firm moral boundaries to delineate between what is morally acceptable and what is not, the behaviors compound until there is no turning back.

Boundaries as the Foundation of Organizational Design and Strategy

Boundaries are often classified as restrictive or bureaucratic; in reality, they are what allow organizations to operate in healthy, sustainable ways. Boundaries are a choice to accept constraint for the sake of a greater goal or purpose (Vandenbosch, 2004). Individuals choose to give up their independence and be constrained by a spouse in exchange for companionship and love. Couples choose to give up their spontaneity and choose growing their family by having children. In a completely different yet still related vein, leaders and teams in successful organizations give up some autonomy and agree to be constrained by defined roles and processes, in exchange for the ability to achieve shared goals. While modern society often paints constraints as negative, they are almost always necessary to achieve something great (Jasiński & Derbis, 2022). It is simply not possible in every situation to have cake and eat it too. Choosing constraints and setting boundaries is what allows individuals and organizations alike to create and sustain something meaningful that could never be achieved in a free-for-all environment.

Galbraith's (2014) star model is particularly applicable to organizational design because it emphasizes that strategy can be executed effectively only when structure, processes, people, rewards, and culture are aligned. Boundaries are the invisible thread that holds these elements together. For example, a clearly defined organizational structure ensures that everyone knows who reports to whom, who is responsible for what, and when. Without boundaries, structures fall apart, processes become optional, people are replaceable, rewards are inconsistent, and culture does not matter (Cloud, 2013). In organizations where the things that should be important get overlooked or swept under the rug, nothing can grow. Leaders who understand the importance of design concepts like the star model must also realize that boundaries are not about restricting flexibility but about designing an organization that can sustain itself for the long term.

Boundaries in Action. A good example of boundaries in action is The Walt Disney Company. Disney's strategy revolves around creating immersive, high-quality storytelling experiences that are consistent across its films, parks, destinations, and merchandise, and that require significant boundary setting and human buy-in. One way Disney achieves this is by enforcing clear boundaries between roles. The Imagineers are free to innovate, but always within Disney's brand parameters. Operations teams are

responsible for bringing those ideas to life on a global scale (Iger, 2019). Senior leadership stays focused on long-term strategy and quality control. Nobody is confused about where their role ends and someone else's begins, which allows people to do their best work.

This is where HRD comes into play. Disney invests heavily in HRD. Disney University has been around since 1955, and every new "cast member" starts with Disney Traditions, which immerses employees in the company's values, culture, and standards (Capodagli & Jackson, 2019). They do not stop at onboarding. Programs like Disney Aspire pay hourly employees to earn college degrees, demonstrating the company's commitment to long-term growth and retention (Capodagli & Jackson, 2019). Employee feedback reflects this commitment. On Glassdoor (2024), roughly 75% of employees say they would recommend the company as a great place to work. Many positive reviews cite the strong culture, values, career advancement opportunities, and HRD offerings.

Disney's boundaries do two essential things. First, they give employees the autonomy they need to develop mastery and innovate in their roles. Second, they connect that clarity to strategic learning systems such as mentoring, stretch assignments, formal recognition, and tuition support (Swanson & Holton, 2009). That way, development efforts are ongoing and valuable to the people, not just a performative checkbox. The result is that Disney preserves its brand integrity, empowers creativity, and develops a skilled and engaged workforce that wants to stick around and keep building. Their boundaries do not limit their potential: their boundaries are what have allowed them to sustain such incredible brand integrity and employee net promoters for the better part of a century, and why so many of their people are flourishing.

Setting Healthy Organizational Boundaries. Healthy boundaries do not emerge by accident; leaders must be intentional about setting, modeling, and enforcing the boundaries to help the organization achieve its goals. While not every organization needs to be designed like Disney or follow the same strategies, there are practical takeaways from the Disney case study that can benefit any company.

The first takeaway is that boundaries are an act of stewardship. Disney empowers its creative teams to dream big and take risks, but always within clear, intentional parameters (Iger, 2019). As Christian leaders, this is what stewardship looks like in the workplace: entrusting people with freedom and creativity while safeguarding the organization's mission, values, and resources. Healthy boundaries do not restrict; they guide humans toward mission-aligned outcomes. Research on strategic alignment has found that innovation without boundaries leads to wasted resources and inferior products (Hamdan, 2020). When leaders set innovation boundaries, they channel creativity toward outcomes that directly support the organization's competitive advantage. Organizational leaders need to understand the difference between what is

flexible and what must be set in stone, so that teams are free to flex their creative muscles without compromising on quality or undermining the strategy.

The second takeaway is to clarify roles, responsibilities, and decision-making rights. Disney's cross-functional teams, from the animation studios to vacation tour operations, know exactly which unit is responsible for each decision, where their domains overlap and diverge, and when leadership approval is necessary (Iger, 2019). Organizations must ensure that every team understands its role in the overall strategy and create clarity across positions to prevent bottlenecks, frustration, and confusion. When employees know what they own and where their authority begins and ends, they can take initiative and get things done without second guessing themselves or waiting for approvals from people who have no skin in the game (Campbell, 2000). Clear boundaries around decision making empower teams to generate creative ideas and solve problems at their level, while allowing leaders to focus on broader strategic priorities.

The third takeaway is the importance of establishing robust quality assurance and review processes, along with multiple checkpoints, for all significant initiatives. Disney uses review boards, brand committees, and multilayered quality checks to ensure that every product or experience aligns with the company's overall vision and strategy (Capodagli & Jackson, 2019). Without these boundaries, standards become inconsistent, and every review process becomes either a bottleneck or an afterthought, providing no value to the product. Properly executed review processes are efficient and consistent, not chaotic or reactive. They allow leaders to set high standards and hold their teams accountable for meeting those standards, without crossing the line into micromanagement (Rochmatullah et al., 2023). That means leaders do not have to get involved in every mundane detail their team handles or worry about every minor step of the process. They can set parameters for their teams to operate within while still maintaining some autonomy, and expectations are met without the leader having to be involved at every single stage.

Conclusion

Tessa's story is not an isolated incident—not within the organization she left or other organizations around the world. No industry or job title is immune to the adverse side effects of missing or unenforced boundaries. Jobs that should be simple and clear become overwhelming and convoluted; every day becomes an exercise in futility for the unfortunate individuals trapped in boundless organizations. Tessa's frustration and eventual voluntary departure, even though it meant financial sacrifice, reveal the true cost of organizations and leaders that operate without constraints. Talented employees leave, taking valuable institutional knowledge with them. Innovation flatlines, and

leaders are left to call all the shots without any other points of view. Organizational strategy goes to the back burner, and the organizational design falls apart.

In contrast, companies like Disney excel because of the clear, well-defined boundaries they have established. Constrained leaders understand that while there needs to be strategic guardrails, teams still need the freedom and autonomy to innovate. They understand that everybody has a role to play and something valuable to contribute, and employees must be both allowed and encouraged to take the lead in the areas where they excel. They trust the processes they put in place and in their team's integrity to see products and initiatives through to the finish line, without feeling the need to micromanage or get involved in details that do not require their intervention. These firm boundaries allow organizations to grow and thrive without sacrificing efficiency or strategy, the opposite of what Tessa experienced under her CEO's reactive, unconstrained, and boundless leadership.

The question every leader should ask is: Where have blurred or nonexistent boundaries in your organization created dysfunction and toxicity? Leaders of boundless organizations may find themselves or their teams constantly "firefighting" rather than working strategically, as urgent problems overshadow long-term priorities. Decision making may slow to a crawl when no one is certain who owns a task or has the authority to make a call. Employees may experience frustration, burnout, or even disengagement when they feel micromanaged, overlooked, or trapped in cycles of confusion and rework. These are the red flags that should prompt leaders to pause and reevaluate whether the boundaries in their organization are healthy.

Boundaries are not barriers; they are more like the lines on a road. They make the direction clear, create order out of chaos, and prevent collisions while still allowing forward movement and progress. However, even the best organizational "roads" still require maintenance. When leaders ignore the early warning signs of boundary failure, the lines begin to fade, and the path forward becomes both inefficient and unsafe. It is a leader's responsibility to ensure that those lines—those boundaries—are clearly painted and consistently enforced. Paying attention to the red flags of fading boundaries is just as important as establishing the boundaries in the first place. Healthy, well-maintained boundaries protect the mission, reduce dysfunction, and create an environment where both the organization and its people can flourish.

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