

# Working Effectively with My Consumer-Employer to Solve Problems

## Handouts<sup>1</sup>

### Activity 1: Work and Personal Boundaries

#### Handout 1

#### Defining Work and Personal Boundaries

### Activity 2: Presenting a Problem to My Consumer-Employer

#### Handout 2

#### Assertiveness

#### Handout 3

#### Guidelines for Presenting a Problem

#### Handout 4

#### Practice: Presenting a Problem

### Activity 3: Solving Problems with My Consumer-Employer

#### Handout 5

#### Communication and Self-Management Skills

#### Handout 6

#### Identifying Work and Personal Boundaries

#### Handout 7

#### Practice: Problem-Solving with Your Consumer-Employer

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## Defining Work and Personal Boundaries

*Boundaries* are limits to the relationship between the consumer-employer and the personal assistant (PA).

*Work boundaries* are limits and responsibilities within your role as a PA. Since your consumer is your employer, he or she defines what your role will be. The only boundaries that are set by the State of Illinois DHS/ORS are:

- You do not support your consumer-employer in doing anything that is illegal.
- You must report abuse, neglect, or exploitation of the consumer.
- You must report if the consumer is committing fraud (or cheating the DHS/DRS program).<sup>2</sup>

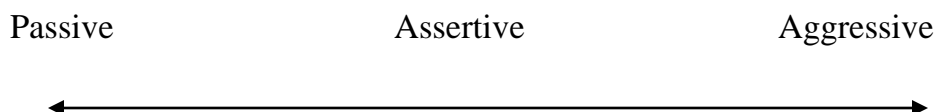
*Personal boundaries* are physical, mental, and emotional limits, set by the PA as a person. You know when you have reached a personal boundary if a particular task makes you feel uncomfortable or causes you physical pain. Personal boundaries can protect you, the PA, from being hurt on the job, or violated by the consumer-employer. On the other hand, if your personal boundaries do not allow you to provide the assistance that the consumer-employer requires, you may not be able to keep your job.

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<sup>2</sup> Reporting fraud and abuse is covered in another training module.

### Assertiveness

**Assertiveness** is the ability to express yourself and your rights without violating the rights of others.



When you are being *passive*, you do not say anything when you feel uncomfortable about doing a task or feel that you are being asked to do something that you should not do. Some people may take advantage of you or violate your rights—without even knowing that you are not comfortable with the situation.

When you are being *aggressive*, you are expressing yourself and your rights, but you may be disrespecting the rights of others.

#### Tips for Being Assertive with Your Consumer-Employer

- Be clear in your own mind about what you think and feel.
- Use “I” statements to express your thoughts or feelings (“I think...”; “I feel...”; “I’m not comfortable with...”).
- Be specific about what makes you uncomfortable or what you’re not willing to do.

### Guidelines for Presenting a Problem

The guidelines for presenting a problem to your consumer-employer are similar to the tips for being assertive. That's because it's important to be both respectful of your consumer-employer's needs *and* assertive about your own sense that there is a problem.

- Be clear and direct about the behavior or situation you are addressing.
- Tell your consumer-employer how this behavior or situation affects you.
- Use objective language, without blaming or judging.
- Show your respect for your consumer-employer and belief in his or her ability to work with you to deal with the problem.

**Practice: Presenting a Problem**

Use the guidelines for “presenting a problem” to let your consumer-employer know that you are having a problem with each situation.

**1. Situation:** You have told your consumer-employer at least three times that Saturday is the day you need to spend with your family. Yet he has called you every Saturday for a whole month to ask if you can help out for “just a couple of hours”—to fill in for his weekend PA.

**Instead of saying:** “How many times do I have to tell you that I want to keep Saturday for my family?!”

**Follow the guidelines to present the problem:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**2. Situation:** Your consumer-employer weighs over 300 pounds. When you were hired, she said you would never have to transfer her out of bed by yourself—there would always be another PA or a family member around to help. But today you are by yourself with your consumer-employer and she insists that you help her get out of bed so she can go to the bathroom.

**Instead of saying:** “You told me I’d never have to help you transfer by myself and I’m not going to strain my back.”

**Follow the guidelines to present the problem:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Practice: Presenting a Problem**

**3. Situation:** Your consumer-employer has a couple of friends who often eat meals with him. He always wants you to buy enough food for everyone when you go shopping. But he only gives you enough money to buy food for him. He tells you to collect some money from his friends to cover their share—but lately they don’t have the money to give to you, when you’ve already spent some of your own money to buy extra food.

**Instead of saying:** “I’m tired of putting my money out to buy food for your friends! You just have to pay me back for what I’ve spent!”

**Follow the guidelines to present the problem:** \_\_\_\_\_

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### Communication and Self-Management Skills

**The following skills are important to communicating effectively and building relationships in direct care work:**

- Clear, nonjudgmental language to communicate a thought or idea
- Nonverbal listening skills (effective body language) to show attention, understanding, and concern. Effective body language includes postures, facial expressions, and movement.
- Paraphrasing, or repeating back in our own words what the speaker has said, in order to clarify or confirm that we understand.
- Asking open-ended questions to get more information—for example, questions that may begin with what, why, or how, and encourage people to share their thoughts or feelings.
- Pulling back when a conversation becomes stressful (Self-Management). This helps us stay calm and listen more effectively to the other person.

## Identifying Personal and Work Boundaries

**Imagine that your consumer-employer asks you to do these tasks. Think about how you would feel.**

**Then, write:**

√ If you *would* do the task

? If you are *not sure if you would* do the task

X If you *would definitely not* do the task

- \_\_\_ 1. Buy beer for him/her.
- \_\_\_ 2. Buy beer for his/her friends.
- \_\_\_ 3. Buy your consumer-employer's mother a birthday present with your credit card.
- \_\_\_ 4. Change the cat's litter box.
- \_\_\_ 5. Walk your consumer-employer's dog and clean up feces.
- \_\_\_ 6. Take your consumer-employer's children to school.
- \_\_\_ 7. Cook dinner for your consumer-employer's family.
- \_\_\_ 8. Attend religious services with your consumer-employer.
- \_\_\_ 9. Go to a bar with your consumer-employer.
- \_\_\_ 10. Move your consumer in a way that feels unsafe.
- \_\_\_ 11. Assist your consumer- employer to watch an adult video.
- \_\_\_ 12. Work with a consumer whose relative is selling illegal drugs in the home.



## Identifying Personal and Work Boundaries

- \_\_\_ 13. Take your consumer-employer's side in a family argument.
- \_\_\_ 14. Work weekends, when you've agreed to just week-days.
- \_\_\_ 15. Work on your day off.
- \_\_\_ 16. Do tasks for your consumer-employer that you know he/she is capable of doing without any help.
- \_\_\_ 17. Use a Hoyer lift or other assistive devices without being trained in their use.
- \_\_\_ 18. Work with your consumer-employer when he or she is drunk.
- \_\_\_ 19. Prepare food for your consumer-employer's friends who are drunk.
- \_\_\_ 20. Assist your consumer-employer at a party where people are using illegal drugs.
- \_\_\_ 21. Listen to music with your consumer-employer.
- \_\_\_ 22. Go to the movies with your consumer-employer.
- \_\_\_ 23. Buy "medical marijuana" for your consumer-employer.
- \_\_\_ 24. Buy "medical marijuana" for your consumer-employer—when you know his/her friends will use it.
- \_\_\_ 25. Help your quadriplegic consumer-employer get in position for sex with his/her partner.
- \_\_\_ 26. Massage your consumer-employer's back
- \_\_\_ 27. Massage your consumer-employer's genital area.

### Practice: Problem-Solving with Your Consumer-Employer

For solving problems with your consumer-employer, it's important to use all of the core communication skills AND follow the guidelines for presenting a problem.

In this case, the problems are tasks that your consumer-employer asks you to do that go beyond your sense of work and personal boundaries.

- **Pull back** from emotional reactions
- **Paraphrase** to be clear what your consumer-employer is asking you to do
- **Ask open-ended questions** to understand how this task is important to your consumer-employer, and how he/she sees it fitting in your role
- **Present the problem:**
  - Be clear and specific about what part of this situation is a problem for you
  - Tell your consumer-employer how this affects you
  - Use objective language, without blame or judgment
  - Show your respect for your consumer-employer and belief in his/her ability to work with you to deal with the problem
- **Ask open-ended questions** to explore a different approach to this task, that would meet your consumer-employer's needs without being a problem for you