The Boundary Form:
A Simple & Powerful Risk-Management Tool

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I've now met with thousands of volunteers, staff and board members in communities across Canada over the phone, by email and face-to-face in workshops and other events. Nonprofits and charities are so diverse in their missions and resources, but I have also noticed many similarities.

1. Volunteers and staff members very often have big hearts. In caring for clients and participants, they often overreach their job role and land themselves and/or their organizations in hot water. Or organizations find volunteers quitting because they didn't realize the extra demands that clients might make.

2. Volunteers, staff members and management are generally very busy. Their written policies and procedures may be excellent, but for various reasons are often forgotten or "misremembered." Some nonprofits simply have not created clear policies.

There is a tremendous need for clarity and simplicity – not just around what volunteers and staff members *should do* (where a job description is a must), but also around a handful of "red light" *never do's* that are specific to each position.

Training (especially role-playing) and email updates are examples of terrific ways to reinforce roles, but the best idea I've found to date is this boundary form.

Before I explain how to write this form, here are the five SmartTips that we believe should be the context for your risk management work.

SmartTip 1: Protecting your people has to be Priority One

Regularly communicate to your volunteers and staff the following: "Our first priority as an organization is to protect our people." If risk management is just about protecting your assets from a lawsuit, you will never get the buy-in from your staff and volunteers that you need.

SmartTip 2: The real experts are around you

Don't create risk management without properly consulting your people, especially those who know the risks and, most likely, the best ways to manage them.

SmartTip 3: Put it in writing – your own writing

Written procedures are important to ensure consistency, uncover current blind spots, create a legal paper trail in the event of a lawsuit, and ensure proper monitoring for results. Use your people's own words whenever possible. It will help you get buy-in.

Do not fall into the trap of using blank templates other organizations have created. Make them your own. Your activities and people are likely different with different risk.

SmartTip 4: Keep it simple – one page is often enough

Risk management has its tricky moments and the occasional need for expert wisdom, but the products of your work need to be clear (easy to read) and concise (so they will actually be read). Use one page for communications/forms whenever possible.

SmartTip 5: Keep it kind

Too often risk, management forms and communications are written in such as way that they make nonprofits look uncaring and ungrateful. This is not necessary. Legal forms such as this can be kind.

SmartTip 6: Where there is one-on-one client interaction, keep documentation forever

Where a staff or volunteer position requires one-on-one interaction with clients, keep their important paperwork (e.g., their file, which should include everything from application and job description to signed documents) forever.

How to Create a Boundary Form

A job description tells people what they ARE to do in their role; a boundary form tells them what they are NOT to do. Over time, you should create a boundary form for your riskiest positions.
Below are some tips on creating this form.

- It should be a maximum of one page long.
- At the top, it should say "Boundary Form," followed by the position title.
- In the first paragraph, thank the people who fill this role for what they do. This is very important!
- Next, explain that "for your protection and the reputation of our organization" the following actions cannot, under any circumstances, occur. If any of these actions do occur, we will be forced to terminate you.
- Then list four to seven items under "red light" activities for that role. Be very clear so there is no ambiguity as to what you mean. Only list actions that would lead you to terminate a person immediately for a single offense.
- Close by stating that these rules are there to protect them, as well as clients and the organization.
- On the back of the form, list the "yellow light" activities that they should not do, but would not result in immediate termination. Outline the process that will be followed if one of these activities occurs.
- The form should be reviewed and signed every year. Consider using a distinct colour paper so that everyone knows about the "orange form."

Final point: Make sure the people who will be asked to sign the Boundary Form are involved in creating it. They know the role – often their boss does not know what requests they face day-to-day – and in the end the buy-in will be much improved.

