



***NAVIGATING THE UNWRITTEN
RULES IN THE WORKPLACE:
A KEY FOR CAREER SUCCESS***

By: Tinisha Agramonte

Department of Commerce, Director, Office of Civil Rights

Guiding Questions

Have you ever thought to yourself, I wish I had known that?

What are the unstated or unwritten rules necessary to “play the game” that may drive your professional success?

How do you uncover the rules to play the game?

When is it/is not necessary to “play the game”?

WHAT ARE UNWRITTEN RULES?

What are Unwritten Rules?

“Rules that determine who gets what, when, and how”



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)

What are Unwritten Rules?

- Invisible forces that lie below the surface and shape cultural norms
- Unspoken or Unwritten rules that can have a significant impact on one's job satisfaction, advancement opportunities, and career trajectory
- Rules that operate along with an organization's mission statement or explicitly stated in work policies
- Largely emanate from organizational culture and are shaped by assumptions that are held by the shared beliefs of the workers
- Many times the unwritten rules are just a reflection of the boss's preferences
- Behavioral and conduct nuances that are critical for success in the workplace

What are some Common Unwritten Rules?

Sports	Social	Workplace
Softball/Baseball—Do not steal bases when your team is way ahead	Do not talk on the phone or play music in public places without headphones	Do not contradict your boss publicly
Basketball – Late in the fourth quarter, if a team is winning big, the starters are pulled	Do not ask for something if the person only has one left — gum, piece of cake, etc.	Do not state a problem without offering a solution
Football – If a team is winning big and has the ball with a minute left on the clock, take a knee	When out to dinner with a group, only the person who ordered the least expensive meal/combo of things can offer to split the check evenly. Bonus--If you borrow someone's car, fill up the tank before you return it	Be kind/respectful to everyone, especially food service workers/janitorial staff/admin professionals

What are some DC-specific Common Unwritten Rules?

Transportation	Social	Workplace
<p>Metro</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Stand on the right side of the escalator, walk on the left --Don't block people exiting or stand/block the doorway --Know the markers for short train (6 cars) or long train (8 cars) 	<p>Be inclusive--DC is very diverse—people from all over the world with diverse backgrounds, political ideology, and religious beliefs. Be open to new people, new places, and new experiences.</p>	<p>Dress code--Business Attire</p> <p>People commonly ask where you work/what you do, so have your canned response ready.</p>
<p>Car/Cab</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Always leave early because there will be traffic -- exit cab on the right side --stay out of bicycle lane --Do not talk in a “slug” car 	<p>People play sports on the mall—do not walk on their make-shift fields</p>	<p>You must have a basic knowledge of federal politics and demonstrate political savvy</p>
<p>Bus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –People line-up in an orderly fashion 	<p>Don't judge a restaurant by its storefront</p>	<p>First Impressions and Networking Matter—Treat all with respect...You never know who you are meeting.</p>

RECOGNIZING AND NAVIGATING
THESE IMPLICIT CODES ARE
CRITICAL TO SUCCESS

How to Uncover Unwritten Rules

- Be Quiet--Observe everything!
 - *Who talks at meetings?*
 - *Who gets the special projects?*
 - *Who gets promoted?*
 - *Who gets demoted?*
 - *How does the boss imply/infer expectations?*
- What is the structure of meetings?
 - *Are conversations free flowing, or dominated by a few at the top?*
 - *Is debate or questioning valued?*
- What do people wear?
- How do people socialize?
- Who has power and influence?
- How are ideas presented and vetted?
- What is valued?



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)

Through understanding others' behaviors (and their impact), you can understand company culture

Pay Close Attention to Contradictions

What is Written in Policy or Stated	Versus	What is Done
Managers say they promote open and honest dialogue		Challenging a manager's ideas is met with immediate pushback
Policy states diversity & inclusion are important		Biases are present for people who speak with an accent or use language associated with a certain socio-economic class, region, or ethnic group (ex: southern, urban/rural, working class, etc.)
Telework is promoted as a workplace flexibility		When employees telework they are viewed unfavorably
Policy might say that Fridays are for casual wear,		Everyone in your office is still dressed up in business attire
The policy says promotions are based on merit		Relationships and politics play a big role in who gets selected
Everyone is encouraged to speak up at meetings		Top leadership dominates the conversation and doesn't seek or value feedback



*TIPS FOR NAVIGATING
UNWRITTEN RULES*

Tips for Navigating Unwritten Rules

- Listen and Observe. Be Patient. Don't fight the norms right out of the gate. First, learn and reflect.
- Pay attention to individuals who appear to successfully navigate the organizational norms and emulate behaviors that appear to be effective.
- Ask questions instead of providing answers.
- Find a mentor who can assist you with learning the lay of the land and navigating the office culture.
- Find a sponsor who can publicly speak for you and advocate on your behalf in spaces you have not been privy to entering



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

What is the difference between a mentor and sponsor?

Tips for Navigating Unwritten Rules (Cont'd)



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)

- Develop a **rebound/resiliency strategy** for when you unknowingly violate an unwritten rule.
- Do your own research, talk to trusted colleagues/former employees to get “the scoop.”
- Learn from others’ mistakes and successes.
- Know when and how to address harmful unwritten rules and practices.

IMPORTANT NOTE: If the office norms are discriminatory or harmful, address them with your supervisor; an appropriate official within your chain-of-command; HR or the EEO office, as appropriate.

Build on Competencies/ Traits



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-ND](#)

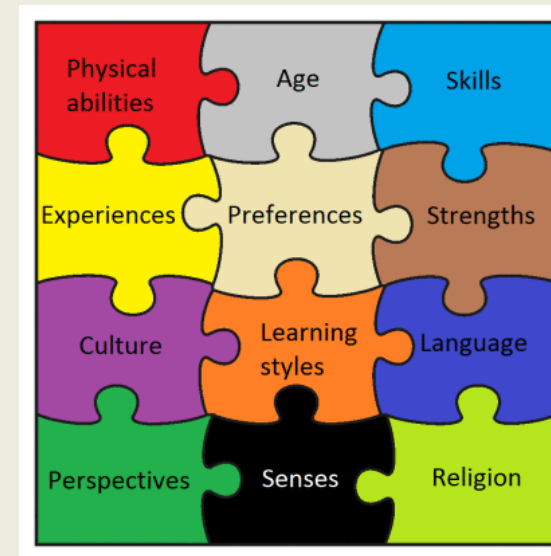
- *Social astuteness: the ability to read other people and the self-awareness to understand how they see you*
- *Interpersonal influence: a convincing ability to affect how and what other people think.*
- *Networking ability: the capacity to form mutually beneficial relationships with a wide range of diverse people.*
- *Apparent sincerity: seeming to be honest, open, and forthright.*

*UNDERSTANDING THE
IMPACT OF UNWRITTEN
RULES*

How do unwritten rules impact workplace diversity & inclusion?

The Impact of Unwritten Rules

- Inclusivity is the “blending of different background experiences and perspectives”



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)

- A diverse workplace does NOT mean an inclusive workplace!!

The Impact of Unwritten Rules (Cont'd)



Negative Consequences of Unwritten Rules

The Impact of Unwritten Rules on Creativity

- Creates inequities when some know the rules and others don't—some are in the “in” group; some are not
- Creativity is lost when a group cannot bring their unique experiences and selves to a problem
- When behaviors are different than what's written, employees start to distrust the organization's mission and core values
- The culture might promote behaviors of mediocrity, fear, politics, and group think

How to Address Harmful Unwritten Rules



Time your concerns appropriately



Be very specific when addressing the problematic behaviors



Focus on the positives



Have solutions in mind



Find support among your colleagues

IMPORTANT NOTE: *If the office norms are discriminatory or harmful, address them with your supervisor; an appropriate official within your chain-of-command; HR or the EEO office, as appropriate.*

Learning From Collective Experiences



What are some unwritten rules that you have experienced?



How did you know when you violated an unwritten rule?



What was the impact of not following an unwritten rule?



What would you have done differently?



How can managers promote transparency?

Questions

