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

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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”
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
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Workplace</th>
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<tr>
<td>Softball/Baseball—Do not steal bases when your team is way ahead</td>
<td>Do not talk on the phone or play music in public places without headphones</td>
<td>Do not contradict your boss publicly</td>
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<td>Basketball – Late in the fourth quarter, if a team is winning big, the starters are pulled</td>
<td>Do not ask for something if the person only has one left — gum, piece of cake, etc.</td>
<td>Do not state a problem without offering a solution</td>
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<td>Football – If a team is winning big and has the ball with a minute left on the clock, take a knee</td>
<td>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</td>
<td>Be kind/respectful to everyone, especially food service workers/janitorial staff/admin professionals</td>
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<td><strong>Transportation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td><strong>Workplace</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Metro</strong>&lt;br&gt;-Stand on the right side of the escalator, walk on the left&lt;br&gt;-Don’t block people exiting or stand/block the doorway&lt;br&gt;-Know the markers for short train (6 cars) or long train (8 cars)</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Dress code—Business Attire&lt;br&gt;People commonly ask where you work/what you do, so have your canned response ready.</td>
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<td><strong>Car/Cab</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Always leave early because there will be traffic&lt;br&gt;- exit cab on the right side&lt;br&gt;- stay out of bicycle lane&lt;br&gt;- Do not talk in a “slug” car</td>
<td>People play sports on the mall—do not walk on their make-shift fields</td>
<td>You must have a basic knowledge of federal politics and demonstrate political savvy</td>
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<td><strong>Bus</strong>&lt;br&gt;- People line-up in an orderly fashion</td>
<td>Don’t judge a restaurant by its storefront</td>
<td>First Impressions and Networking Matter—Treat all with respect...You never know who you are meeting.</td>
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RECOGNIZING AND NAVIGATING THESE IMPLICIT CODES ARE CRITICAL TO SUCCESS
Recognizing Unwritten Rules

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?

Through understanding others’ behaviors (and their impact), you can understand company culture
<table>
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<th>What is Written in Policy or Stated</th>
<th>Versus</th>
<th>What is Done</th>
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<td>Managers say they promote open and honest dialogue</td>
<td>Challenging a manager’s ideas is met with immediate pushback</td>
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<td>Policy states diversity &amp; inclusion are important</td>
<td>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.)</td>
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<td>Telework is promoted as a workplace flexibility</td>
<td>When employees telework they are viewed unfavorably</td>
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<td>Policy might say that Fridays are for casual wear,</td>
<td>Everyone in your office is still dressed up in business attire</td>
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<td>The policy says promotions are based on merit</td>
<td>Relationships and politics play a big role in who gets selected</td>
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<td>Everyone is encouraged to speak up at meetings</td>
<td>Top leadership dominates the conversation and doesn’t seek or value feedback</td>
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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.

What is the difference between a mentor and sponsor?
Tips for Navigating Unwritten Rules (Cont’d)

- 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

- **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?

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

- A diverse workplace does NOT mean an inclusive workplace!!
The Impact of Unwritten Rules (Cont’d)
The Impact of Unwritten Rules on Creativity

Negative Consequences of Unwritten Rules

- 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

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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