



SHIFTING THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

BY JON SPRINGER

As many organizations are discovering, sustainable corporate change can be elusive. Why? Because we often fail to ensure that our organization's "unwritten rules"—the invisible forces that drive people's behavior—support the new course that we're striving to chart. These rules, like the bulk of an iceberg, lie below the surface, shaping workplace culture and affecting team, division, and overall organizational functionality. A systemic leader who knows how to surface, analyze, and appropriately alter her organization's unwritten rules wields a great lever for organizational transformation.

What Are Unwritten Rules?

Whether you call them "undiscussables," "tacit understanding," "social norms," or "mental models," unwritten rules comprise an organization's unconscious accumulation of vested interests, history, beliefs, deep feelings, and customs. These rules initially develop as logical coping strategies based on what it takes to succeed within a given corporate climate. Over time, these strategies become an unspoken code that people learn to imitate by observing the behavior and following the advice of others in the organization. According to Robert Hargrove, author of *Masterful Coaching* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002), "These are rules that no one really seems to be in control of and that may be difficult to even clearly articulate, let alone change."

Unwritten rules can have a favorable, detrimental, or neutral influence on an organization. Some rules can undermine change efforts by swaying us to comply with "the way things have always been done around here." In the worst case, they can lead to Enron-like corruption in which honor and accountability become subordinate

to greed. On the other hand, unwritten rules can help organizations maintain coherence and their unique identity, as well as play a critical role in corporate success.

An example of how unwritten rules develop can be seen in the way employees respond to quick fixes such as corporate downsizing. What begins as simple thoughts, such as "I cannot ask for help; my team leader will think I'm incompetent at my job" or "I must look good or I'll end up on the list for the next downsizing," can systematically stifle learning and personal development. Ultimately, this behavior can lead to organizational failure (see "Unwritten Rules of Downsizing").

The more employees want to succeed or survive in an organization, the more likely they are to adapt to and reinforce its unwritten rules. To keep their jobs, they will go along with the status quo. To climb the corporate ladder, they will observe how their predecessors did so and emulate their behavior. Regardless of an organization's stated values and goals, most employees behave according to the unwritten rules that best support their ability to achieve their personal goals.

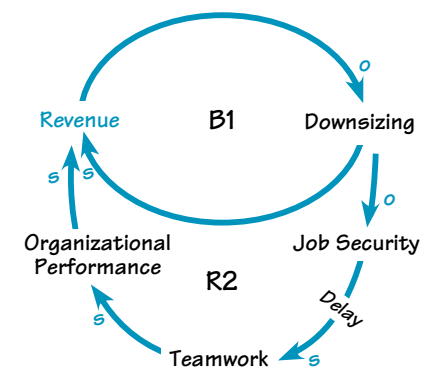
Uncovering Unwritten Rules

How does an organization address its unwritten rules? First, leaders need to expose them. They must do so carefully, because making explicit an organization's inner workings can initially lead to ambiguity and emotional discomfort, conditions that most employees tend to fear and avoid. Leaders must be objective, highly empathetic, and employ methods that ensure that employees feel reasonably safe in disclosing their deep and sometimes previously unarticulated thoughts and feelings about the workplace.

Interview Employees. One way to elicit unwritten rules is to interview employees. As Peter Scott-Morgan states in *The Unwritten Rules of the Game: Master Them, Shatter Them, and Break Through the Barriers to Organizational Change* (McGraw-Hill, 1994), "The goal is to set the interviewee off on a stream of consciousness about the pressures he or she and others feel within the company and how these relate to specific aspects of business performance" (see "Sample Interview Questions" on p. 7). During the interviews, carefully document the responses for future analysis.

Meet with Groups and Distribute Surveys. Another technique is for a leader to conduct group meetings coupled with surveys. Meet with employees of an area undergoing a change initiative to discuss the nature of unwritten rules and workplace assumptions, putting them at ease as

UNWRITTEN RULES OF DOWNSIZING



Fear of job loss leads to thoughts such as, "I must look competent" or "I cannot ask for help." Such thoughts undermine teamwork, collaboration, and learning, ultimately eroding organizational performance. As a result, the company loses revenue and will more likely resort to further downsizing.

Sample questions to uncover unwritten rules include:

- What are the most important behaviors for getting ahead in your area?
- Are people valued more for seniority than for performance? Why?
- If you were teaching a new employee “the ropes,” what would you tell her about your team or organizational culture and practices?
- What has happened to people who have been direct, open, and honest about issues? Why?
- Are problems uncovered or covered up? In what manner is this done? Why?
- What are the ineffective behaviors that we practice in our organization? What are the underlying rules and attitudes that cause these behaviors?

much as possible. Then hand out a survey, consisting of open-ended questions geared to extracting the rules, and give participants a week to submit their responses anonymously. Near the conclusion of the meeting, encourage participants to share some of their responses within the group to elicit additional input.

Solicit Feedback from the Edge. A third method is to seek out the thoughts of those on the “edge.” In *Wide-Angle Vision: Beat Your Competition by Focusing on Fringe Competitors, Lost Customers, and Rogue Employees* (John Wiley & Sons, 1996), Wayne Burkan defines the edge as “trouble-making employees, complaining customers, and fringe competitors who are constantly challenging the rules.” Solicit and analyze feedback from these groups because it often reveals unspoken norms. For example, a customer complaint might reveal that your customer service reps are abiding by the rule, “it is not safe to stick your neck out to address an unhappy customer’s request, so just regurgitate company policy.”

During the uncovering process, not all responses will reflect actual rules. Some may just illuminate symptoms, attitudes, or other unproductive behaviors in the organization. To determine the unwritten rule underlying any input you receive, continue to ask “Why?” until you get to the root cause. If someone says, “It doesn’t pay to work smart,” asking why can elicit, “Because there is no reward for doing so.” Why? “Because management doesn’t link bonuses or appreciation to going the extra mile.” And so forth.

Categorizing Unwritten Rules

Once you uncover an unwritten rule, identify whether it benefits, harms, or has no impact on the organization. To do so, ask whether the rule supports the organization’s best interest, goals, and strategy. If the answer is yes, you should further reinforce and reward it. If the answer is no, you need to determine whether it is neutral and can be ignored or whether it is dysfunctional and needs attention.

An example of an appropriate rule for a department striving for efficiency might be that the first person to arrive in the office each morning turns on the copier, thus enabling coworkers to avoid delays in using the machine. An obsolete/neutral rule might be to change the daisywheel printer ribbon when the type becomes illegible. Because of rapid technological changes, many rules related to technology rapidly drop off the radar screen of organizational memory.

I witnessed a dysfunctional rule in a corporation where the CEO wanted to establish teamwork as an organizational norm. Because he based his management team’s bonuses on their comparative individual performance rather than the organization’s overall performance, the following unwritten rule developed: “The better I look compared to my peers, the more spoils I win.” Consequently, the management team never worked effectively together.

Addressing Unwritten Rules

To counteract the power of dysfunctional rules, leaders must first acknowledge the concerted effort it will take to alter employees’ beliefs and actions.

Then they must choose the best approach for moving forward. In his video *The Paradigm Prism*, Joel Barker advocates that leaders intentionally reverse dysfunctional rules; for instance, “seeking assistance reveals incompetence” could be replaced with “learning from and respecting others is something we value.” Leaders then need to show employees they stand behind the replacement rules by consistently and meaningfully rewarding behavior congruent with them. In the example of the management team whose bonus system contradicted its stated goal of creating teamwork, the reward system could be adjusted to include individual, team, and organizational performance, thus encouraging synergistic effort.

Gaining Competitive Advantage

The bottom line when counteracting dysfunctional rules is to remember that rules drive behavior. Whatever action you take to reverse an unwritten rule must lead unequivocally to the desired behavior. Therefore, before implementing a policy, dictum, or action, carefully consider its possible systemic consequences. Also, routinely observe employee behavior and adjust the drivers of behaviors as necessary through performance metrics, leadership role modeling, or organizational policy. By removing as many obstacles as possible to employees’ efforts to make your organization successful, you can develop a committed, innovative, high-performance culture and gain a competitive advantage.

Unwritten rules and assumptions also exist at the industry level. It is in this realm that even greater potential competitive advantage resides. By transcending the rules and assumptions that shape our worldview, companies can evolve new products, breakthrough innovations, and major industrywide changes. Exposing and effectively responding to the unwritten rules of your industry could catapult your organization to the top of your field. ■

Jon Springer (jspringer@theglobal.net) consults in the fields of leadership, cultural change, and strategic planning.