

# Why the Rules Are There

In a perfect world, we'd all do our jobs with integrity, honesty, safety, and concern for the well-being of stakeholders. The reality is, however that not everyone has the same level of common sense or awareness of consequences, and not everyone can be trusted. This article takes a closer look about why we need rules, and how to set and apply rules that people will respect and follow.

## Why we have rules



Unfortunately, some people take advantage of situations for their benefit. That's why rules are necessary. It's also why you need to understand **why the rules are there** and **what they protect**. When you appreciate this, you can help yourself – and others – follow the rules and build more harmony in the workplace.

There are essentially **two types of rules**:

- those that keep people safe and satisfied,
- those that protect the interests of the organization.

Often these overlap.

A healthy and satisfied worker is usually **more productive**, and therefore both sides benefit. Consider a hospital policy for two nurses to check a drug label before giving it to a patient – this protects the nurses and the hospital from negligence claims (and it protects the patient as well!) When a rule states that before you operate a power saw, you must put the guide in place, wear protective eyeglasses, and never work alone, that's immediately understood and accepted.

When rules protect us, they're much **easier to understand and follow**. In these situations, the rules keep people safe. There's a solid link between the rule and the

potential consequences.

But what if the connection isn't so clear? That's when we may have problems. And these rules are often much more important to the organization's health and well-being.

## Setting the rules the right way

One of the reasons people break rules is that there are **too many of them**, or that they **don't make sense**. Workers usually want to be respected and trusted. When you consider implementing a rule, evaluate it to determine if it's easy and reasonable to follow and what type of reaction it will receive.

Too often, companies establish rules to **make up for poor communication** and a **culture of insensitivity** toward workers. If you think that people on your team abuse their break time, you could set up a rule about how much time they can take during the day to go to the washroom – and then you could have someone track that time! Or, you could try to understand why people are demotivated and spending less time working.

A rule about bathroom breaks will probably do more harm than good. And that defeats the general purpose of a rule – to improve **the health and well-being** of the company and the people who work there.

Having too many rules can be harsh and unfair, and this can **reduce trust**. However, trusting too much and not having enough rules – or not enforcing rules – can be equally damaging.

When you have a team that works well together and things are running smoothly, it's easy to forget about enforcing rules. Let's say you're supposed to get two signatures on every check/cheque, but Sally has been with the company for eight years and is a model worker. You can trust her to sign checks on her own, can't you? Gradually, the "two-signature rule" is forgotten. Until your boss notices \$50,000 missing.

Suddenly, that "two-signature rule" seems very reasonable and necessary. Although you never suspected the consequences, now you're in trouble.

## Making rules that stick

So how do you get people to follow – and enforce – rules? Try these guidelines:

- **Make sure the rule is reasonable.** It should relate to your business interests and not just be a random, "because I said so" rule. If men must have short hair, then be prepared to defend your reasons and show how short hair contributes to success. With any rule or policy, learn about laws that may affect it. Don't violate someone's rights by mistake because you didn't do your research. Most rules should relate to the company's legitimate business interests or be necessary to carry on operations in an orderly and efficient manner.
- **Get staff buy-in.** When people understand why a rule is in place, they're more likely to support it. When you consider a new rule or policy, educate the team about why you're taking action. Discuss the rule, and adjust it to meet everyone's needs.
- **Stress the consequences.** Make sure that people know the consequences of not following the rule. The rule itself must be clear, and the company must tell workers about it before punishing someone for breaking it. Use hypothetical examples to communicate the need for the rule.
- **Track the use of the rule.** To ensure that your rules aren't unnecessary or

silly, monitor how supervisors and managers use them. This way, you'll know whether they're enforced, and enforced equally. You may also identify rules that aren't used at all. If this happens, take some time to figure out why the rule was created in the first place, and determine if it's still necessary or needs updating.

- **Review your rules regularly.** Society and businesses change – and that means your rules have to change too. A few years ago, we couldn't track staff with GPS-enabled cell phones or use the Internet to check out job applicants. Now we need rules for these things.
- **Communicate new rules and changes to old rules.** Use various ways to communicate – posters on bulletin boards, emails, meetings, and fliers. Your goal is for everyone to know the rule, not just the people who are directly affected. Include information on why the rule exists, why it needs to be enforced, and how it will improve the workplace.
- **Train people to enforce the rules.** Communicating that a rule exists isn't enough to make people follow it. Managers and supervisors should know what tools and support are available to them to enforce the rule. Stress that the rule has to be enforced consistently for everyone.

### **Tip:**

Workers should know that, if their behavior is obviously wrong, they can't simply rely on the fact that there's no written rule or they didn't know about the rule. For example, stealing and lying are clearly not allowed, and they can be grounds for discipline.

If a situation is unclear and no rule exists to cover it, ask yourself the following:

- Does the behavior undermine your team's mission?
- Does the behavior undermine the cohesiveness of the team?
- Does the behavior unnecessarily harm the legitimate interests of a member of the team?
- If it does any of these, you may need to take action.

## **Key points**

All workplaces have rules, and staff are expected to follow these rules. However, this isn't guaranteed.

Know how rules are viewed by others and what benefit the rules serve. By being more aware of how rules are interpreted and enforced, you can better understand which rules are needed and which are no longer useful.

Make sure your rules are reasonable, legitimate, and well communicated – and it's more likely they'll be accepted, followed, and enforced.

## **Apply this to your life**

Look at the rules you have right now. Are they reasonable? Why or why not? If they're not reasonable, think of ways to make them stronger or more relevant – and, therefore, easier to enforce.

Do you enforce your workplace rules consistently? Does the team know the consequences of not following the rules? Do you support supervisors in enforcing them? What changes do you need to make sure these things happen?

What rules do you tend to ignore in your own work? Why do you ignore them? If a rule no longer serves a purpose, discuss it with your boss. If you need to be more careful in

following rules, start now. Think of the potential consequences, and decide to be a rule follower.