



The Unwritten Rules: Understanding Unspoken Workplace Norms, Behavior and Culture

The purpose of a for-profit business is to make money for its shareholders. Therefore, it stands to reason that those who help increase the bottom line should rise higher in the organization and earn more than those who don't. If it actually worked this way, the business environment would be an objective meritocracy. But it doesn't.

Promotions, raises, and entry into the executive suite are based on many factors that are difficult to quantify. Some people think the most important of these factors is education, but this is far from accurate. If academic credentials were the key to upward mobility, women would be running the world—or at least the U.S. Women are attaining higher education credentials at an unprecedented rate. As of 2009, females made up 57% of undergraduates and were at parity in most graduate schools. Since we're not running the business world, the key to success must be something else.

That "something else" is what most men know—or learn—and what many women don't: the unwritten rules of business. In fact, some women don't even know there is a game being played. Men, on the other hand, are familiar with the requirements for success because these requirements have been ingrained in them since childhood. Men live and play in a business world that their forefathers created a long time ago and perfected along the way.

Women who think the key to getting ahead is to do their jobs well and even to work above and beyond what is expected of them are missing the complete landscape of the business world. A whole host of contests and competitions is being played around them. These games may have little impact on the company from a financial standpoint, but they improve the status of those who participate in them. Most men understand and know how to use this informal system. Most women do not.

Unwritten rules are written by an organization's leaders and reflect the organization's culture and norms, which include behaviors that may not be apparent or easy to figure out. Employees look to leaders as role models and leaders decide what to reward and what they expect. Often these behaviors are taken for granted and are almost second nature to "what successful employees do." If an employee doesn't have regular access to an organization's leaders, it becomes increasingly difficult to ferret these out which results in career frustration because employees don't know what else they need to do to succeed and advance.

The secret code of business is not that complex. However, it seems perplexing to many women because it is inspired by the male way of doing things. Women who have reached the top positions in business have cracked the code. These female leaders have developed their own playbooks for achievement. These women don't try to be one of the guys. But they follow (or at least understand) the unspoken behavior and norms that

are condoned in the work environment and that contribute to the achievement of their business goals, however far-reaching those goals may be.

Research on Unwritten Rules completed by Catalyst has shown that there are a number of behaviors and actions that influence success in the workplace. The most often mentioned unwritten rule was networking and building relationships within and outside the organization, closely followed by finding ways to become visible and playing politics in lobbying for yourself and your work.

Women who are often playing multiple roles as mother, spouse, head of household, chauffeur, etc. find it difficult to make time for what they consider to be an “extra” responsibility that doesn’t directly deliver value to their organization. Often we put our heads down to get our work done in the most efficient and expeditious manner so that we can get home to our families and the rest of our lives. Women may get frustrated when they realize that they must engage in activities that they don’t consider essential, but that are critical for their success.

One of the goals of SuiteTrack is to help female professionals understand the unwritten rules of the business game. Specifically, we focus on helping women learn how to:

- Brand their passion
- Tactfully promote themselves
- Network successfully inside and outside of their organizations
- Effectively negotiate for what they want
- Own the illusion of confidence
- Use language as a tool for influence

As women begin to apply these rules every day, they become more aware of what they don’t know about the game. They learn to understand the different plays being laid out by their “coaches” and “teammates.” They learn how to observe, ask and gain insight as to what works in their organization and how to plan their day to include more of these activities. And if more women come to know what really goes on in the workplace, perhaps we can take a hammer to the glass that’s been hanging over our heads for much too long.