



Why Rules Hurt

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In the orderly world of business we often wish to clarify confusion with rules. “Why not set the record straight?” But first we must ask: who are the rules really for?

1. The Need for Rules

There often can be no doubt. People are misbehaving and we have to make it clear – especially for those ‘idiots who seem to lack common sense’. To be more generous, we apply rules for an action that while perfectly clear to we managers or business owners, seems to elude the understanding of other people. “Let’s post some rules and stop the carnage!”

2. The Immediate Damage

But what are we doing? With posted rules we are immediately tarring everyone with the same brush. So we punish the innocent (most people) for the sake of the guilty (few people) by creating an environment that is accusatory for a start and appears controlling for an end. Since one of the prime philosophies of a successful enterprise is employee autonomy, the top-down control of posted rules smacks clearly against that empower-the-employee philosophy.

What is the alternative? Talk to the violators, one by one and leave the non-violators out of it. Or talk to the group at your regular meeting, first generally and then, specifically, referring to the violators if you know who they are, but in a somewhat friendly manner. “Ian, I need you to stop throwing your weight around so much in Julie’s territory.” (You can never leave the discussion general because people will figure it applies to everyone else.) Or, if you absolutely feel you must post some rules, have the group draft them, not you. Avoid the top-down, command-and-control approach and gain from both the objectivity of the larger group and its buy-in to the rules the group itself has created.

3. The Long-Term Damage

More important is concern for the long-term damage of posting rules. Just think of when you enter a room in some other business environment that has posted rule-type notices. How does it make you feel? Most people sense a somewhat controlling feeling and often develop an immediate loss of respect for that office or at least for the people who post the notices. Likewise for the residents of that office, a sour and disrespectful climate probably prevails.

As stated above, rules, while not stating explicitly, imply an accusation or blame. In another paper this writer explained how blaming inevitably works against getting long-term results.

Then there is the sense of growing ‘A’ or bureaucracy. Another lesson our consultancy tries to impart to management is to take steps to continually reduce bureaucracy, otherwise it will gain a stranglehold on the enterprise. You actually have to work at reducing ‘A’; it will NEVER reduce itself – unless you are proactively reducing it.

So, in summary, posted rules result in:

- Loss of respect
- Creating blame which is an obstacle to getting results
- An increased bureaucracy

None of which are good for your business.

4. Who are the Rules really for?

When we post rules, most of the time we are responding with our emotions. That is, the rules are for us. And as this and other authors state over and over again, emotions should not dictate the day. They rarely provide long-term wisdom. So, often rules are posted to satisfy our mostly ill-conceived emotions. You might as well punch someone in the nose; it will provide just as much satisfaction to us and as much negative goodwill to others. So the rules are posted to assuage our disturbed feelings. Again, other management papers illustrate the need to defuse emotions. Posting rules works against the principle of defusing emotions.

So, in conclusion, think twice before posting rules. And if you feel you must, the easy and wisest step you can take is ask for a second person’s opinion or contribution before making the posting.

Remember: A notice-free environment is a healthy environment.

Good luck

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