



TOOL

Unwritten Rules

PURPOSE

This tool is designed to give co-leads an understanding of unwritten rules and how their team's unwritten rules affect culture and performance.

When to Use

Use this tool when assessing the progress of your UBT up the Pathway to Performance or when you are concerned about team culture.

Who Uses

Co-leads.

How to Use

Review the information on unwritten rules to learn about how they can affect your team's functioning and performance.

What Are "Unwritten Rules"?

"Unwritten rules" are a cultural phenomenon occurring within work groups to circumvent established rules. They represent an expression of culture, with culture being "how things are really done around here". They are generally created to satisfy and accommodate both individual and organizational needs. In essence, they are behavioral expectations. Over time unwritten rules become team operating norms and are handed down to new members as they are assimilated into the group. They may take the form of workarounds to address individuals for whom formal, established rules do not work or they may address a wide variety of systems, personality, and power issues.

While it is recognized that some unwritten rules are specific to work groups, there are some that exist at Kaiser Permanente which are familiar to all of us. For example:

- **"KP time"** which translates into *"don't show up for meetings on time—we come 10 minutes late."*
- **"The Kaiser nod"**: *"No matter what is said in the meeting, just nod your head "yes." We will get together later and decide if we really mean yes."*
- **"The flavor of the month"**: *"They don't really mean it; if we just wait long enough this too will go away."*

Sometimes, the unwritten rule is created as a workaround to a poor process or procedure that actually creates an inefficient workflow. For example, a scheduling practice which looks good in policy, but in reality, creates a backlog of patients in the waiting room resulting in poor customer service. So, the team "fixes" the problem with a schedule that works for them.

Can you think of any unwritten rules in your department? Are some helpful? Do some actually create barriers for the team and others?



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Barriers Created by “Unwritten Rules”

- Creates a controlled environment with a focus on meeting individual needs.
- Creates resistance to standardization.
- Creates an imbalance of power away from the intended structure.
- Creates communication barriers with other teams who do not understand the rules and have rules of their own.

Advantage of “Unwritten Rules”

In some cases, unwritten rules reduce the impact of poor formal systems and processes.

Strategy to Minimize Negative Impacts

Utilize UBT co-leads to facilitate conversations to surface "unwritten rules" that create barriers to performance, relationships, and communication, and then figure out ways the team can minimize the negative impact.

Leveraging “Unwritten Rules” Conversations

We know that unwritten rules are often developed to solve problems. By discussing the unwritten rules, we can identify the root cause and employ RIM methodology to test solutions. By using RIM methodology, the team can create more effective, fair solutions, increase their ability to solve problems, create more efficient processes, strengthen relationships, and build confidence and trust within the team.