



Unspoken rules often complicate the workplace

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Most companies have rules. All companies have *unspoken* rules.

Unspoken rules are the ones you hear around the water cooler, or having a beer after work with a co-worker.

For managers and their employees, understanding and communicating what some call the "unwritten ground rules" can be tricky.

As a corporate manager, JoAnna Brandi once had her own UGRs. But she doesn't consider them that. They were more like "suggestions," she says, on how to best work for her. "I would deliver them very personally and would introduce them as, 'There are some things I'd like you to know about me,'" she says.

Brandi, a Boca Raton-based customer service expert, recently held a teleconference discussion with managers nationwide on leadership. She based the discussion on the "gut-level, real-world messages of employees to bosses" in the book, *Walk Awhile in My Shoes*, by Eric Harvey and Steve Ventura.

"What do you wish you could say to staff?" she asked the managers.

When Brandi was admittedly a brash young manager, she laid out "JoAnna's Rules of Doing Business" for her staff:

> *If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.* She was asking her staff for options and recommendations, not just complaints.

> *The glass is half full.* Brandi was telling her staff to phrase situations in the positive and they would get much further with her.

> *'Tis better to be 1 percent better at 1,000 things than 1,000 percent better at one.* Consistent and regular work is what counts, she was telling them.

> *Everyone is creative -- everyone.*

Today, with the perspective of a customer service expert, Brandi would deliver her messages differently. For example, Brandi says she would offer guidance to a new employee, but would expect a seasoned employee to come to her for perspective.

"Rather than come to me and say, 'May I do this?' [the employee might say,] 'I've investigated several possibilities and I think this is the right choice for what we need. Could I have your perspective on it?'"

Many inexperienced managers identify themselves as "chief problem solver," she says. "You train your employees to bring problems to you. Then when you want to move up you've trained a whole group of people to not function without you."

To learn more about Unwritten Ground Rules, Brandi teamed with Australian-based Keystone Management Services on an international survey of employees.

More than half of workers finished the statement: "If you've got a problem, the bosses ..." with positive statements. They said bosses "empower you to sort it out" and "are available and willing to listen." But about 30 percent of the responses were negative, such as: bosses "will listen, but don't always take action" and bosses "mostly focus on proving blame, rather than looking for a solution."

On the teleconference, managers said they wanted to tell their employees to be honest with them. "I think people often tell us what we want to hear. I want to hear honest praise and honest frustration," said one participant.

Often, managers have a hard time saying "no" to an employee, Brandi said. "It's as hard to say it as it is to hear it. It makes us feel good when we please others."

Another manager said he would like employees to know how difficult and scary managing can be. "You're often juggling risks and decisions. While you're exhilarated by the risk-taking, you're running around like scared little rats," he said.

Of course, managers don't want to unnerve their employees, showing their stress too much. "But make yourself approachable -- a fellow human being doing the best you can," was one manager's advice to his peers.

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