

## Rules

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### From the Editor

Every year or so, the biz world falls in love with a new catchphrase. The latest? “Burn the boats.”

The phrase has a variety of sources, but it always means the same thing: “Find a way to inspire commitment; make sure there is no turning back.” The story goes that whenever ancient armies sailed into battle, their commanders would “burn the boats” as a means of motivation. Without transportation home, retreat was no longer an option. The only way these soldiers would see their families and friends again would be if they won the battle.

Not a bad catchphrase, I guess. Since it's natural for people to be change-reluctant, it's probably not a bad idea to find ways to motivate people to leave behind old ways of thinking, old ways of doing things.

As I said, not a bad idea. But not a great way to start either.

In our 31 years, we've come to understand that the first and best way to help people change is not to limit their options, but to help them understand why the change needs to be made. That's why we've developed and refined a learning tool called Tabletop Dialogues, designed to help people understand the problems, challenges, and opportunities facing their organization. Once people understand those realities, there is a greater likelihood they'll be change-ready instead of change-reluctant.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

### About the Author and the Article

Sure, occasionally we might wish that the rules of the game were different or that, for a moment, they didn't apply to us. But the truth is, we can't avoid them. And more important than that, if done right, they'll limit frustration and inspire teamwork.

“So if we can't get by without rules,” Stephen writes, “the question isn't, ‘How do we get rid of them?’ Instead, we need to be asking, ‘How do we set them?’ and ‘How do we apply them?’” He goes on to offer four *rules* about rules.

Stephen is a partner in LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication. Stephen has been writing these articles for over 30 years. Many of the past issues of *Management Perspectives* can be found at [www.liveconsultants.com](http://www.liveconsultants.com).



*Stephen Baetz*

# In Bounds

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One night last week I couldn't sleep, so I was flipping through the channels looking for something interesting enough to distract my mind, but ordinary enough that I wouldn't be drawn into it. Eventually, I landed on a movie that looked only vaguely familiar and, at first, only mildly interesting. It was *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

You may have seen it; and if you haven't, you've probably seen ten others just like it; parents and teachers are rule-bound, stuffy, and stodgy; and kids have all the right answers. Like most movies made for teenagers in the 80s, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* celebrates a life without rules. Smart and charming Ferris Bueller decides that life is too short, skips school, outwits his parents and principal, all in order to have an unrestrained, authority-free day roaming the streets of Chicago. He wants to have fun, and what's wrong with a little fun anyway?

In the 80s, these movies were (my boys tell me) incredibly popular. Tom Cruise, Molly Ringwald, and Matthew Broderick were all turned into stars because of them, and their mass appeal was, I think, a direct result of their endorsement of a life without rules. A life without constraints and considerations is infinitely more compelling and exciting to a teenage mind, than a life of guidelines, boundaries, and restrictions.

Those movies were popular in the 80s, but on that sleepless night, I couldn't help but be fascinated by their limited view of the world. To my mind, a life without rules is rare, if not impossible, and not even desirable. There's a moment in the movie when Ferris turns to his best friend and says, "Hey, Cameron. You realize if we played by the rules right now we'd be in gym?" The line earned a small chuckle, but more important than that, it got me thinking.

It's not that Ferris doesn't have any rules; it's just that he doesn't want to play by the rules set out for him by others. He has rules, lots of them: rules about what a friend should do; rules about what a fun day in Chicago is; rules about tricking your parents into thinking you are sick. His rules are obvious, elaborate, and constant. For almost the entire movie, he is

instructing his friend and the audience about the rules for a rule-free life. The irony is thick.

I didn't get a whole lot of sleep that night and, for the next couple of days, I was thinking about the *rules* for rules: how to set them and how to apply them. Like Ferris, we might dream occasionally about a life without rules, but the truth is we can't get by without them. Imagine, for instance, life without rules that tell us which side of the road to drive on. Or life without rules that define personal safety and security, that declare on what, when, and how we should pay tax, or on what basis we can or can't discriminate, or even whether people can walk into a theatre once the house lights have been dimmed. Sure, we might wish the rules were slightly different, but I don't think many of us who have emerged from adolescence truly wish for no rules, no traffic laws, no safety and security laws, no equity guidelines, no tax money to fund programs and institutions, no rules to minimize interruptions during a play.

And in the business world, imagine life without rules or guidelines that define what is ethical, what is suitable in an interaction with customers or colleagues, what the hours of work are, what dress code is acceptable, or even what behaviour at meetings is appropriate. A life without rules almost guarantees a life with frustration.

So if we can't get by without rules, rules that protect us from sliding down that slippery slope toward frustration, the question isn't, "How do we get rid of them?" Instead, we need to be asking "How do we set them?" and "How do we apply them?" And if we do it right, we'll limit frustration in our organizations, in our departments, and on our teams.

## The Rules about Rules

Since that late night, I've come up with four rules about rules. There may be more but, when it comes to rules, fewer is usually better.

*Rule 1: Make the expectations clear.*

People can't do what they don't understand. Sounds simple enough, I know. But when it

comes to setting rules, that simple idea has a number of implications. If the rules are too long or too confusing, people won't understand exactly what it is they're being asked to do. If the rules are too abstract, they'll be left to guess at what, exactly, is acceptable. And if there are too many rules, people won't be able to remember them all. And for those reasons, the explanation may be much longer, but a rule itself should never be more than ten words, with no word that has more than three syllables. The language needs to be simple and concrete — which means easy to understand, remember, and follow.

*Rule 2: Connect the rule to a reason and a consequence.*

When I was growing up, my mother (like every other mother at the time) had a house rule: pockets of any clothes we put down the laundry chute had to be empty, Kleenex out of the pockets for sure. As an eight year old, the reason for that rule never made sense and only got in the way of doing much more important *stuff*. Until. Until I had to spend time picking lint. Suddenly, an apparently arbitrary rule had a very good reason to support it.

When we set rules in our organizations, we ought to explain why the rules we set are helpful and the consequence of not following the rule. Maybe safety standards have changed. Maybe current behaviour isn't meeting our customers' expectations. Whatever the reason, make sure it clearly explains the why of the what.

*Rule 3: Make certain the rules are for everyone and apply to everyone.*

“Star treatment” is a common phrase in professional sports; in the entertainment world, the reference is not flattering — it's called “being a prima donna.” Any way you put it, it means that if you're perceived to be important enough, the refs, coaches, producers, or directors treat you differently — no matter your demands, no matter how many times you break the rules that apply to everyone else.

In organizations, star treatment and giving in to prima donnas is dysfunctional. Best-selling author, Malcolm Gladwell has written at length about the collapse of Enron as the failure of a system that allowed different individuals to play by different rules. That argument, if none other, is enough to convince me that everyone has to play by the same rules. When employees at the same level or on the same team are allowed to operate under different rules, it breeds resentment and erodes leadership credibility.

The flipside is to make rules in order to curb the behaviour of one person; that too breeds resentment and acts to fuel cynicism about whether those in leadership have enough backbone to address difficult situations.

*Rule 4: Ensure the rules are enforceable.*

There is a reason why the speed limit on major highways isn't 40 km/hr or why there isn't a law that says that all citizens have to wear a uniform at all times, aside from their obvious absurdity. No one would be able to enforce them. After so many years of fast driving, police would never be able to pull over every single car that broke the 40 km/hr limit and the government would have no real-world way to enforce some national dress code.

So, if you're not willing to enforce the dress code, start times, behaviour guidelines, safety standards, then there's no reason to send around a memo announcing them. Some may take your ideas seriously; most won't. And that will only create internal confusion, division, animosity, and conflict.

### **Be Selective**

Of course, I'm not suggesting that every interaction, every aspect of organizational life needs to be rule-bound. We need to choose carefully when rules are needed. But the fact of the matter is, we can't get away from them; and, more important, when set and applied with care, rules are often helpful. Call me an optimist, but I like to think that when he grew up, Ferris just might have understood that.

# If You Want to Get Everybody on the Same Page ...



**You First Have to Get Their Elbows on the Tabletop.**

## **You can't do what you don't get.**

Lots of organizations have good strategies. But excellence is in the execution. Every employee, every team, must implement flawlessly. To do that, they need to get the big picture. Everyone must get it.

## **Tabletop Dialogues**

is an easy-to-administer learning process that helps everyone *get it*. As a result of participating in a dialogue, employees align their effort with the direction of the organization and are more change-ready.

## **Tabletop Dialogues**

centre on a large information-rich visual that is placed on a table and explored by a group of 8 people. A facilitator leads the group in a focused dialogue and helps the group draw conclusions about the challenges and opportunities the organization is facing.

## **Tabletop Dialogues**

start with members of senior management determining the key issues facing the organization. Hard data are assembled and transformed into information-rich tables, charts, and graphs that become incorporated into the visual.

## **Tabletop Dialogues**

engage the hearts and minds of every employee in the issues facing the business.

## **In the end ...**

Everyone gets it! Then the elbows come off the table and everyone leaves the room ready to work on what is really important to organizational success.

**For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.**

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