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The Unwritten Rules of Organisational Life: How Unspoken Expectations, Workplace Norms and Relational Obligations Shape Employee Behaviour

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Abstract

Organisations have formal policies, job descriptions and procedures along with an invisible system of unwritten rules that influences people's thoughts, interactions, behaviours and actions. These non-explicit expectations have an impact on relationship with others, management interactions, communication, behaviour, and how success is perceived within an organisation. Frequently, employees find that their behaviors that may be rewarded in practice are not outlined in an organisational's formal policies. Such expectations as being able to work outside of the workplace, not contesting decisions with an authority figure, having a relationship with influential peers, showing loyalty to the organisation and putting organization demands first over personal boundaries are not necessarily written in the policy and may become part of the routine landscape of organization life. This concept paper explores the impact of tacit rules of an organization on employee acts, relishes with acquaintances at work and organization culture. The paper builds on Organisational Culture Theory, Psychological Contract Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Socialisation Theory and the Social Norms Theory for a holistic perspective on the formation, transmission, interpretation and reinforcement of informal expectations within an organisation. It outlines a conceptual model relating informal organisational norms and norms interpreted by employees, relational obligations, employee responses, and organisational outcomes. The changing landscape of the workplace is explored deeply, especially the hybridized way of working, increasing telematics, the multi-generational workplace, increasing workplace silence, the quiet quitting, as well as differing perceptions of the limits of work and life. Organisational life is much more than written policies, job descriptions or formal documented procedures. There is an unwritten set of rules that govern the interactions, dynamics, processes and perceptions of employees, impacting on how they communicate, interact with one another, how they make decisions in their work and their views of organizational effectiveness. This paper offers a discussion of unwritten rules of organisations pointing to their role as one of the important, yet understudied, mechanisms for organisational culture formation, transmission and sustainment. These rules have beneficial consequences for: social integration, co-operation, exchange of knowledge, interpersonal support. When they inculcate the ideas of unquestioned hierarchy, availability, favouritism, emotional compliance and silence, however, its impact is to jeopardise employee health, trust and organisational functioning. The Unwritten Organisational Norms Framework suggested in this study adds to the body of organisational behaviour literature by considering the role of the informal norms of formation and their relationship with employee interpretation, relational obligations, behaviour responses and organisational outcomes. Moreover, hybrid work, tight connection with the digital world, and new employees expectations and work relationships have been included to understand these dynamics. In

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conclusion, organisations must be mindful of the fact that people – their employees – will not do what is codified into policy strictly by rote. They also act on the rules that they observe, experience and learn within the regular interactions in the organisation.

***Keywords**: Unwritten Organisational Rules, Informal Workplace Norms, Organisational Culture, Psychological Contract, Employee Behaviour, Workplace Relationships, Employee Silence, Socialisation, Organisational Trust, Human Resource Management.*

Introduction

The traditional definition of organisations is in terms of their formal structure, policies, reporting relationships, performance management systems and codes of conduct. Recruitment is done in a consistent manner and responsibilities are given via job description statements and checked off to a set level of performance. Real world organisation however, is far more than these formal arrangements. Expectations that are not officially communicated or formally documented can affect the daily behaviors of employees, who often find that they should feel some sort of responsibility for an employee's behavior. Very often, employees will find situations in which some expectations concerning their employees' behaviors influence the employee's very day to day behavior and they should have some kind of responsibility as regards their behavior.

These expectations can encompass not to argue with top management, replying to work emails while not in work hours, being friendly with key people, showing up and being supportive, and not challenging existing processes or protocols and not doubting who has an informal influence. These expectations can affect white collar career prospects, other relationships and understandings of organisational acceptance and can not be found in policy documentation.

This invisible aspect of organisational life can be called the “rules of organisational life, that you don't write.” These are unspoken attitudes and unwritten obligations to another person, which employees pick up as a result of their observations, relationships with others, signals from them and experiences in the company. They express the actual expectations of what employees should do – and these may be contrary to formal organisational policies.

An organisation can, for instance, decree a work-life balance in employees. But, it might come to the realization that those who pipeline late-night messages get more managerial appreciation and visibility. In short; over time it turns into an informal sign of commitment if they allow themselves to be available outside of their regular working hours. For instance, the organisation can encourage employees to participate, and employees may learn that they could have a negative impact on the working relationship if they ask a senior manager a question.

An important difference between formal rules and informal expectations is that employees may adjust their behaviour according to the rules they encounter as they adjust to the organisation they are a part of rather than simply implement their formal rules. Informal rules can have an impact in ways in which employees communicate, look for recognition, handle disputes, share information, and build relationships with their co-workers.

This is a phenomenon that is now more relevant in the world of work. New styles of informal behaviour pressures have appeared due to hybrid working, digital communication, flexibility at work and a growing set of employee demands resulting in multigenerational teams. Staff can have stipulated flexibility, but may feel responsible for being 'available at all times' anyway. Flexibility, formally agreed upon, but staff may feel responsible to be 'available'. Expressive communication can be important for younger workers as well, but they face informal norms of respecting authority. While an employee might be told to be creative, he might also be told that working with the manager's practices is not desired.

More recent work confirms that it is significant to explore these un-formal processes. This informal dimension is an important one, albeit comparatively neglected, in the organisational realm, as revealed through the reviews of the 184 articles reported by Methot, Frank and Shin (2026). The authors call such communication acts, workplace social glue, and explain the positive and/or negative outcomes that can emerge from these.

In this context, this article examines the dynamics of how unwritten norms come into being, how they impact on employees' actions and how they affect interpersonal relationships within the employment context. It addresses three questions:

- How are unwritten organisational expectations created and transmitted within organisations?
- How do informal norms and relational obligations influence employee behaviour, voice and workplace relationships?
- How can organisations distinguish constructive informal norms from those that undermine employee well-being and organisational effectiveness?

The paper develops a conceptual framework to explain these relationships and offers implications for contemporary human resource management.

Conceptualising Unwritten Rules of Organisational Life

Unwritten organisational rules are rules that exist outside of formal rules, policies, contracts, and procedures that inform employee behaviour. They are shaped by repeated interaction, shared beliefs, the culture of the workplace, and managerial behavior and inter-person dynamics.

- **Norms that are unwritten, as opposed to formal rules, are often learned by looking and experiencing.**

An employee could be given formal information relating to reporting lines, hours worked and the expectations for performance if they are employed by a new organisation. But over time, the worker might find that there are other requirements—who requires advance consultation from them, who they'll check in with informally before making a decision, when it's okay to disagree, and who gets the credit of which professional?

These expectations are a disguised communication of a behavioural system.

The game is both a written and an unwritten rule game.The game is a formal rules and unwritten rules game.

Formal rules of an organisation determine the recognised rules of conduct. Unwritten rules are informal rules employees feel they must follow or follow-up to work properly in the organisation.

Formal policy may be designed to entice employees to share their ideas openly with the management, while informal may be in place to discourage any disagreement at senior-level meetings.

Likewise, even though an employee leaves work at 5 PM, maybe they think that going home early may be seen as a lack of dedication by the employee.

The separation does not imply that informal rules can be necessarily bad. Many are useful due to the fact that they help coordination, cooperation and social integration. This may be a problem if it leads to contradictions, inequalities or pressure that the workers (employees) are not easily able to address.

- **Relational Obligations**

Relational obligations are obligations, which are established in relation to interpersonal and professional relationships. The workers might get a sense of obligation to fellow staff, feel a need to respond to management support, remain loyal to bosses or refrain from doing things that might harm management-staff relationships.

Such obligations are not always (explicitly) negotiated in advance. They are worked out in repeated exchanges, or through professional dependence and social expectations.

For example, one employee that gets a lot of encouragement from a boss, he might be reluctant [to say no] to more work, even if he has too much on his plate.

This shows how informal relationship expectations can manifest beyond work-related decisions.

- **The Hidden Curriculum of Organisations**

Organisations also have an informal learning environment in which the employees learn what behaviour is rewarded, tolerated, or discourages.

This may be considered a covert organisational curriculum.

When a new appointee is introduced into the organisation, they can officially learn the policies but normally form an unspoken agreement with colleagues and supervisors as to how the appointee is expected to behave.

For instance, if the employee finds that in official meetings, innovations are encouraged, then they may learn that organizational change, that is, altering of how things are done, should be done informally by senior colleagues.

Organisation socialisation thus entails learning as well as the formal and informal behaviours of the organisation.

Theoretical Foundations

The proposed study draws upon five theoretical perspectives.

- **Organisational Culture Theory**

Organisational culture is described in Schein's (2010) description of artefacts, espoused values and underlying assumptions.

Assumptions tend to be very much linked to unwritten rules as they reflect the beliefs of work colleagues about how employees are expected to behave and about how the relationships within the organisation can work.

For instance, an organisation might formally defend equality and have an informal belief that the senior employees in the organisation don't challenge.

These ideas become entrenched as a result of consistent interactions and managerial reinforcement.

This theory states that there are unspoken rules which can be understood as creating organisation culture, even in the absence of instructions.

- **Psychological Contract Theory**

According to Rousseau (1989), psychological contracts are what employees hold as a set of beliefs about the reciprocal obligations that they currently have within their organisation (s.Rousseau (1989) defines psychological contracts as an employee's set of beliefs of reciprocal relationships he/she now has with the organization.

These obligations can be in addition to documented employment contracts. Employees are entitled to be recognized, treated fairly, have a career and managerial support.

Meanwhile, expectations that include loyalty, flexibility, availability and readiness to take on extra duties can also become tacit in organizations.

For instance, someone might think that if they work overtime every day, they will become a manager or be recognized for it in the end. If these expectations are not met, the employee might feel a psychological contract violation has occurred.

As such unwritten rules within the organization can influence employees' expectations regarding their work relationship to the organization.

- **Social Exchange Theory**

Blau (1964) provides an explanation for social exchange as being reciprocal relations in which people react to benefits, supports, and obligations that are received from others.

In the workplace, workers often pass each other the ball in a way that implies giving advice, helping, providing information, or professional assistance. Within workplaces, there are often ad hoc interactions with advice, assistance, information and professional support.

If you are helping someone on a challenging project, for instance, they might be willing to return the favor later when you help them.

When meaningful, exchanges give a boost to the dynamics within their workplace. If workers feel required to comply with the manager's favour (or social support), however, they can become problematic.

Thus, Social Exchange Theory can account for the effect of the informal relational obligations on employee behaviours.

- **Socialisation Theory**

Organisational socialisation is the process by which the employee acquires organisational values, expectations and patterns of behaviour needed to operate in an organisation.

Van Maanen and Schein (1979) emphasize the need to have in-depth socialization of newcomers to acknowledge the roles and expectations of the organisation.

New hires often get this tacit knowledge, by observing others, listening and hearing them, the examples they set, and observing them interact with employees.

According to Ambrosius (2024), in his bibliometric overview of 452 papers, there are different research fields which are covered sufficiently in studies on organisational socialisation such as manifestations of psychological contracts, relationship building, supervisor interactions and changing work contexts.

Bauer et al. (2024) also examined and meta-analyzed recent studies on newcomer socialisation and discuss the relevance of employee adjustments and socialisation experiences.

The studies lay the groundwork for exploring the norms that are silently passed on from one generation of an organisation to the next.

- **Social Norms Theory**

It is a theory of how values of behavior and beliefs of others within their social environment affect a person's actions, known as Social Norms Theory.

Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren (1990) assert that descriptive norms reflect common actions of people, as distinguished from injunctive norms which reflect people's approval or expectations.

At work, they might think people all get a message late into the night and all work that way, "that's the way things are done". If they don't even follow the same behaviour formally, they can start to do so anyway to avoid looking like they are uncommitted.

This theory is driven by the process of norms becoming normalised and entrenched with collective action.

Major Unwritten Rules in Contemporary Organisations

Organisational rules can manifest themselves either explicitly in written documents or implicitly in daily working routines, which depend on the structure and practice of organisations and the importance attached to leadership roles by workers. There are some patterns which are of special relevance for current organizations.

- **The Rule of Unquestioned Hierarchy**

While a lot of organisations foster employees' participation, informally employees' expectations may not lead them to question senior managers.

Staff may understand that there are certain situations in which it is not suitable to disagree openly, raise suggestions or contradict other decisions.

For instance, a young worker in an Indian manufacturing company might notice that something in the process is inefficient, but is afraid to disagree with an elder member of the team in a group meeting. The employee might think that it is an act of disrespect and not participation.

This expectation is non-formal, which decreases employee voice and organisational learning.

- **Optical Illusions**

New expectations of employee accessibility have been introduced with digital communication.

While in a formal sense having a set work schedule, employees can feel obliged to respond to messages outside their hours.

When managers are sending messages late in the day, they may be sending them in such a way that they may not be comprehended to mean that their messages should be acted upon immediately. A sense of commitment and loyalty may be perceived by staff as being indicated by availability over time.

One emphatically noteworthy advancement is the conceptual work of Mdhluli (2026) in terms of psychological contracts relating to the expectations of connectivity. It provides insight into the potential consequences of digital availability becoming an informal guideline that is expected and when breached can undermine trust in the workplace.

- **Relationship Based Access – The Rule**

Workers can find that soft factors such as networks and proximity to others can have an impact on their professional paths, in addition to formal assessment.

For instance, those team members who have regular contact with powerful managers may be provided with more information, visibility and professional opportunity.

This informal network can aid in collaboration, the sharing of information, etc., but it can raise awareness of favouritism and access inequities.

- **The Rule of Emotional Compliance**

Staff may be put on the spot as to the importance of smiling, never confronting and appearing agreeable as expressions of good professional standards.

As a result, they can sometimes suppress their real concerns or disagreement so as to have harmony in the office.

A person may deal with a particular decision publicly against an opinion that is different privately.

This shows how expectations can be informal and impact emotional expressions and professions.

- **Has Depicted Visual Participation**

A commitment is seen in the actions of an individual and not in productivity in some work setting.

Those who don't take lunch breaks or show a quick response to managerial information might be accused of 'burning the candle at both ends' and "working longer than expected" compared to workers producing equal output in an acceptable timeframe.

These can lead to presenteeism, which can put an unnecessary strain on staff.

They could additionally challenge organisations' formal programmes of flexibility and productivity scrutiny.

Contemporary Trends Reshaping Unwritten Workplace Rules

The nature of unwritten organisational expectations is changing as organisations adapt to technological, demographic and structural transformations.

- **Hybrid Work and Proximity Expectations**

The new rule is not to be at work by the job title when hybrid working has come into the world, but to be seen as professional and be able to communicate.

Some remote employees might think they have to speak up more to prove they are being productive. In the meantime, if they work in offices on a business-as-usual basis, they might get a boost in informal exposure and opportunities to engage with management.

In August 2026, a Euro found report on the managerial challenges of hybrid working highlights the following aspects: Coordination, team cohesion, access to information, fairness and employee wellbeing. It has also stated that about a quarter of EU's workers work in a hybrid manner. The autonomous working time and place profile is shared by 48% of hybrid workers, whereas 22% of them report little decision over the working time, and little decision over location.

The results highlight how important it is to have a clear and equitable expectation within organisations, instead of assuming that things are like they always were/are.

- **Digital Connectivity and the Right to Disconnect**

Advances in digital monitoring, and collaboration software and platforms, and messaging applications have blurred the lines between where and when work happens.

Employees might feel that they have to communicate right away, be 'on' the web at all times or to communicate on personal time.

The 2026 systematic review published in the Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health looked at interventions and policies aimed at reducing after-hour availability expectations and work-related connectivity. It is focused on the increasing significance of organisational boundaries and how well disconnection measures are working.

This development opens a meaningful area for research with emphasis on how employees perceive this unstated part of the psychological contract and how it affects the relationship between employees and employers.

- **Quiet Quitting and Employee Expectations Ceasing to Be expectations.**

Rumors also circulate about the quiet quitting movement - this is a change in attitude about work, personal limits and organisational needs.

A 2025 study by Griep, et al, from Human Resource Management, takes a psychological contracts-based and organisational justice/social exchange-based approach to quiet quitting. It takes distinction with quiet quitting, which deliberately satisfies the bare requirements of a job, rather than quiet quitting, which refers to its causes, and results.

This applies to unwritten rules, in that staff may reduce their discretionary efforts if they feel that expect too much from them in informal organisational settings as opposed to their formal roles.

For instance, an employee might progressively seek to limit activities to those that are formally assigned, as one person who has taken on additional roles without being rewarded may choose to only work in those roles, restricting activities to those formally assigned.

- **Generational Expectations and Changing Workplace Norms**

Workplace Attitudes can vary among staff of diverse age group.Different age groups of employees can have different expectations of the workplace.

Others might feel that it's a personal duty to address senior management at any hour, and others might think it is an unnecessary encroachment on personal time.

These differences shouldn't be made just because someone is an adult, though. There are also differences among people in their values, at stage of career, or in their experience of occupation and organisation.

HR managers need to create shared and shared understanding of expectations and remain cognizant of legitimate differences in preferences of workers.

- **Informal Communication and Workplace Relationships**

The informal, informal communication continues to shape the understanding of the employee on organisational culture.

Methot et al. (2026) analysed 184 research articles on informal social communication in organisations and played highlighted its importance and function for relationship building, social connection and workplace interactions.

This type of communication can contribute to employees getting a sense of “how things work around here” and of forming a professional network or acquiring informal knowledge. It can also lead to gossiping, exclusion and the spread of unofficial information, however!

Informal communication however is a crucial arena in which organisational norms are established and spread.

Proposed Conceptual Framework: The Unwritten Organisational Norms Framework

Based on the theoretical discussion, this paper proposes the **Unwritten Organisational Norms Framework (UONF)**.

The framework explains how informal expectations emerge within organisations and influence employee behaviour through five interconnected stages.

- **Stage 1: Organisational Context and Informal Norm Formation**

Formal policies, leadership behaviour, organisational hierarchy, peer interactions and workplace culture create the environment in which unwritten rules develop.

- **Stage 2: Transmission of Unwritten Expectations**

Employees learn informal rules through observation, socialisation, managerial signals, informal conversations and professional relationships.

- **Stage 3: Employee Interpretation and Relational Obligations**

Employees interpret these expectations in terms of acceptance, career security, professional reputation, reciprocity and interpersonal relationships.

- **Stage 4: Employee Behavioural Responses**

Employees may respond through compliance, cooperation, employee voice, silence, impression management, boundary-setting or withdrawal of discretionary effort.

- **Stage 5: Organisational Outcomes**

These responses influence organisational trust, psychological safety, belongingness, knowledge sharing, employee well-being and organisational effectiveness.

The framework also recognises three contextual factors:

- **Leadership accountability:** Whether managers demonstrate and reinforce fair behavioural expectations.
- **Psychological safety:** Whether employees feel comfortable questioning informal practices.
- **Organisational transparency:** Whether expectations and performance standards are communicated clearly.

These factors may determine whether unwritten rules become constructive social mechanisms or restrictive organisational pressures.

Research Propositions

The proposed framework generates the following propositions for future empirical investigation.

- **Proposition 1:** Stronger informal organisational norms significantly influence employee behaviour, even when these norms are not formally documented.
- **Proposition 2:** The transmission of unwritten rules through organisational socialisation influences employees' perceptions of acceptable workplace behaviour.
- **Proposition 3:** Relational obligations mediate the relationship between informal workplace expectations and employee compliance behaviour.
- **Proposition 4:** Perceived psychological safety moderates the relationship between restrictive unwritten norms and employee silence, such that higher psychological safety weakens this relationship.
- **Proposition 5:** Perceived inconsistency between formal organisational policies and informal workplace expectations negatively influences organisational trust.
- **Proposition 6:** Leadership accountability and organisational transparency strengthen constructive informal norms and reduce the negative consequences of restrictive unwritten expectations.
- **Proposition 7:** The relationship between unwritten organisational norms and employee behaviour varies across institutional and cultural contexts.

Illustrative Organisational Examples

New informal rules about working in person and about communicating, representation of oneself professionally arise with hybrid working.

Chatting with coworkers may seem like an effective way for employees who are working at home to show their productivity. In the meantime, employees consider the following hypothetical Indian IT company that has a pro-formation policy about flexibility and work-life balance. Part-time working is

allowed in provision of designated days. There are often, however, senior management team meetings that go on late into the evening which is when employees are expected to respond urgently to late night messages, and the latter are appreciated.

It isn't official policy that employees have to be "available," but over time, we come to think of it as a commitment. Some begin to work harder to be _ noticed_ by the manager, others become irritated and decrease their discretionary effort.

This is not actually codified in the organisation, it's more like a guideline set by how the jobs are conducted – being intentionally available on digital platforms is considered to be proof of member engagement with the workforce.

For example, it can be a fictional global company selling product in India and Europe. An organisation's culture encourages employees' voice and participative decision making. In one of the areas, however, staff realize that decisions in the organization are more likely to be taken by informal dialogue discussed between top managers before the formal meetings.

Individuals who don't belong to these networks might think they have regular processes to be involved but are feeling likened to being left out.

The third one is a story on an HEI that fosters collaboration and the development of research innovations in an institutional setting. But younger professors may suspect challenging of traditional academic customs may be at odds with faculty seniors. Therefore, some of them will not be able to share the non-conforming ideas during the department's meetings.

The examples demonstrate that rules that are not documented exist outside of corporate organizations. They can impact relationships in the workplace in education, healthcare, banking, manufacturing and public administration.

Implications for Human Resource Management

The general framework has a number of implications for HR practitioners and organisational leaders.

- **Determine requirements in the "Invisible" Workplace Environment**

Organisations should review their formal policy and how effective it is in practice. Informal expectations that may be causing undue pressure can be uncovered through the use of employee surveys, confidential interviews, focus groups and exit interviews.

- **Showing Interest in the project's work.9.4 Standing up for the project.**

There are clear expectations to be communicated by organisation in relation to working hours, digital availability, professional working norms, voice of staff and norm of performance as well as managerial communication.

For instance, if immediate replies to after hours messaging aren't mandatory, managers need to make this clear.

- **Strengthening Managerial Accountability**

Managers are a critical part of shaping informal workplace work cultures. Managing relationships with others through fair play, respectful communication, psychological safety and an awareness of the use and abuse of managerial power should, therefore, be a focus of development on leadership programmes.

- **Reforming Organisational Socialisation**

Induction programmes should cover formal policies as well as the anticipated set of Professional Relationships and Professional Practice policies in respect of ethics.

But organisations need not simply relegate bad ideas of casual practices as facts of organizational life.

- **Protecting Employee Voice**

It is important that staff can research and point out accepted practices without fear of retribution. Restrictive norms can be detected through anonymous feedback mechanisms, with discussions that are open and participative decision-making.

- **Support Sustainable Work Practices**

There is a balanced discussion about commitment and over-availability. Evaluation of performance should have outcomes, quality/acontribution as its focus, not measures of visibility or presenteeism.

Future Research Directions

The proposed framework can be studied on an empirical basis from different organisations in India or other countries in the future.

Comparative studies could examine the relationship between institutional hierarchy, leadership behaviours and cultural norms and their impact on the unwritten rules of the organisation.

A qualitative study may be used to investigate learning informal norms in the workplace and the changes in these norms over the course of the employees' careers.

A measure scale may also be created to determine how restrictive or constructive (operational or moderator) individuals perceive the organizational expectations and norms to be that remain silent.

One could hypothesize that repeated exposure to restrictive informal regulation may lead to employee silence, psychological contract violation, intentions to quit their jobs quietly, and turnover intentions, and could undergo examination in longitudinal studies.

But a timely avenue of inquiry should focus on unwritten rules in a hybrid workplace, especially one where employees are constantly online and available.

Conclusion

Organisational life is much more than written policies, job descriptions or formal documented procedures. There is an unwritten set of rules that govern the interactions, dynamics, processes and perceptions of employees, impacting on how they communicate, interact with one another, how they make decisions in their work and their views of organizational effectiveness.

This paper offers a discussion of unwritten rules of organisations pointing to their role as one of the important, yet understudied, mechanisms for organisational culture formation, transmission and sustainment.

These rules have beneficial consequences for: social integration, co-operation, exchange of knowledge, interpersonal support. When they inculcate the ideas of unquestioned hierarchy, availability, favouritism, emotional compliance and silence, however, its impact is to jeopardise employee health, trust and organisational functioning.

The Unwritten Organisational Norms Framework suggested in this study adds to the body of organisational behaviour literature by considering the role of the informal norms of formation and their relationship with employee interpretation, relational obligations, behaviour responses and organisational outcomes.

Moreover, hybrid work, tight connection with the digital world, and new employees expectations and work relationships have been included to understand these dynamics.

In conclusion, organisations must be mindful of the fact that people – their employees – will not do what is codified into policy strictly by rote. They also act on the rules that they observe, experience and learn within the regular interactions in the organisation.

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