

# UNWRITTEN RULES

Organizational Change & Workplace Design

Unwritten Rules, Organizational Change & Workplace Design

Allsteel / Leitner Insights

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# **UNWRITTEN RULES**

**Organizational Change & Workplace Design**

## About This Book

This is the transcript of a talk delivered at the 2018 CoreNet Global Summits in Madrid and Boston. It is the third in a series of presentations by Allsteel and its research partners to share science, original research, and new findings that will shape the future of workplace-making and our industry.

The talk was delivered by Jeff Leitner, who just completed his fourth year as innovator at residence at the University of Southern California, and Jan Johnson, vice president of design and workplace resources at Allsteel.

The first two presentations in this series, on factors that correlate with knowledge worker productivity, were delivered at CoreNet Global Summits in 2016 and 2017. White papers summarizing that research are available to CoreNet Global members at the online Knowledge Center (<http://corenetglobal.org/KCO/landing.aspx>) and to the public via Allsteel (<http://www.allsteeloffice.com/design-resources/workplace-trends>).

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“ **There seems to be an unwritten rule on Wall Street: If you don't understand it, then put your life savings into it.** ”

**Peter Lynch**  
American investor and philanthropist

**You're surrounded in every part of your life by invisible forces that shape your behavior.**



“

JEFF LEITNER:

**You are surrounded in every part of your life by invisible forces that shape your behavior.**

I get that this sounds crazy, like science fiction: forces that influence how you behave whenever you're around other people, how you act and what you say in life's most important and least consequential moments.

But they're not fantastical or supernatural. In fact, they're perfectly normal and quite natural. And we've known about them for at least 2,500 years.

Figure 1: Invisible Forces



But before we dig into what the forces are, let's look at them in action.

**Remember when you took a special someone home to meet your family for the first time?**

It was the big introduction of your boyfriend, your girlfriend, your husband, or your wife. And as you're pulling up to the house or the restaurant or your cousin's wedding, you turn to him or her and say: "Look, my family is weird. Whatever you do, don't do this" or "You must do that."

Take a minute and think about what you said in that moment. Or, if you haven't had this joyful experience yet, what you will say when you subject the person you love to your weird family?

I'll go first. I have a 19-year-old daughter and I asked her what she tells guys before she brings them home.

She says she tells them to be social and outgoing. She says: "Even if you're uncomfortable and don't know what to say, say something. Because if you don't, my parents will think you're boring, and if they think you're boring, they won't like you."

And then she tells them, "And if they don't like you, they'll probably wear me down and then I won't like you."

I, for one, am not crazy about being described as judgmental. But there you go.

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JAN JOHNSON:

### **In my family, the test prospective boyfriends or girlfriends had to pass was decorating Christmas cookies**

– with my rather difficult dad as judge and jury. That may sound like no big deal, but it was at my house.

Each year, my mother would make something like 40 different batches of Christmas cookies. She'd start in September and finish up the week before Christmas.

Everybody's favorite was also the most time consuming: cut-out, wafer-thin sugar cookies. There was a whole ritual each year when she got to that batch: once they'd cooled, my mom would carefully ice them herself, then transfer them to dinner plates in front of my Dad and each of us kids.

Colored sugars would have already been poured into small, shallow glass bowls, arranged down the middle of the kitchen table. Then each of us would use our fingers to carefully gather up a small amount of the chosen color and carefully, artfully sprinkle it onto the iced cookie.

**If you overdid it, got sloppy, or accidentally mixed one color into another's glass bowl, you were done and definitely not invited back.**

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JEFF LEITNER: Here's another situation. Imagine onboarding someone you really like, maybe your very closest friend, to your company.

**Imagine giving someone you care about their new employee orientation.**

“Look, this place is great, but it's weird. Whatever you do, don't do this.” Or “You must do that.”

Again, I'll go first. About 20 years ago, I joined a public affairs consulting firm in Chicago. I was really lucky. This was a prestigious collection of experienced political operatives, the kind of super smart, super connected people who help decide who gets elected and who gets rich. If you've ever heard of the smoke-filled room where decisions get made, this place was the smoke-filled room.

When I started, the woman who on-boarded me said:

**“Whatever you do, don't ever thank the managing partner.**

**Don't thank him for a raise.**

**Don't thank him for a promotion.**

**Don't thank him for a bonus or a meal or a ride.**

**If you thank him, he's afraid you'll think he's generous. And he doesn't want you to think he's generous; he wants you to think he's strategic.”**

”

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JAN JOHNSON: My friend and I worked for the same company several years ago. When she got hired, my let-me-tell-you-how-things-really-work-around-here advice was that when our leadership said “entrepreneurial” they really meant seat-of-the-pants. And that they resisted structured rules and set processes. They were cowboys and proud of it.

So lots of behaviors that would have gotten somebody in trouble in another company were swept under the carpet if they got results – if we beat out the competition.

We were also really good at rallying to deal with a crisis, but rarely followed the same process twice. So my advice to her was:

**Don't ask for permission, just forgiveness.**

**To leverage something we already figured out, don't reference the previous 'process.' Instead, reference the client for whom we did “X” – that's how colleagues will relate to your recommendation to do something similar.**

**If you pitch a new idea, sell the outcomes, not the benefits of consistency or repeatability.**

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**The invisible forces  
are unwritten rules  
and they shape your  
behavior at home, at  
work, and everywhere  
in between.**



“

JEFF LEITNER: The invisible forces that surround you are unwritten rules like this — about things like being sociable and sugar cookies.

**There are thousands of these in your life and they shape your behavior everywhere — at home, at work, and everywhere in between.**

I sincerely hope you remember everything we say today, but there are three things in particular I want you take away from this. The first is this:

**These things are everywhere.**

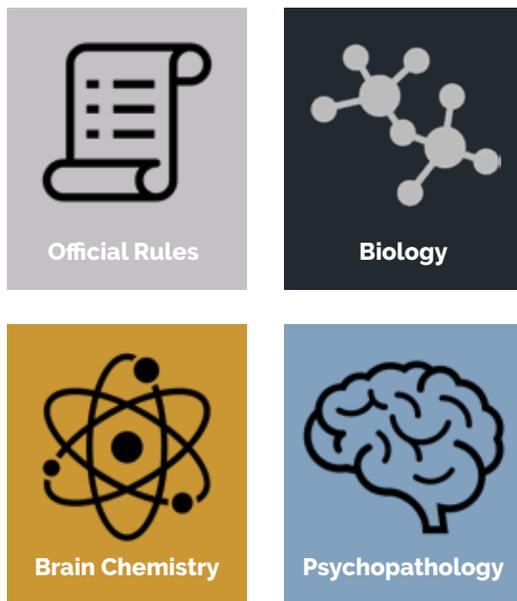
Next, you should know that unwritten rules are crazy powerful. They are more powerful than all the other things that influence your behavior. They are more powerful than official rules, like laws, company policies, and even posted speed limits.

Anybody here try to teach somebody to drive? It's really hard. It's hard because most of the rules of the road are unwritten rules.

In most U.S. states, the speed limit on a highway is somewhere between 55 and 70 miles per hour. And how fast are you supposed to drive? Is it between 55 and 70 miles per hour? Of course not.

The right answer is: about the same speed as everybody around you. If the speed limit is 70 and you drive by a police officer going 75 while everybody else is going 75, nothing will happen.

The unwritten rule wins.



## Unwritten rules are more powerful than biology and brain chemistry.

Well, actually, they are a function of biology and brain chemistry. But we'll get into that in a bit.

They are more powerful than your pathology, your childhood, your personality type and, yes, even your horoscope. I am a Libra born in the Chinese year of the rabbit, but unwritten rules have more to do with me standing here talking to you.

And unwritten rules are a more intuitive explanation of what you do than behavioral economics.

Of course, It's possible that you're doing a complex cost-benefit analysis before speaking up in a staff meeting, but it's more likely that you're reacting to your organization's unwritten rules about who should speak, who shouldn't, and the price you pay for being wrong.





**In fact, unwritten rules are buried so deep inside you that even the idea of violating them causes you stress.**

I'll show you. Close your eyes for a moment. Now imagine pushing the button for the elevator. We'll wait a minute for it to arrive. Ding. It's here. The door opens and there are a handful of people already on board. You push the button for the lobby — yes, somebody had already pushed it, but it's a habit — and then what do you do? You turn around and face the door, just like everybody else.

But this time, just to shake things up, you don't turn around. You just stand there and face everybody on the elevator. You smile. You smile your best smile. And you just stand there and look at them all the way down to the lobby.

Uncomfortable, right? You didn't like it. And I promise you your lift-mates didn't like it. You violated an unwritten rule about elevators. The rule isn't posted in a single elevator in the world, and yet everybody knows you're supposed to turn around and face the door.

So the first of three things we wanted you to remember from today was "These things are everywhere." Now the second:

**These things are remarkably powerful.**

**Unwritten rules are  
the single biggest  
influence on your  
organization.**



This is all interesting, sure. But why are we talking about unwritten rules here, at this conference, today?

## **Because unwritten rules are also the single biggest influence on organizations.**

Of course, that stands to reason as unwritten rules are the single biggest influence on people and people compose organizations.

## **But nobody ever talks about unwritten rules.**

In the U.S. alone, businesses spend more than \$15 billion a year on leadership development, on training executives how to get other people to do what they want.

And get this, somebody counted and there are 1,500 books published every year with the word “leadership” in the title. That’s a little more than four new books published every day. But nobody is teaching executives anything about unwritten rules.

And again, in the U.S. alone, businesses spend \$59 billion a year on management consulting.

But somehow nobody out there is consulting on unwritten rules.

Now there is at least one good reason nobody talks about business and unwritten rules.

## **It’s because every business — and even the idea of business, really — is about two sets of very different, incompatible unwritten rules.**

On one hand, businesses are profit-making machines. So there are unwritten rules for that:

- spend as little as possible
- charge as much as you can
- move production to wherever labor is cheapest, and
- automate everything possible

On the other hand, businesses are all about people. And so there are unwritten rules about that:

- We think of our employees as family
- The customer is always right, and
- We’re committed to our community.

## **Trying to reconcile these two sets of rules is really hard.**

Let me give you a couple of examples.

Malden Mills Industries manufacturers fleece and other textiles in a good-sized factory in western Massachusetts.

Or it did until late 1995, when a boiler at the plant exploded and fire destroyed the factory.

Three thousand employees were suddenly out of work. In a remarkable move, the CEO decided to keep paying all those employees, even though they had nothing at all to do until the factory was rebuilt.

It was a feel-good story. The unwritten rule at Malden Mills about treating employees like family was real.

Unfortunately, it did not go well.

In 2001, six years after the fire, Malden Mills filed bankruptcy and the CEO was forced out.

In 2007, the company sold all its assets and abandoned the employee pension fund.

In 2015, all operations were shut down and moved to other states.

**This isn't a story about evil triumphing over good. It's just about a clash of unwritten rules.**

In 2015, at about the same time Malden Mills was shut down for good, the CEO of Gravity Payments in Seattle, Washington radically changed the salary structure at his company.

He slashed his own salary and raised the minimum annual salary for everybody else at the company to \$50,000, then \$60,000, and today, to \$70,000.

Who wouldn't love that?

Well, for one, the CEO's brother, who owned 30% of the company, sued him.

Pundits in the media blasted him for being a socialist — an odd critique of a guy who runs a credit card processing company.

And weirdest of all, some of his own employees resigned in protest, because new workers were getting an instant raise.

The CEO didn't do anything illegal or bad for business. In fact, Gravity Payments is now bigger and more successful than ever. But, man, he seriously violated some unwritten rules.

**There are thousands of examples like these.**

**There are so many that it looks like unwritten rules can explain some mysteries in business we can't seem to solve.**

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**The brutal fact is that 70%  
of all change initiatives fail.**

”

**Cracking the Code of Change**

Nitin Nohria and Michael Beer

May-June 2000

“

**Yet study after study puts  
the failure rate of mergers  
and acquisitions somewhere  
between 70-90%.**

”

**The Big Idea: The New M&A Playbook**

Clayton M. Christensen, Richard Alton, Curtis Rising,  
and Andrew Waldeck

March 2011

For example, the business press says that 70% of all change initiatives fail.

Think about that...

seven out of ten times that we get leadership on the same page, survey our employees, design a strategy and spend thousands or millions of dollars on change management consultants, we strike out.

**It's because of minefields we couldn't see: unwritten rules dictate how our organizations run and thus, how our organizations change.**

An even more expensive mystery is the failure rate of mergers and acquisitions, which is as high as 90%.

This means that smart, serious people spend years negotiating every possible detail of a deal, spend millions of dollars on consultants and accountants, and almost never get it right.

Sometimes, the problem is bad information. Other times, the problem is stupid expectations.

**But most of the time, the problem is a mismatch of cultures — and cultures are all about unwritten rules.**

**“Open-Plan Workspaces  
Are the Work of Satan”**

Mother Jones

**“How to Negotiate the Noise  
and Intrusions of an Open-  
Plan Office”**

The Irish Times

**“Turns Out Open-Office Plans,  
Once Hailed as Facilitators of  
Face Time, Might Actually  
Stifle Communication”**

Slate

**“New Study Says Open-Plan  
Offices are Bad (Duh?)”**

Metropolis



**“How Dense Is Too Dense?”**

Work Design Magazine

**“Death To The Open  
Floor Plan!”**

Fast Company

**“Open-Plan Offices Were  
Devised by Satan in the  
Deepest Caverns of Hell”**

The Guardian

**“Research: Cubicles Are the  
Absolute Worst”**

Harvard Business Review

“

JAN JOHNSON: These headlines tell a similar story about our industry's failure to get the workplace right. Sure, some of them are deliberately provocative. My personal favorite was an ABC News piece from a few years ago titled: "Proof that Open-Plan Offices are Satan's Handiwork." But where there's smoke, there's fire.

There are all sorts of reasons we don't get the workplace right. But I wonder whether our failures have two main causes: Our industry's legacy of "cost control" vs. "value creation"; and our lack of understanding of human behavior in general, and areas like environmental psychology, more specifically.

After all, while our mandate has historically been efficiency; **our greatest potential contribution to our clients' success is improving worker effectiveness.**

I hope that's why we're all sitting in this room: to add to our understanding and our tools when it comes to people and performance.

**This is why we need to know about things like unwritten rules. And why we, as an industry, should continue to seek out wisdom and new areas of knowledge from those fields that help us understand behavior and motivation.**

And why we must develop strong working relationships with HR, IT and the business units inside our clients' organizations, so we can share and apply what we're learning.

But I digress and we'll talk more about this later.

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JEFF LEITNER: So back to the three things we really want you to take away from our talk. One, "These things are everywhere." Two, "These things are remarkably powerful." Here's the third and final thing:

**"In the coming years, you're going to have to understand these things to do your job."**

So we'll spend the rest of our time together talking about how unwritten rules work.

Let's begin with what they are:

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**Unwritten  
unspoken,  
guidelines  
you how  
in social**

**rules are  
informal  
that tell  
to behave  
situations.**

---

They are not about what you think or feel.

They are about how you act and what you say.

**Unwritten rules are very specific codes of conduct for the dozens or hundreds of times a day that you're with other people.**

We've known about these suckers for at least 2,500 years. The Ancient Romans called them *lex non scripta*.

And scientists have been studying them since the 1930s.

Here was the very first experiment...

Researchers put subjects — one at a time — in a dark room and told them to stare at a pinpoint of light on the wall.

Then they asked subjects — again, one at a time — how far the light moved. Their answers were anywhere from 2 inches to 6 inches.

Then researchers brought subjects together in small groups and asked them again.

And now they said 4 inches — a kind of consensus answer.

**Without knowing it, the subjects had negotiated an unwritten rule about how to respond.**

Two interesting things happened next.

One, when researchers interviewed subjects one-at-a-time again, they stuck to the consensus answer.

Even when no other subjects were around, even though they didn't know the other subjects and would probably never see them again, they stuck to the unwritten rule.

Two, when other scientists recreated the experiment, they asked subjects what effect the group had had on their answers.

And the subjects said: none.

They were all following an unwritten rule, but they couldn't even see it.

Now we're talking about scientists here, so there are lots of technical terms to explain the mechanics of unwritten rules, like **reference network**, **empirical expectations**, and **conditional preference**.

But I'm not going to bore you to that kind of lecture.

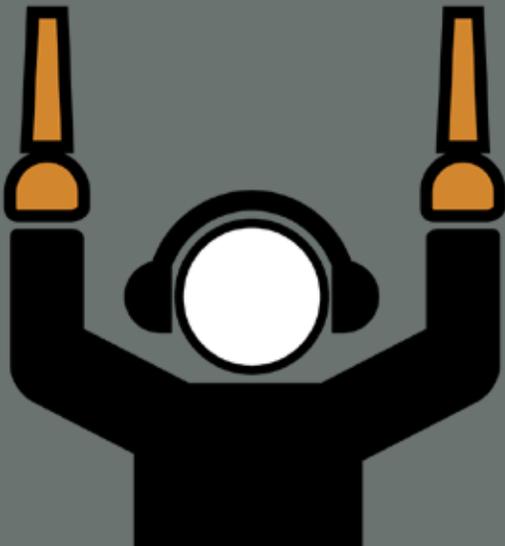
Instead, I'm going to tell you five things about how unwritten rules work.



1

THEY ARE

# SERIOUS DIRECTIVES



**Unwritten rules are not casual suggestions or rules of thumb. They have real-world consequences.**

And they have been the tool of choice for managing groups of people for about 200,000 years.

From the first human societies until 1754 B.C., all rules were unwritten rules.

That's when King Hammurabi of Mesopotamia dictated the first written rules. There were 282 of them, including some classics like “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

And in 600 B.C., somebody wrote down the rules in Leviticus, a book in the Jewish Torah and the Christian Old Testament.

Leviticus has 613 rules, ranging from really serious, like no lying, to less serious, like no mixing fabrics in your clothing.

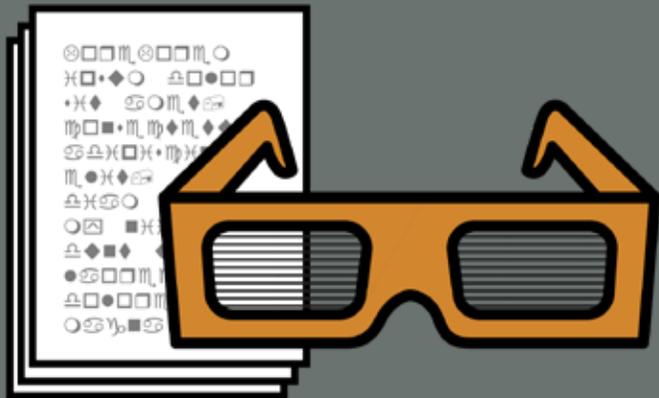
That may look like a lot of rules — the 282 in Hammurabi's Code and the 613 in Leviticus.

But that is not nearly enough to run a small kingdom. And it's probably not enough to keep the peace in a mid-sized company.

**To co-exist with others, particularly strangers, you need a lot of direction.**

# 2

## THEY ARE YOUR CODE FOR OFFICIAL RULES



### **Written rules and unwritten rules have a surprising relationship.**

Since Old King Hammurabi jotted down the first written rules, there has been an explosion of them.

In just about 200 years, you've been loaded down with constitutions, laws, ordinances, criminal codes, civil codes, company policies, student handbooks, user agreements, and the rules that come with your Monopoly game.

### **At any moment, you're subjected to tens of thousands of written rules — most of which you are completely unaware of.**

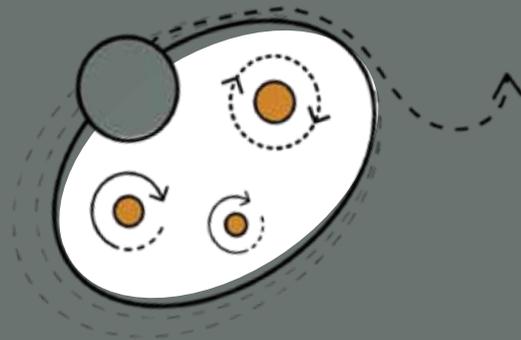
That turns out not to be a problem, thanks to unwritten rules.

Instead of trying to remember and follow all those written rules, you just follow the ones we've all agreed to follow. supposed to happen. And people within those companies have unwritten rules about whether to pay any attention to that at all.

# 3

## YOU

# LEARN THEM BY WATCHING



Every now and then, someone might tell you the unwritten rules, like when you're about to meet their family for the first time. But most of the time, you learn unwritten rules by observing other people.

**Whether you're aware of it or not, you're constantly scanning other people's behavior and adjusting your instincts about how to act, what to say, how to dress, whether to sing out loud on a bus, take your shoes off on an airplane, scold your children in public, or hug a stranger.**

This is a huge evolutionary advantage.

Other animals are dependent on biological evolution — which generally takes hundreds of years — to make big changes.

But human beings, with all our scanning and adapting, can take advantage of sociological evolution.

It's why we — and not lizards or elephants — invented science and joined CoreNet.

# 4 THEY ARE HACKS



Unwritten rules begin as work-arounds.

Something doesn't work for us, so we come up with various ways to fix it. One of those ways get adopted as the favored solution and it spreads, from person to person, from group to group, and ultimately from society to society.

## **These hacks show up in one of two environments.**

One, where there are lots and lots of written rules — way more than you can possibly keep up with. As I said a minute ago, you use unwritten rules to sift through written rules and decide which ones to pay attention to.

Deloitte did a study and found that 91% of Americans sign user agreements without reading them. And that number is even higher — 97% — for Americans aged 18 to 34.

Yes, this is lawyers' fault. They make user agreements too long and hard to understand. But that's OK — we signal to each other that we don't need to pay that much attention.

Two, unwritten rules also show up where there are no written rules at all. Think *Lord of the Flies*, the British novel from the 1950s in which a group of boys are stranded on an uninhabited island. Sure, things took an ugly turn. There was a bit of torture and killing.

**But the point is, for all our complaining about rules, we do not tolerate an absence of rules particularly well. If there are no rules about what to do in social situations, we always create them and hold each other accountable for following them.**

# 5 THERE ARE SOCIAL RESPONSES THAT KEEP YOU IN LINE



We don't need police to enforce unwritten rules. We just have to exploit the fact that we're social creatures.

**We think we're individualists, particularly in the West, particularly in the U.S.**

But all of us dress about the same, wear our hair about the same, talk about the same, buy the same things, eat the same foods, and follow the same customs.

**It's not a weakness. It's biology.**

While we're the dominant creature on Earth now, we're relatively puny and weak and were - for a couple of hundred thousand years — at great risk of being wiped out by bigger, stronger faster animals.

What saved us was our ability to change and coordinate our behaviors. Now it's what allows us to build companies, cities, and societies.

**But because we're social creatures, we do not like to be alone.**

And when we're with other people, we don't like to be ostracized.

We're so sensitive to being shunned or snubbed that you don't have to do much to keep us in line.

You just have to glare or look away if somebody doesn't turn around in an elevator.

And you just have to smile ever so slightly or make brief eye contact with somebody who does the right thing, like take their place at the end of the line.



Photo Credit: Jason Smith

## **I came to all this inadvertently in about 2010, when I started something called Insight Labs.**

I would invite about a dozen of the smartest people I knew to help me tackle a big, strategic problem for a government agency, an institution, a corporation, or a big non-profit.

Over four years, I did it about 45 times, all over the U.S.

Because I invited different people each time, I ran out of smart people I knew. So I invited hotshots I had heard of or read about. By time I stopped in 2014, I had thought with about 600 scientists, artists, academics, senior executives, and journalists.

Together, we tackled a wide range of challenges, including healthcare, international diplomacy, public education, genocide, urban renewal, and the arts.

Of course, there is no way to be expert in any two of those things, much less 45 of them. So each time, I zoomed out and looked for the social forces at play. In other words, we looked at how people behave in relation to healthcare or international diplomacy or public education.

After that I spent four years digging into the history of innovation and the science of social norms.

**There I discovered the intellectual foundation for unwritten rules and the language I needed to explain what I had been doing with all those people for all those problems.**



Here's an example. I once assembled a roomful of big thinkers to help Starbucks. The giant brand was working through an interesting challenge.

They were about to redesign all of their cafes in the world, requiring a ridiculous number of designers doing an extraordinary amount of design.

**The challenge was how best to integrate design and all those designers into Starbucks' corporate culture.**

We had to figure out how to reconcile the unwritten rules of business — about things like **predictability**, **uniformity** and **numbers** — with the unwritten rules of design — about things like **creativity**, **context** and **insight**.

I'll come back to this story in a minute.

I also did an Insight Lab for NASA.

For decades after that photo was taken, NASA was the coolest government agency in the world. NASA was where the smartest people in the U.S. did the most extraordinary work.

The public loved them and lawmakers loved them, as evidenced by big budgets for audacious projects.

But in the years before NASA called me, lawmakers had cooled on them and budgets had become a real struggle.

What could they do to get back in everybody's good graces?

Before the Lab, my colleague interviewed important people at NASA. And every one of them told him the same story: the story of President John F. Kennedy and the moon shot speech.

As you probably know, President Kennedy declared in 1961 that NASA would put a man on the moon in less than a decade, even though the science and engineering to do it didn't exist.

**Of course, NASA succeeded. And, as is often the case, the great success birthed an unwritten rule: NASA gets its vision from the president.**

The 18,000 people of NASA, which include many of the world's most brilliant scientists and engineers, wait for a layman to tell them what to dream about.

I'll come back to this story too.

”





JAN JOHNSON: Most of us aren't going to tackle the problems Jeff is describing, but we have to understand unwritten rules too.

**Unwritten rules are what we're unconsciously defining whenever we design a workplace.**

And when we talk about change management — or more specifically, change *communication* — I imagine most of us work with our clients to craft explicit messages or new protocols for behaviors that tell workers how we want them to act in the new workplace.

We publish new policies and hold orientation sessions for organization-wide rules — like “no speakerphones in the open” — or use names for settings to imply the rules for using that space — like “no talking or phone calls in the library”. In other words, we think pronouncements, or written policies or protocols are most of what we need to provide. That “sayin’ it makes it so.”

**But what we very often miss and therefore fall to address is the disconnect between what we and the organization are saying and what is being signaled.**

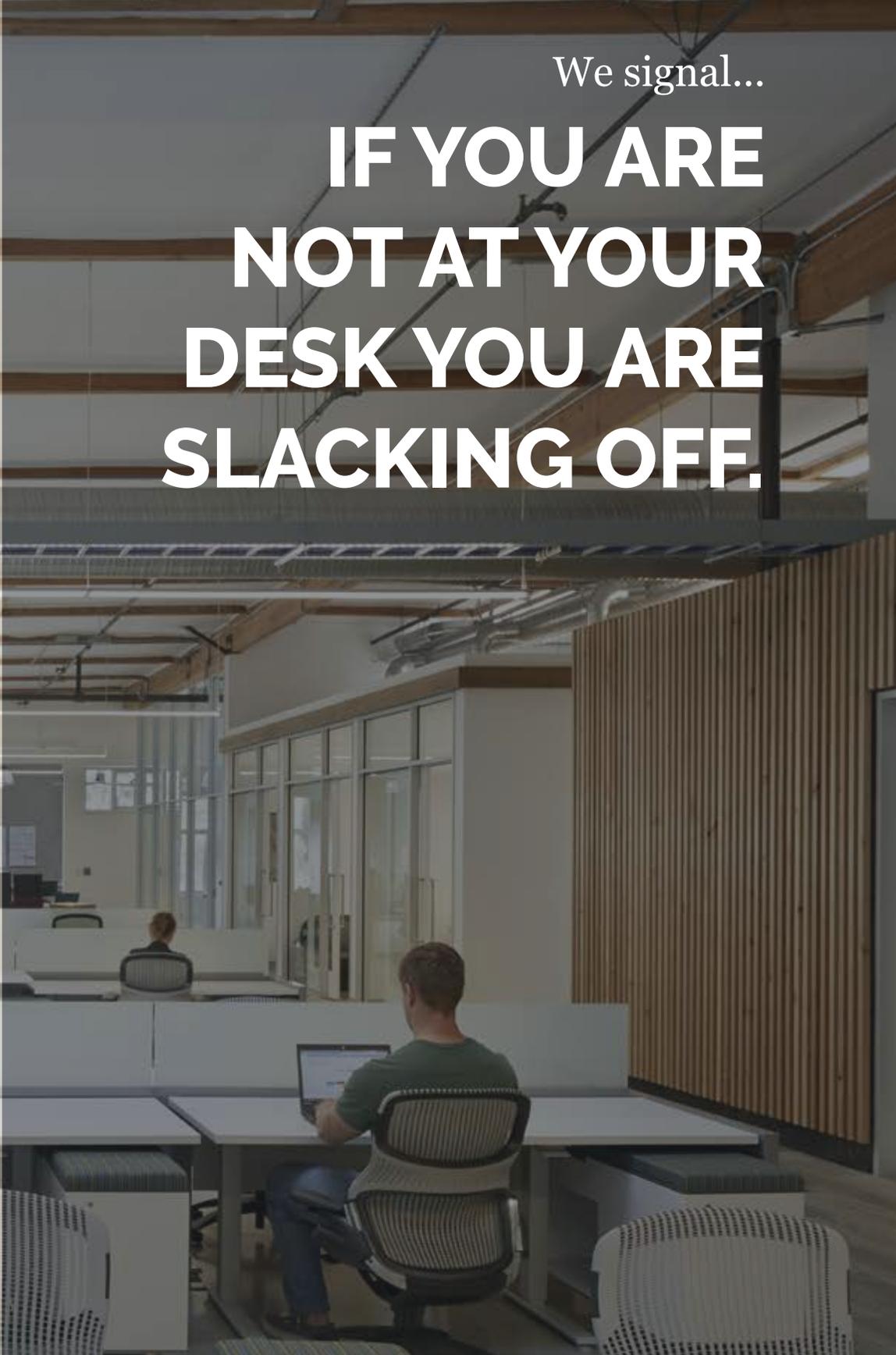
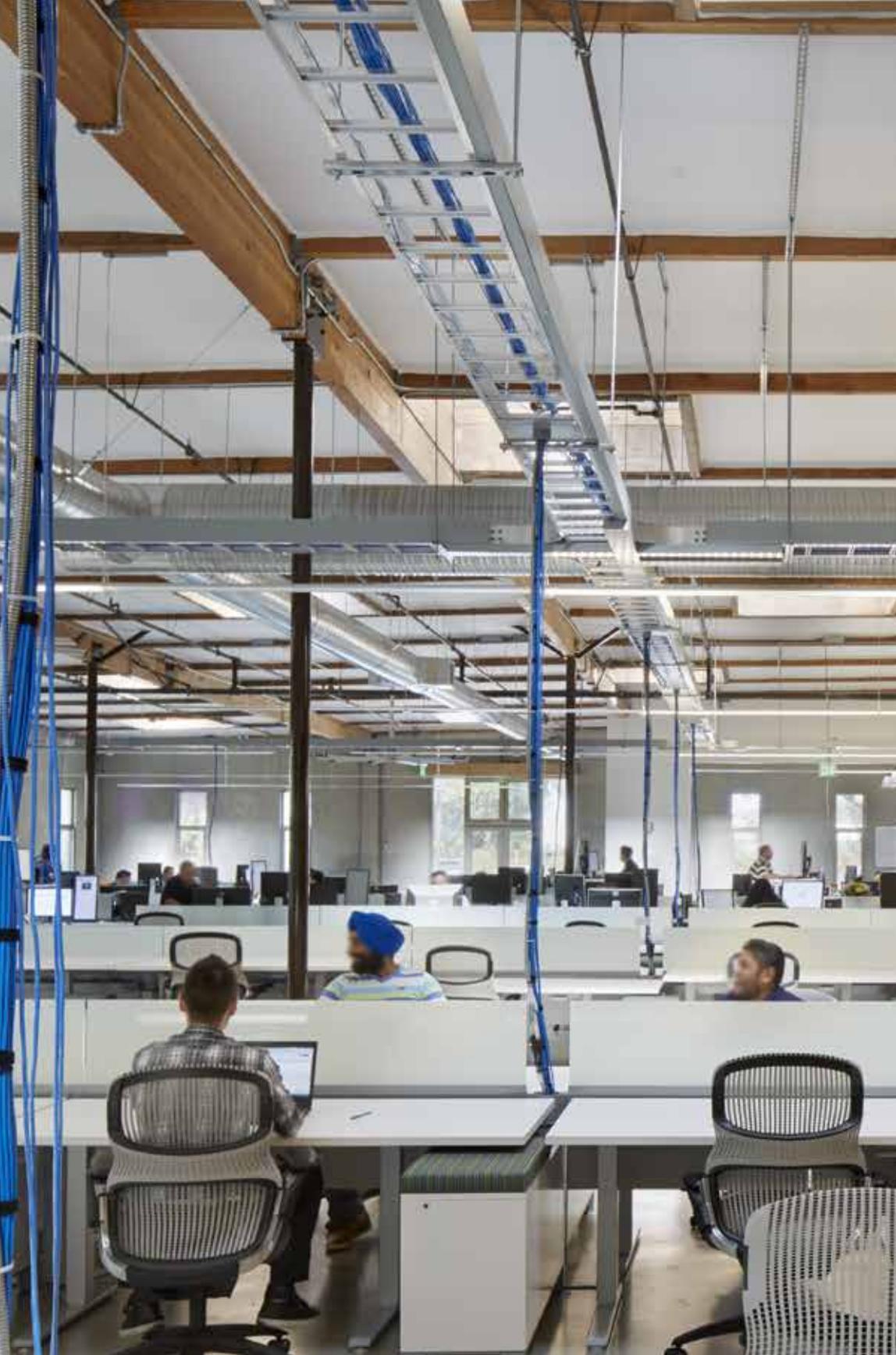
**We miss the unwritten rules.**

Consider the conversations we've had — with our clients and with their employees — about moving around the office, self-care, casual conversation, and working remotely. I'm sure you can all relate to these four examples.

We say...

**WORKERS ARE  
FREE TO MOVE  
ABOUT THE  
OFFICE.**





We signal...

**IF YOU ARE  
NOT AT YOUR  
DESK YOU ARE  
SLACKING OFF.**

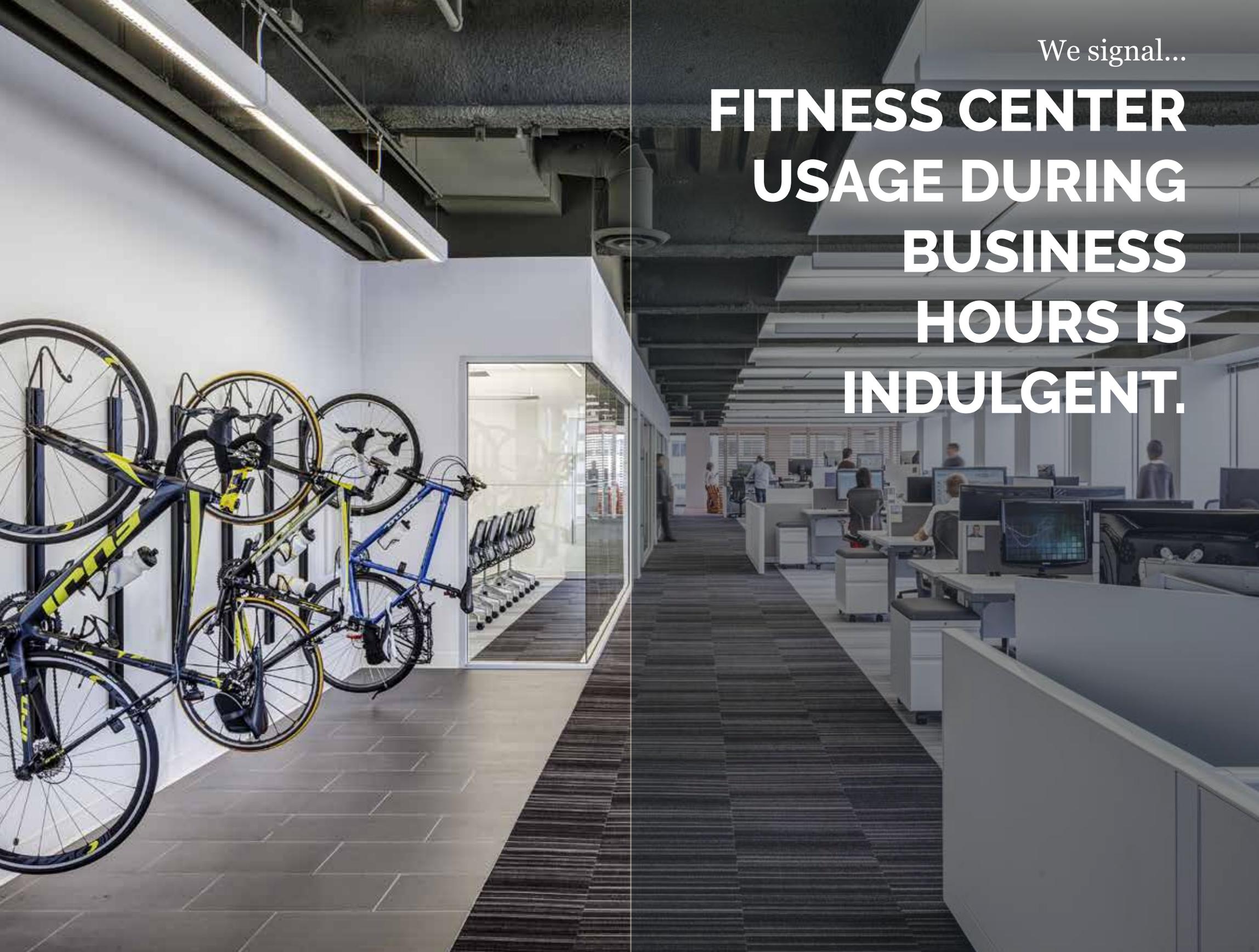
We say...

**EMPLOYEE  
WELLNESS IS A  
TOP PRIORITY  
FOR OUR  
ORGANIZATION.**



We signal...

**FITNESS CENTER  
USAGE DURING  
BUSINESS  
HOURS IS  
INDULGENT.**



We say...

**SOCIAL  
CONNECTIONS  
AND SHARING  
KNOWLEDGE  
ARE CRITICAL  
FOR BUSINESS  
SUCCESS.**



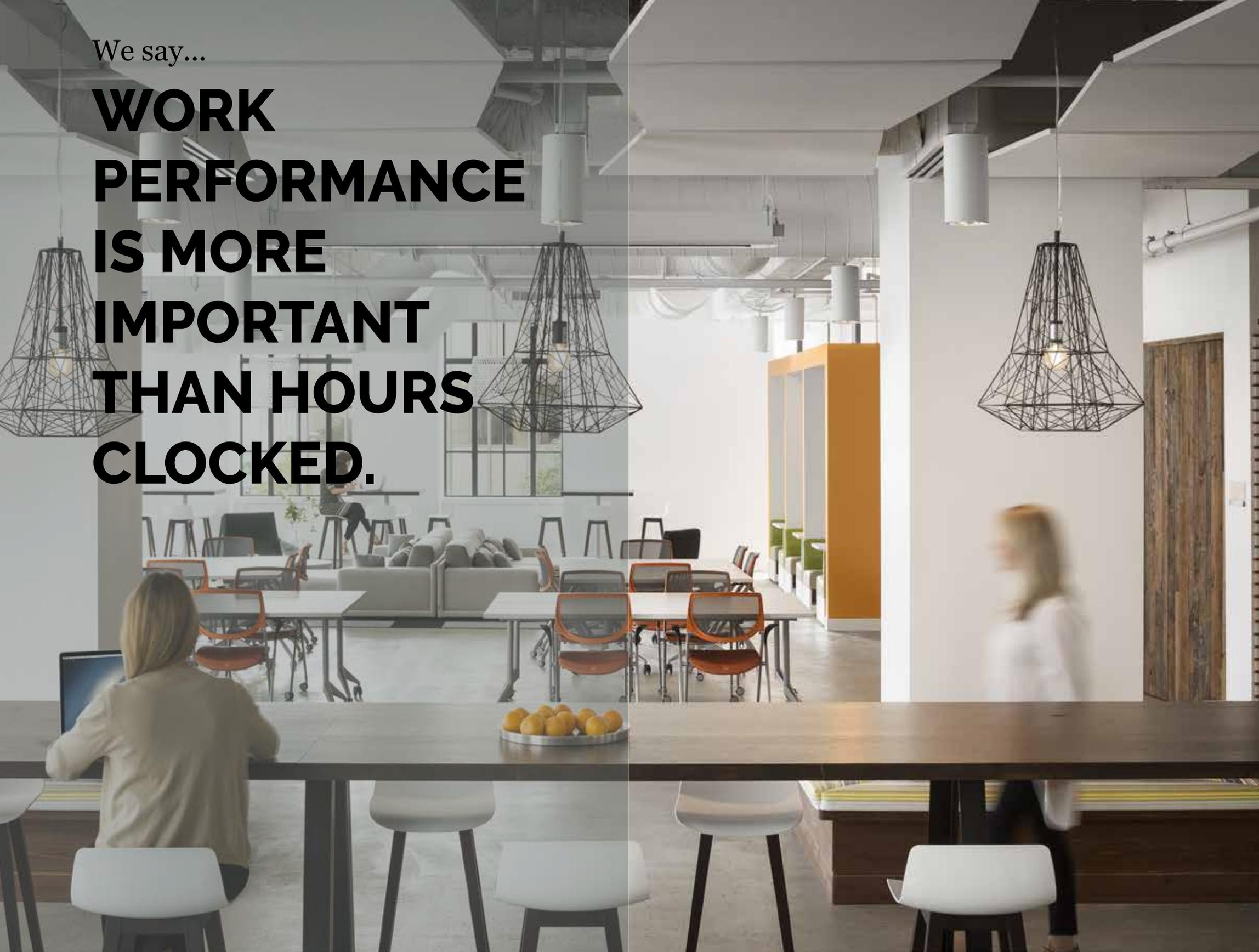
We signal...

**CASUAL  
CONVERSATIONS  
AREN'T AS  
IMPORTANT  
AS THE 'REAL'  
WORK.**



We say...

**WORK  
PERFORMANCE  
IS MORE  
IMPORTANT  
THAN HOURS  
CLOCKED.**



We signal...

**WORKERS WHO  
ARRIVE EARLY  
AND STAY LATER  
ARE MORE  
VALUABLE.**



Clearly, all the recent articles condemning open plan mean we're missing important elements, whether that's the full range of spaces teams need to be effective — including spaces to find privacy or quiet; or true permission to exercise choice and control.

Or, even more likely,

**we're overlooking the unwritten rules and their powerful influence on supportive behaviors.**

So what can we do with this new understanding of the unwritten rules — this incredibly powerful, yet mostly unconscious and invisible force that drives behaviors?

**What can we do to use this power for good in our work as workplace strategists?**

**First comes learning how to uncover these rules in our clients' environments.**

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**How do you  
uncover  
unwritten rules?**

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JEFF LEITNER: I have developed and published a methodology for uncovering unwritten rules in unfamiliar environments. But we don't have the 18 or so weeks that graduate students get to learn it and practice it.

So instead, I'll give you five questions you can ask to help you surface these all-powerful unwritten rules in your client organizations.

**My experience suggests that conversations around these questions will open up interesting discussions and lead to valuable insights.**

## QUESTION #1

# What official rule does almost everybody around here ignore?

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No organization complies with every rule.

**The ones people ignore can point you to the unwritten rules that they follow instead.**

For example, some companies absolutely, definitively prohibit flexible working hours.

Employees who have to come in late because they were at the doctor or a meeting at their kid's school are out of luck. These are businesses that absolutely, definitively can't start late - like factory floors and operating rooms.

But I did research that revealed that even those companies have flex time - unwritten rules unofficially managed to decide who gets to come in late and who gets to leave early.

## QUESTION #2

**What key event or activity do you really have to experience to understand this place?**

Our unwritten rules are grounded in stories. That's why the most popular religious texts in the world — like the Torah, the Bible, and the Koran — are detailed histories and not just philosophical essays.

**So rather than ask people directly about their unwritten rules — which will get you either blank stares or nonsense — get them to tell you stories that reveal them.**

That's where you'll find their unwritten rules.

## QUESTION #3

**What way of doing things around here would a new person inevitably get wrong?**

Think back to the rules about driving. Sure, there are a lot of official, written rules about how to be a good, safe driver.

But there are lots more unofficial, unwritten rules about how to interact with all the other drivers on the road. This is mostly what inexperienced drivers get wrong.

The same is true for all complex social environments.

You've seen new people come into your family known exactly how they'll get it wrong.

**Those missteps and misinterpretations — the ones you don't make anymore because you've learned your lessons — are great clues to unwritten rules.**

## QUESTION #4

**What is something that isn't officially scheduled but that people would be upset about if it didn't happen?**

**Sometimes, unwritten rules take the form of unwritten schedules.**

For example, every organization has an unofficial position on employees' birthdays.

Some celebrate individual birthdays. Some celebrate monthly birthdays for people born within a few weeks of each other. Some celebrate overtly, with cake and a shout-out in the company newsletter. Some celebrate privately, with a few colleagues and an extended lunch. But good luck changing an organization's unofficial birthday policy without starting a fight.

Unofficial rules, policies, and schedules came into being to solve a particular problem and people tend to be pretty committed to those solutions.

## QUESTION #5

**Think of somebody around here who has a bad reputation. Why does he or she have that reputation?**

Remember, we're social creatures who learned to collaborate to stay alive, to fight off big mammals on the savannah.

**So reputations are really important. They tell you who you can trust, who you can't, who follows the group's rules, and who doesn't.**

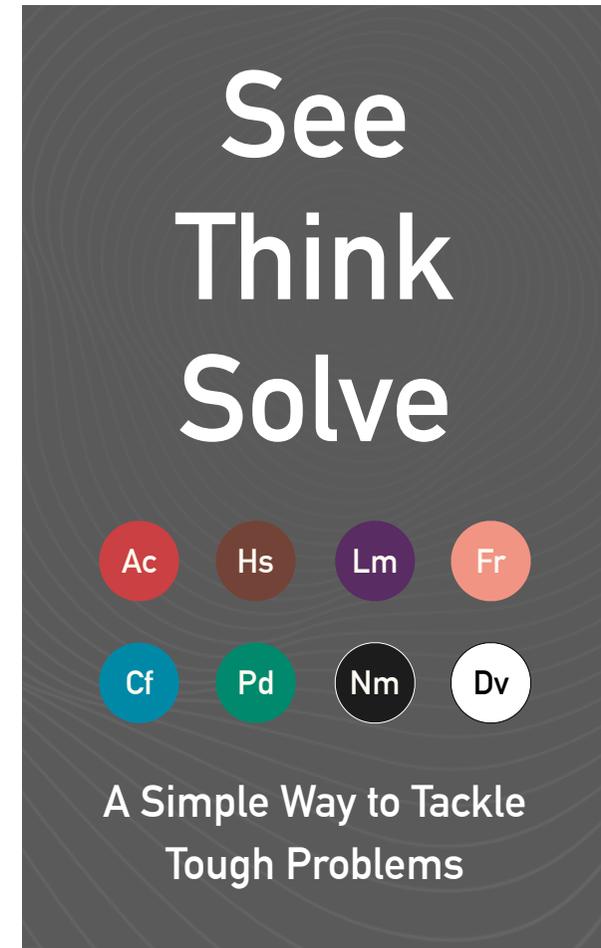
As such, people who have bad reputations generally get them because their peers think they're a threat to social cohesion.

So reputations are like treasure maps to help you find what a group values and wants to protect.

Those are your five freebies:

1. **What official rule does almost everybody ignore?**
2. **What key event do you have to experience to really understand this place?**
3. **What way of doing things would a new person inevitably get wrong?**
4. **What is something that isn't on the schedule but people would hate if it changed?**
5. **And why would somebody have a bad reputation?**

**If you want even more questions or want to better understand my methodology, go to Amazon and buy this book.**





## **Finally, let me address something everyone inevitably asks: once you've found unwritten rules, how do you change them?**

The good news is that the answer is simple and straightforward. The bad news is that it's anything but easy.

We'll begin with a common misconception. You don't change an unwritten rule by adding a written rule. You can try, but it won't work; and if it works, it won't hold. As a former colleague of mine used to say: If you need a sign to tell employees to wash their hands, you've already lost the war.

And in my world, this means you can't solve social problems with new laws. New laws are nice because they formalize our values and, sometimes, because they come with big budgets. But if the new laws don't align with how our worlds really work, we'll just ignore them or work around them.

**The only way to change unwritten rules is with better unwritten rules.**

## **That's what I learned with Starbucks.**

Again, we were trying to reconcile the unwritten rules of corporate culture and the unwritten rules of design.

But in every scenario, the unwritten rules of profit-making would have suffocated design and doomed the work.

The ravenous demands of a big, multinational corporation were just too much. That wasn't a judgement — just reality for a \$75 billion business.

## **The answer was counterintuitive: segregate design.**

Even as design was fighting to be taken seriously by the C-suite, design leaders fought to keep design out of the company's Seattle headquarters and pushed it out instead to remote, individual studios.

In these studios, design leaders could maintain and reinforce the right written rules — the ones about creativity, context, and insight.

## **New unwritten rule: Creatives should never office next to the boss.**



## It's also what I learned with NASA.

My colleague, the same one who interviewed important people at NASA, took the question to President Obama's speechwriter: Would there ever be another moon shot speech, the kind of speech NASA seemed to be waiting for?

"No, absolutely not," he said.

He gave a handful of reasons, including the end of the Cold War, changes in U.S. domestic politics, and Elon Musk.

So we went back to NASA and told them their prince was never coming back. They, themselves, would have to decide what to dream about.

**New unwritten rule: The people who know what's possible should be the people who decide what's next.**

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JAN JOHNSON: Let me close by reminding you of the three things we want you to take away from today:

- 1. Unwritten rules are everywhere.**
- 2. Unwritten rules are really powerful.**
- 3. You're going to have to understand unwritten rules to do your job well.**

**Here's the bonus: You are now more valuable to your clients.**

You know more than they do about the dynamics at work in their own organizations. You can share this knowledge with them. You can help them see disconnects between what they say and what they signal. You can help them see what's serving them and what their employees are just ignoring.

And now you understand what workplace change is really about. That it's not about persuading employees or orienting them to a new design, but rather about understanding how employees actually behave when management isn't watching, and looking for and addressing the disconnects between the organization's intentions and their signals.

**Workplace change isn't something you do at the end of a project, after the new space has been designed and built.**

**It's something you do from the beginning, in collaboration with the people whose patterns and unwritten rules you're going to disrupt — ideally for the better.**

So you might do things like encourage teams to consciously, collectively develop their own understanding or agreement on the behaviors that they create to govern their use of their neighborhood. Simple stuff, like how they know it's OK to get the attention of a coworker; or how long a conversation might be had at that coworker's desk before moving to an enclosed meeting space; or being diligent about cancelling a reservation for their meeting room so others know it's available after all.

And remember: While words are powerful, they're not nearly enough. Saying something doesn't make it true: Management edicts don't change employee behavior. Finding and changing unwritten rules — while it might be unfamiliar and hard — is the key to helping your clients realize their best intentions.

And finally, please let us know what happens as you share these insights and apply them to your work. Let's learn from each other.



**JEFF LEITNER** developed the first methodology for altering social norms to effect change, then turned the methodology into university curricula, course materials, training videos, and a book, *See Think Solve: A Simple Way to Tackle Tough Problems*. He is a fellow at New America, where he partnered with the OECD to produce the first-ever sequence for solutions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Previously, he designed and launched the first-ever doctorate in social innovation, developed and led Insight Labs, and co-founded the international initiative UX for Good.

**JAN JOHNSON** is vice president of design and workplace resources at Allsteel. She leads a key element of the company's research, mining science — including Leitner's work — for insights into the effectiveness of work environments. She has contributed to the emerging field of workplace strategy in the U.S. and abroad, through important works in the field's body of knowledge and by shaping and teaching the field's professional competencies.

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