



Are You Playing By the Rules?

Discover Simple Rules to Create the Patterns You Want

Simple rules help guide the behaviors and interactions of members of any group. Whether by conscious agreement or by unspoken assent, members of a group appear to engage with each other in consistent ways that can be captured as a short list of simple rules.

Simple rules establish the conditions that give rise to patterns in any group. You may recognize such patterns as “the culture” of an organization. Becoming more aware of the simple rules within your organization gives you the capacity to reinforce what works or to transform your organization’s culture.

Often new leaders come into an organization and state their intention to change the culture. Unless intentional steps are taken to uncover and change the existing simple rules that hold old patterns in place, no amount of leadership command will change them. Simple rules can be used retrospectively to understand what shaped the conditions to generate whatever patterns are currently in place. Or . . .

Simple rules can also be used to shape a desired future. Organizations can identify patterns they want to generate and define simple rules that seem most likely to help them generate those patterns. What is critical in establishing system-wide patterns is that everyone has to use a shared set of simple rules at all levels of decision-making and action. This requires a shared understanding of what the rules mean and agreements to use the rules to make decisions.

Effective simple rules include the following characteristics:

- Are few in number (typically 3-7 work best), so they are easy to remember
- Are general statements that apply in any situation
- Are always stated in the positive so you know what you “should” do
- Start with an action verb
- Address the three conditions for self-organizing ([C, D, and E](#))

Simple rules are different from the norms we name for meetings and short-term interactions. Simple rules are intended to be more generally applied and not time bound. They are also different from values and beliefs because they are about action. They start with a verb, so they shape behaviors, not just hopes.

As an example, here are the simple rules HSD Associates follow:

- Teach and learn in every interaction
- Search for the true and the useful
- Give and get value for value
- Attend to the whole, the part and the greater whole
- Engage in joyful practice
- Share your Human Systems Dynamics story

Using the guidelines outlined above, brainstorm a list of the simple rules you can apply to your current situation.

| |
|----------------|
| Simple Rule 1: |
| Simple Rule 2: |
| Simple Rule 3: |
| Simple Rule 4: |
| Simple Rule 5: |

Once your group has agreed on its list of simple rules, try them for a short time and return and review to make sure the rules remain practical and are creating the patterns you desire.

Do you feel stuck by a situation that won't go away?

[Download the Same and Different tool to learn how to get unstuck.](#)

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