# Unwritten Rules: How Might the Current Organizational Culture Support and/or Undermine Equity and Inclusion Goals?

**Developed by Kathy Obear, Ed.D., Center for Transformation and Change**

Recognizing and engaging in authentic conversations about the current state as well as the desired state are critical leadership steps for creating equitable and inclusive work environments. Unwritten, often unacknowledged, norms and rules of appropriate conduct and valued behaviors can undermine stated organizational goals, mission and values. In addition, these often accelerate the advantages and opportunities of some groups while negatively impacting the success and engagement of people in marginalized groups.

It is critical that leaders hold meaningful, regular conversations to identify and remedy any gaps between the stated vs. the actual organizational expectations and standards of the current culture. This “hidden curriculum” is often passed down and taught outside of formal onboarding and training processes through supervision as well as informal coaching, mentoring, and sponsoring. These unofficial expected standards of behavior are also applied and enforced unequally by group membership with members of marginalized often held to much higher standards and disproportionately critiqued and punished if they violate these unwritten rules.

If unexamined and not effectively addressed, leaders and managers can arbitrarily perpetuate and enforce a wide range of unwritten assumptions and beliefs, including: who and what is considered “professional”, what is “good” leadership, how decisions get made, who is a “good team member,” the “right” ways to interact, what is appropriate attire and appearance, what behaviors signal who is promotable or deserves development opportunities, etc.

Analyzing the actual, unofficial culture is a critical step to identifying areas that, possibly unintentionally, perpetuate inequitable dynamics and result in lower engagement, innovation, and retention.

**Directions**:

1. Individually, circle the words/phrases below that describe your experience of the ***current organizational culture***.
2. Review your answers as you consider these questions:
* (√) Which already help create work environments and effective teams that advance organizational goals?
* (\*) Which, if any, hinder or undermine stated organizational goals? What impact do these have?
* (#) Which, if any, may have a negative differential impact across various group identities, such as: race, gender/sex, age, position in the hierarchy, years of experience, gender identity, sexuality, etc.
1. Which others might help create work environments and effective teams that advance organizational goals?

I am deeply grateful to all those who have shaped my understanding of dynamics of organizational effectiveness and inclusive, socially just organizations: Thought leaders and mentors from Elsie Y. Cross Associates, faculty from the Social Justice Education Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, my dear faculty colleagues from the *Social Justice Training Institute*, thousands of participants in SJTI, my training sessions and White Accountability Groups over the decades, and Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun’s for their seminal work on *White Supremacy Culture*, <http://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf>

Be a team player

Smile all the time

Be friendly

Be polite

Be nice

Direct eye contact

Be appropriate

Be professional

Dress for success

Do not raise your voice

Banter

Talk about sports

Tell jokes

Talk about kids and family

Family-friendly

Create a fun environment

Create a serious, intense environment

Be formal

Be informal

Debate

Ok to question and challenge others

Ok to challenge leaders in public

Only challenge or confront in private

Defend your position

Repeat your position until accepted

Find the weakness in other’s points

Critique other’s ideas

Consider all ideas

Interrupt to make your point

Listen respectfully

Play devil’s advocate

Seek out differing perspectives

Challenge biases and assumptions

Advocate for your ideas

Create alliances behind closed doors

Hidden agendas

Meetings before & after formal meetings

Direct communication

Indirect communication

Ask questions for understanding

Build on the points of others

It is ok to say you don’t understand

Get down to business, tasks

Build effective working relationships

Transactional

Mentor and sponsor people like you

Build trust

High trust environment

Low trust environment

Transformational

Be authentic

Be honest

Be ethical

Act with integrity

Ok to be dishonest to get what you need

Be transparent

Speak truth to power

Keep your mouth shut

New people should be seen, not heard

Be constrained, no emotions

Leave personal life at the door

Value the whole person

Actively create equity and inclusion

Success is based on who you know

Rational thought

Analytical thinking

Linear thinking

Urgent trumps important

Fast-paced discussions

Jump in, be extroverted

Ok to interrupt others

Quick fixes

Quantity matters

Results-oriented

Efficiency valued over quality

Action-oriented

Process-oriented

Take risks

Take the initiative

Appear confident

Appear strong

Advocate for yourself, your future

Align with your manager to get ahead

Be cautious

Avoid conflict

Personalize critiques and feedback

Help others save-face

Smooth over differences

Raise issues in the moment

Minimize differences

Encourage engagement across differences

Engage in conflict openly

Disagree behind closed doors

Create harmony

Invite conflict and disagreement

Do not embarrass leaders

Make your boss look good

Do not make others uncomfortable

Interrupt microaggressions in the moment

Don’t rock the boat

Don’t get out of line

Follow chain of command

Stay in your lane

Have to be perfect

Can’t make mistakes

Fear-based culture

Blame and shame-based culture

Growth mindset

Learn from mistakes

Continuous improvement

Invite critique, challenges

Punitive, retaliatory culture

People labeled if challenge, question

Impersonal

Be constrained

Keep your emotions in check

Only show acceptable level of emotion

Ok to be emotional

Only share acceptable emotions

Be tough

Be strong

Show empathy

Show care and concern for others

Express appreciation and gratitude

Prove you are right

There is a right/best solution

You are either right or wrong

You are either good or bad

Defend your position no matter what

Have each other’s back

Cover your own a\*\*

Compete with others

Collaborate with others

Be independent

Be opportunistic

Advance your career

Take credit for your ideas

Individual achievement is rewarded

Team achievement is rewarded

Empower, develop, coach, and sponsor others equitably

Win the argument

Push hard to convince others

Be aggressive

Understand multiple perspectives

Gather input from many sources

Explore multiple approaches, ideas

Quick decisions

Time is money

Explore dilemmas and complexities

Explore assumptions and biases

Be proactive

Mostly reactive

Crisis-driven

Drop everything in a crisis

Top-down decisions

Strict hierarchy

Transparent decision-making processes, sharing of information

Collaborative decision-making

Seek and consider input from those impacted by decisions

Make decisions for others

Protect your power and access

Business as usual

Reward innovation and creativity

Think outside the box

Break the rules

Advocate for change

Go along to get along

Fit in, assimilate

Unquestioning loyalty

Fall in line

Quantitative data is prioritized

Only value facts, what can be measured

Value intuition, hunches

Value personal experiences & qualitative data

Prioritize customer service

Profits over people

Mission focused

Values focused

Face-time

Flex-time

Appear really busy and over-stressed

Wellness and self-care are valued

Loyalty valued over performance

Little to no accountability

Intent valued over impact of actions

Meaningful accountability