Make Rules When You Are Happy...
So You Implement Them When You Are Not

Fast Answers Coaching Session

"I never realized how important workplace behavioral standards were until I began supervising others. Having the rules spelled out creates clarity." (Hospital CEO)

I liken the understanding of this concept to playing a game of Monopoly. The game board gets set up, the game is underway and going smoothly. That is, until, someone tries to make a move counter to your chances to advance your status in the game. OUT comes the rule book. Most problems can be solved through a quick read of rules set forth for the game. All areas in the workplace, the board room, or at home with the family can be made better by application of this principle with a rule book in hand.

In our workplaces, most "rules" (policies, practices, procedural steps, etc.) are crafted only after a problem has occurred. A person calls a coworker by a derogatory name, a staff member uses the company car and brings it back empty on gas and full of trash, an employee misuses the company credit card, or the last person out fails to lock the doors and do a security check. The list goes on and on. The rules that are written to correct a problem most often are written by one person without input from the people who will be impacted by them. These rules have three features. First, they are written in a negative tone, acting to inform personnel of how their failure will be punished. Second, they are harsh and often include high level punishment for failure to act appropriately. And, third, they fail to take into account the 97% of people who generally do the right thing and don't REALLY need the rules in the first place.

When teams are forming is the best time to work collaboratively to develop a philosophy about how work is going to be done, expectations and boundaries of social expression, and standards that all agree all personnel will follow. The depth of the rules can be defined BY the team, FOR the team. By completing the rules together, all members of the team have a clear understanding of how behavior, decorum, and tone will be interpreted. Of equal benefit, a person new to the team can be easily oriented using the agreed-upon language and defined standards.

Many organizations have developed standards of behavior and/or values statements that guide the work of the organization. This is a critical step to building good culture. However, it is often not deep enough for teams to truly embrace the detail of accountabilities in the workplace. Teams should be encouraged to use the established values and behavioral standards as their guide and go deeper to operationally define the words found in the corporate statement. Teams that deeply assess what does it mean when they see the rule, for example, "bullying will not be tolerated in our company." What does that really mean to and for this team and what does it look like when it happens?

By making rules when we are happy, the highest benefit is that people will be on notice to monitor their own behavior. The second benefit is that groups of people will "self-norm," holding each other accountable and de-escalating undesirable situations before they are allowed to become the norm. And, when it is necessary to hold someone accountable through performance management, the rule book is the buffer that says, "This is what is expected of you at work and your behavior is not meeting that standard."