

# UNWRITTEN RULES:

What You Don't Know Can Hurt Your Career

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Founded in 1962, Catalyst is the leading nonprofit membership organization working globally with businesses and the professions to build inclusive workplaces and expand opportunities for women and business. With offices in the United States, Canada, and Europe, and the support of more than 370 member organizations, Catalyst is the premier resource for research, information, and trusted advice about women at work. Catalyst annually honors exemplary organizational initiatives that promote women's advancement with the Catalyst Award.

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# 1. LEARNING TO PLAY BY THE RULES

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Advancing in today's business world is often as much about learning and playing by the rules as it is about talent and results. Some rules are explicitly stated in organizational handbooks, performance review procedures, or by senior leadership. But other rules are left implicit—unwritten—for employees to decipher on their own. Those who do not have the tools to access this maze of “unwritten rules” and the important knowledge these rules provide remain left out, no matter how competent they are.

Given the glaring lack of diversity at the very top of many organizations, it is likely that women—and especially women of color—encounter particular barriers when it comes to figuring out what it takes to advance. Catalyst research shows that lack of access to informal networks—especially those

networks that can provide important information—is one of the primary barriers to the advancement of women.<sup>1</sup> Many talented women may not have the same access to their organization's unwritten rules as their colleagues, to the detriment of their career advancement.<sup>2</sup>

In a globally competitive marketplace, inclusive workplaces are essential to attracting and retaining the best talent. Despite increased efforts to create more inclusive workplaces, however, many organizations continue to function based on old norms and rules, not all of which are communicated formally or explicitly.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the unwritten rules and how they are shared is fundamental to the creation of an inclusive work environment.



1. Catalyst, *Women and Men in U.S. Corporate Leadership: Same Workplace, Different Realities?* (2004); Catalyst, *Connections That Count: The Informal Networks of Women of Color in the United States* (2006).
2. Jeanette W. Gilsdorf, “Organizational Rules on Communicating: How Employees Are—and Are Not—Learning the Ropes,” *Journal of Business Communication*, vol. 35, no. 2 (April 1998): p. 173-201. Lorelle B. Jabs, “Communicative Rules and Organizational Decision Making,” *Journal of Business Communication*, vol. 42, no. 3 (July 2005): p. 265-288. Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson, Jeylan T. Mortimer, Jennifer C. Lee, and Michael J. Stern, “Judgments About Work: Dimensionality Revisited,” *Work and Occupations*, vol. 34, no. 3 (August 2007): p. 290-317.
3. Gilsdorf.

## UNWRITTEN RULES 101

In this report, we use the term “unwritten rules” to describe generally unspoken *workplace norms and behaviors* that are necessary to succeed within an organization *but* that are not communicated as consistently or explicitly as formalized work competencies are.<sup>4</sup> Often, these behaviors are taken for granted as “what successful employees do.”

Unwritten rules are not always separate from an organization’s *written* and official rules and are rooted in the organization’s history, values, and norms. A majority of unwritten rules do—or did at one point—help predict success.<sup>5</sup> As organizations change, however, old unwritten rules may hinder—rather than facilitate—new organizational strategies and objectives.<sup>6</sup> Behaviors that made sense in the past may not work as effectively in today’s ever-changing, global workplace.<sup>7</sup>

The most powerful messages about unwritten rules come from an organization’s leadership. Leaders and managers communicate subtle signals about what behaviors they expect, as well as what is valued and rewarded. Furthermore, employees look to leaders as role models for how to work and succeed.

Because unwritten rules are not always equally accessible to all employees, they may create barriers for some. For instance, when rules are communicated through informal networks, those without access to these networks miss out on developmental opportunities. At the same time, organizations might overlook some of their best talent by inadvertently providing opportunities only to those who belong to the most influential networks.

Why is it helpful for leaders and organizations to learn about unwritten rules? Unless challenged, some unwritten rules may be counter-productive to the organization’s search for the best fit for talent.<sup>8</sup> Organizations can thus benefit from considering the following questions:

- Does everyone within the organization have access to unwritten rules to advancement?
- Are current unwritten rules consistent with the organization’s values and with attracting and retaining the best talent?
- Do some rules need to change?

Recognizing “how the work gets done around here” can help organizations understand whether old rules are in conflict with new goals and strategies and, if so, what needs to change.

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4. Tove Helland Hammer, Per Oystein Saksvik, Kjell Nytro, and Hans Torvatn, “Expanding the Psychosocial Work Environment: Workplace Norms and Work-Family Conflict as Correlates of Stress and Health,” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2004): p. 83-97.

5. Kay J. Bunch, “Training Failure as a Consequence of Organizational Culture,” *Human Resource Development Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2007): p. 142-163.

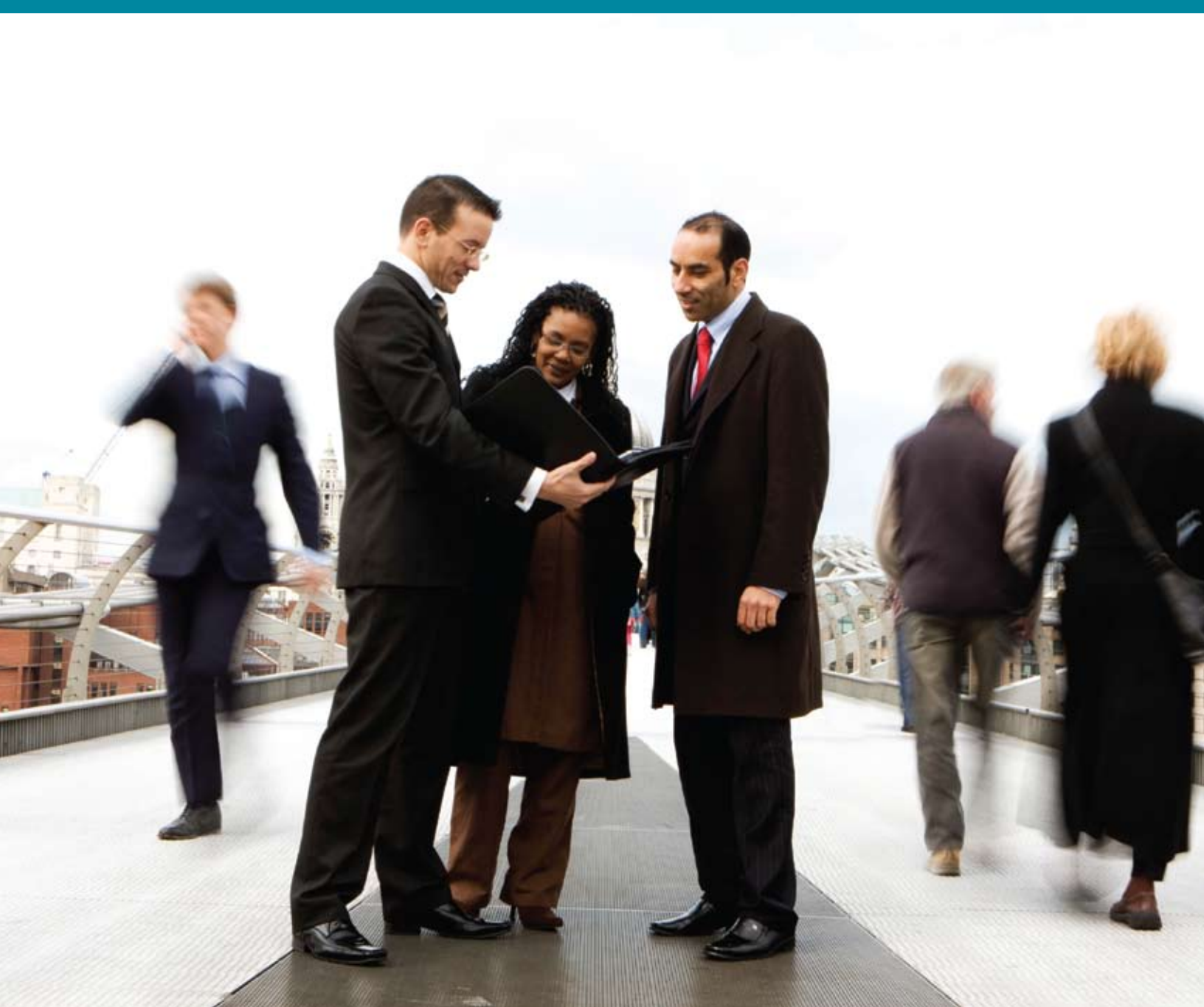
6. Randolph T. Barker and Martin R. Camarata, “The Role of Communication in Creating and Maintaining a Learning Organization,” *The Journal of Business Communication*, vol. 35, no. 4 (October 1998): p. 443-467.

7. Face-time norms, for example, become counter-productive in a context where flexible hours are an essential part of getting the work done, as is the case for businesses working in multiple time zones. If the behaviors that are rewarded (e.g., spending many hours in the office) do not lead to the desired outcome (e.g., productivity, engagement), then organizations are not rewarding and leveraging their best talent.

8. Phyllis Weiss Haserot, “How to Change Unwritten Rules,” *The New York Law Journal*. <http://www.pdcounsel.com/how%20to%20change%20unwritten%20rules.html> (accessed September 2007).

# 2. WHAT ARE THE UNWRITTEN RULES?

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Catalyst interviewed 65 women and men from a variety of industries, locations, and roles about advancing in the workplace. We asked interview participants to provide examples of “unwritten rules,” defined as workplace norms and behaviors that are not communicated in an explicit or formalized way, but that clearly play a role in developing career and advancement opportunities.

Participants’ responses fell into two major categories, which are listed in Table 1:

- Behaviors and/or actions that are helpful to advance.
- Individual skills and characteristics the organization values when it comes to promotional opportunities.

TABLE 1: Top Unwritten Rules to Advancement <sup>9</sup> (N=65)	
Behaviors and Actions	Individual Skills and Characteristics <sup>10</sup>
Network and build relationships within and outside the organization (71%)	Articulate, good communicator, influential (52%)
Find ways to become visible (51%)	“Agentic” (42%) <sup>11</sup>
Play politics and lobby for yourself and your work (45%)	A team player, works well with others (37%)
Communicate effectively and ask for lots of feedback (43%)	“Fits in” with the organizational culture (32%)
Perform well, produce results (35%)	Knowledgeable, competent (32%)
Find a mentor, coach, sponsor (32%)	Energetic, works a lot (31%)
Work long hours (29%)	Strategic, savvy (26%)
Develop a good career plan (20%)	“Communal” (22%) <sup>12</sup>

## Build Relationships and Become Visible

As noted in Table 1, participants agreed about the importance of building relationships within and outside the organization, whether through networks and affinity groups or with mentors, supervisors, and other influential individuals who can share knowledge.

Respondents described networks and professional connections both as a source of knowledge about what it takes to advance as well as a way to gain access to opportunities, including the chance to become known within the organization. A middle manager, for example, explained why building relationships is so essential to advancement.

9. Number of statements: 218 for “Behaviors and Actions”; 222 for “Individual Skills and Characteristics.” Percentages do not total 100 because participants could discuss more than one rule in the course of the interview.

10. Other individual characteristics cited in the interviews that do not appear in the table include “reliable, gets the work done in time” (14 percent); “creative, innovative, curious” (12 percent); “aware of own strengths, weaknesses” (9 percent).

11. Based on existing research, “agentive,” or masculine, traits include characteristics such as assertive, ambitious, dominant, independent; “communal,” or feminine, characteristics include traits such as sensitive, friendly, well-liked, emotional. Marianne LaFrance, “Gender and Social Interaction” in Rhoda K. Unger, ed., *Handbook of the Psychology of Women and Gender* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2001): p. 245-255.

12. See footnote 11.



*I think building relationships is one of the key aspects of advancement. [Networking with] every type of person—inside and outside the company...instead of just doing the work. Because that's what I did when I first started. I did the work, and I figured my work would speak for itself, and I would go places. When I figured out I'm not going anywhere, it's like, how come?*

—Asian woman,  
U.S.-based middle manager

Mentors often facilitate the expansion of their mentees' social networks, which, in turn, may provide the opportunity to meet new mentors. Both networking and having a mentor can help employees become more visible. As the following quotations illustrate, building relationships and showcasing one's work and skills should go hand-in-hand.

*It's equally important to call attention to yourself [and your work]...Women don't do that enough. Having an elevator speech ready so if you run into someone senior...and they ask you how things are going, you should be prepared in two minutes or less to give a good summary of your recent accomplishments, achievements, rather than just, you know, "Oh, I'm busy and things are going well."*

—White woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

*Really be present...not just physically. Be involved in all that you want to be involved in and try to take advantage of as many taskforces and optional work projects as possible...committees, and find opportunities to work on [tasks] that aren't just given to you as assignments. Seek out more assignments and projects and be there for the company.*

—Latina, U.S.-based senior leader



Seek out more assignments and projects  
and be there for the company.

—Latina, U.S.-based senior leader



Importantly, simply belonging to a network might not be enough to gain visibility and recognition. It is also critical to find the *right* networks—that is, the most influential networks in the organization, as explained in the following quotation.

*I work in a predominantly conservative, white, male-led company. And unless people feel comfortable, you're not automatically invited into the in-group...I'm generally a person who tries to get along well with everybody, so it was easy for me to make them feel comfortable enough to invite me to their in-groups. But I think other people had issues with that.*

—Black man, U.S.-based non-manager

Similarly, a woman law partner drew the connection between practice area—which is often influenced by developmental relationships built early in a career—and later career success.

*The thing I did not know, when I started out, was that your income as an attorney is dramatically affected by what area of law you practice...Now, the area of law that I practice in, while I love it...is probably one of the very low-end billing areas...And that's also one of those unwritten things. You just don't know it. And you figure it out as you go.*

—White woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

## Communicate Effectively and Promote Yourself

Effective communication, including the ability to give and receive feedback, proactively asking the right questions, and closely observing how other employees communicate, emerged as another success factor. One woman noted how knowledge often comes from a variety of sources and that feedback also provides important information about work norms, such as “face time.”

*Direct feedback [comes] from my manager... And then indirect feedback [comes] from peers and managers. [I] had a conversation with a peer of my manager [who said] to get ahead, you've got to be at least “in the building.” So that means working the standard hours isn't going to cut it because senior managers are there after the standard hours. So if they want to get information, and you're not in the building, they're going to get it from somebody else.*

—Asian woman,  
U.S.-based non-manager

An Asian senior leader noted how the norms and expectations about communication can vary based on employees' cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

*Tell them what you're interested in doing next. Because if you don't speak up, no one will know. And if you don't speak up when an opening comes up that might be a good fit for you, they won't think about you...Being an Asian-American, I've never been that assertive about it. I always thought that my good work would show people that I'm capable of going to the next level. And that alone is not enough.*

—Asian woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

Finally, a black senior leader emphasized knowing both yourself and others.

*Be a go-getter, proactive, but it's actually about making people feel good. As a woman of color [you have to consider] culture too—whether ethnicity, race, or nationality. Know yourself inside and out.*

—Black woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader



“

To advance, tell them what you're interested in doing next. Because if you don't speak up, no one will know.

—Asian woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

”

## Do Your Homework: Figure Out Your Career Path

Unwritten rules not only convey information about what to do to succeed, but also about career progression and paths to the leadership track. Participants talked about defining goals early on, planning each step, and then learning the right skills. Some noted how, for women especially, career choices are strictly linked to the unwritten work-life choices that leaders need to make to advance. One example comes from a U.S.-based participant.

*If you want that kind of a role, you're going to have to move. I've moved seven times...These are the kinds of things that you're going to have to be willing to do...In our organization*

*we showcase how manufacturing directors—even though they've stayed in manufacturing [for their career]—have worked in China, Germany...to show people the kinds of roles [these directors have] taken as they've moved up.*

—White woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

In sum, although some flexibility is necessary to define one's long-term career paths, participants agreed that “doing your homework” can be extremely helpful to career progression.<sup>13</sup>

## Who Is the “Ideal Worker”?

Some unwritten rules of advancement are rooted in what Joan Williams calls the “ideal-worker norm”—a set of norms and expectations about the characteristics necessary to succeed professionally and, accordingly, about what is valued at work.<sup>14</sup>

The ideal worker is often described as someone with agentic characteristics (e.g., independent, rational, and non-emotional) who also models particular work styles and behaviors such as “always in the office,” “works full-time,” and “puts work first.” To the extent that exhibiting “ideal worker” behaviors leads to professional success, employees who do not fit this set of norms might find themselves disadvantaged when it comes to career progression.<sup>15</sup>

To further explore the relation between ideal-worker norms and unwritten rules, respondents were asked to describe the “ideal” employee within their organization or field of work. Specifically, we asked participants to name the typical characteristics and skills of those who advance. A summary of their answers is outlined in the second column of Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, participants described the ideal worker as articulate, a good communicator, and “socially” and “emotionally” intelligent. These traits help build connections and make it possible to self-promote without appearing arrogant. The ideal employee is proactive but not pushy; as a woman in a Europe-based senior leadership position put it: “[The ideal employee] takes the initiative but is also diplomatic.”

13. For a discussion of unwritten rules around the use of flexible work arrangements, see Jeanine Andreassi and Cynthia Thompson, “Work-Family Culture: A Sloan Work and Family Encyclopedia Entry,” [http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia\\_template.php?id=262](http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_template.php?id=262) (accessed September 2007).

14. Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): p. 5. According to Ms. Williams, the underlying assumption about the ideal-worker norm is that “success requires ideal worker status.” These beliefs also influence what is considered “real work,” as is often the case with face time and 24/7 workplaces. Because the notions of the “ideal worker” and “real work” are inextricably tied to gender, they are especially likely to affect perceptions of women employees. Ronald J. Burke, “Workaholicism Among Women Managers: Personal and Workplace Correlates,” *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, vol. 15, no. 6 (2000): p. 520-534. Alison Sheridan, “Chronic Presenteeism: The Multiple Dimensions to Men’s Absence From Part-Time Work,” *Gender, Work, and Organization*, vol. 11, no. 2 (March 2004): p. 207-225.

15. Catalyt, *The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don't* (2007).



Thirty-seven percent of interviewees also described the ideal employee as a team player. A good leader works well and has the skills to coordinate, delegate, and manage team members' work. A senior leader, for example, spoke about the ability to share credit and information with others.

*The people that I see...being the most successful are the ones that very much consider themselves part of a team and working with that team. I once heard a phrase used within our organization that we don't have any stars on our team. It's a team. It's not individual. It's the amalgamation of the group, and that's what makes us successful.*

—White woman,  
Canada-based senior leader

Similarly, a man in a middle-managerial position noted how the increased popularity of work teams is changing what is needed to advance, even in a technical field.

*In the past, we could be individual players in the technology arena, and that was more than acceptable. In many cases, it was the preferred way. Now, it's becoming much more of a team effort and you have to show the ability to work with the team and to be part of that team. If you're going to be a lone ranger, you might get promoted to a certain degree from a technical standpoint, but that's it.*

—Asian man,  
U.S.-based middle manager

Consistent with previous Catalyst research on gender stereotypes of women leaders, the ideal employee was mostly described in agentic terms. Forty-two percent of respondents described the ideal worker as assertive, independent, results-oriented, and a good problem-solver. Only 22 percent of interviewees cited communal characteristics, such as friendly, likable, or people-oriented, as those that might be helpful to advance.<sup>16</sup> One senior manager suggested that when it comes to acceptable emotional repertoire, gender stereotypes still play a role.

*I still [tell] young women or people [who] ask me to be careful with their emotions and make sure they don't express them too much in front of men. Not because they shouldn't have them, just to make sure that they don't cause any kind of confusion or negatives because people might not understand...That is one of the unwritten rules. You never know when [an emotion] is going to be in the green or in the red area.*

—Woman, Europe-based  
senior leader (race not available)

Another senior leader discussed how she had to monitor her behavior to project a non-stereotypical image.

*I think that being an African-American woman is the hardest piece...It [is] difficult to be yourself because you have to operate in a certain space so [that] you're not considered threatening, confrontational. You have to make sure you articulate your points very clearly, etc. It's also hard to get past those stereotypes in certain circles.*

—Black woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

16. See footnote 11.

# 3. DISCOVERING UNWRITTEN RULES

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How do employees learn about unwritten rules? When asked *how* they had come to understand unwritten rules, participants discussed both how they had gained access to information about what it takes to succeed and what learning strategies they had used to understand “how things work” in their organization.

Respondents sometimes learned about important career rules almost by chance or by trial and error; many were proactive in asking colleagues and supervisors for information to understand how things work in their organization; some perfected their observation skills. Table 2 summarizes the approaches and strategies that participants described as helpful to figuring out unwritten rules.

TABLE 2: Discovering Unwritten Rules (N=65) <sup>17</sup>	
Gaining Access	Learning Strategies <sup>18</sup>
Informal networks only (65%)	Observe others, both successful and unsuccessful (58%)
Formal and informal networks (57%) <sup>19</sup>	Individual feedback; performance evaluation feedback; formal coaching (37%)
Mentors, sponsors, supervisors (48%)	Trial and error; trying different tactics (28%)
	Observing written and verbal interactions (e.g., email, meetings) (28%)

Some respondents discussed how different learning processes intersect. One woman described using both feedback and observation to understand what it takes to advance.

*I had a couple of managers who have been excellent mentors...They have actually shared their observations about how I am perceived, how I need to speak out more and things like that. Sometimes really good information comes...through performance reviews. As much as we hate to read them...a lot of times that information is very constructive. I also have learned that it's important to ask your bosses or other people that you think highly of, or the executive types, for words of wisdom.*

—Asian woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

As noted in Table 2, a majority of interview respondents (57 percent) relied on social networks, mentors, or both as sources of information and professional opportunities. Mentors, coaches, and/or sponsors not only provide important knowledge, but also provide models of successful behaviors. Accordingly, observing those who are successful within the organization was a common learning strategy, as the following quotations illustrate.

*Observation of the environment is very important. You really have to get the pulse of the organization as to what type of people do they need up there...So it's not only looking at yourself as to whether or not you have the skills. It's looking around you and saying what are the opportunities? What are the areas... that you think you can bring value to? If you don't have those skills, you have to acquire those skills.*

—Asian woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

17. Number of statements: N=235. Percentages do not total 100 because participants could discuss more than one rule in the course of the interview.

18. Table 2 presents a summary of the most frequently cited learning strategies; other strategies discussed in the course of the interviews include “actively seeking out information, asking” (22 percent); “previous work experience, education” (20 percent); and “intuition” (8 percent).

19. Although not all participants clearly differentiated between “formal” and “informal” networks, some noted that formal professional networks become especially helpful when they function as a means to build informal networks and mentoring relationships.



*Observation is the first step. The second step is discuss the topic, ask people if it is the right way...Ask peers or colleagues...Participate in coaching, mentoring, formal mentoring, informal mentoring. But really clarify your initial perception.*

—Woman, Europe-based senior leader (race not available)

Sometimes, the unwritten rules became obvious only when participants saw that someone whom they would not have expected to advance received a promotion. One participant explained.

*You can learn what to do and what not to do by looking at your boss or their boss...Sometimes it's looking at peers that get ahead or don't... I'll have an opinion as to who [in a group] is capable of going up and who isn't. And then when...somebody who I thought should go up [is promoted], it reinforces [what] I believe... And I think some of the unwritten rules come [up] when the people that you might not expect to get ahead, get ahead.*

—White man, Canada-based middle manager

Employees learn not only by observing individual behaviors, but also by noting how people interact with one another, dress, and communicate verbally and non-verbally (e.g., through body language but

also via email and at meetings). In this study, 28 percent of participants observed others' interaction styles to understand what is valued and what is not valued, including which behaviors seem to lead to promotional opportunities. A U.S.-based black woman senior leader explained, *"You need to sit on a curb and watch what goes by."*

Another woman explained.

*"[I learn by observing] email communication or just voicemail communication, hearing the way people communicate and use the lingo... Watching people make presentations is another way [of learning]."*

—White woman, U.S.-based senior leader

Finally, interviewees leveraged knowledge from previous jobs to understand the unwritten rules at new jobs.<sup>20</sup> One woman described the challenges of integrating the old and new rules.

*"[In the] organization I came from, you knew the rules, it was very clear...[In] this organization, they are not as clear... You have to navigate [the challenges] differently, and more carefully, and learn along the way. And I hit some unexpected pitfalls and subcultures.*

—White woman, U.S.-based senior leader

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20. Jon C. Carr, Allison W. Pearson, Michael J. Vest, and Scott L. Boyar, "Prior Occupational Experience, Anticipatory Socialization, and Employee Retention," *Journal of Management*, vol. 32, no. 3 (June 2006): p. 343-359. Carr and colleagues claim that "veteran" newcomers "may follow different strategies to incorporate and assimilate their past experience with the new organizational settings" (p. 346). Understanding how employees "integrate" their understanding of what it takes to advance can be especially helpful for global teams and units where larger cultural norms may intersect with more specific organizational norms and rules.

# 4. IN HINDSIGHT...



When it comes to career advancement, what do participants know now that they wish they had known early on? While responses to this question echoed the earlier descriptions of unwritten rules (see Table 1), some rules emerged as more important *in retrospect* than others.<sup>21</sup> Table 3 summarizes the five most frequently cited responses.

TABLE 3: In Hindsight... (N=65) <sup>22</sup>
I wish I had known...
About organizational politics, becoming visible, and advocating more for myself (35%)
To plan my goals and career in advance, learning about the next steps (26%)
The importance of effective communication, asking questions, and asking for feedback (22%)
The importance of social networks; to network more effectively (18%)
To find a good mentor/coach/sponsor (15%)

Thirty-five percent of respondents said that they wished they had known that “just” working hard is not enough to succeed. Respondents also wished they had been more aware of organizational politics and about the advantages of self-promotion. Some discussed career planning, value clarification, and finding good mentoring and networking opportunities. The following responses illustrate some of these issues.

*[I wish] I had claimed my successes and had been a self-advocate, built relationships, and communicated in such a way that I had more advocates at the senior level so that I could have added value in different ways...They knew me as a very specific and narrow set of responsibilities, when I had broad skill sets.*

—Asian woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

*I didn't recognize how naïve I was...You're a woman engineer and...it's just like a boxing match from the time you are in calculus in high school...And it isn't a boxing match, and it took me a long time to realize: quit fighting so hard for your own thing; figure out how to team with them and work together.*

—White woman,  
U.S.-based middle manager

*[I wish I had known] how to get [paid what I was] worth, no matter where I'm at [with my career]...In my first job...I did all this stuff and...the next job was a certain job, but they gave it to someone else...The problem was not only they gave the job to another person, the problem was that person's salary was two times mine.*

—Latina, U.S.-based middle manager

A few participants wished they had better managed their work and personal lives.<sup>23</sup> Working too many hours and making personal trade-offs seemed—in hindsight—unnecessary to reaching their current positions.<sup>24</sup> Six participants (9 percent) said that they would not do anything differently.

*I wouldn't have known what to do with it if I had known [the unwritten rules] early on. I think it is a matter of experience...Life is a journey, not a destination, so it is not good to know it all up front.*

—Black woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

21. Catalyst conducts an in-depth analysis of participants' responses to the “hindsight” questions in the second phase of this research.

22. Number of statements: N=76. Percentages do not total 100 because participants could discuss more than one rule in the course of the interview.

23. Catalyst conducts an in-depth analysis of participants' comments about managing career and personal responsibilities in the second phase of this research.

24. David J. Thompson, “The Seven Layers of Change for Work-Life Effectiveness,” *WorldatWork Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1 (First Quarter 2007): p. 54-61. Time, work, life, and advancement opportunities are the subtext of many unwritten rules described in this report. While a large number of employers now offer some type of work-life program (e.g., dependent care, parental leave, flexible work arrangements), unwritten rules about work may get in the way of effective implementation. Unsupportive workplace cultures can limit the extent to which many of these programs can successfully address employees' work-life effectiveness.

# 5. HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN CHANGE



Finally, interviewees were asked what organizations could do to better convey unwritten rules and whether they thought companies should make “unwritten” information accessible to employees in more formalized ways. Table 4 summarizes the recommended approaches.

TABLE 4: What Organizations Can Do (N=65) <sup>25</sup>	
Approach	Examples
Programs and practices (78%)	Mentoring programs; formal networks; buddy system; orientation and career development programs; talent reviews; programs to help increase visibility
Organizational culture (63%)	Increase cultural awareness and awareness of unwritten rules and values; facilitate teamwork; create an inclusive workplace
Individual in the organization (20%)	Talk more openly about norms and rules; create more informal opportunities to share knowledge; increase your awareness of how others perceive you and are perceived

The vast majority of participants (78 percent) advocated for formal programs and practices such as mentoring, networking, and career development plans to provide specific information about advancement. As exemplified in the two statements below, targeted practices can create a venue to communicate unwritten rules and make career development processes more transparent.

*We’ve started a program [that] is our way of trying to communicate some of this information...[It] fosters the communication and learning and creates an open dialogue. And [these programs] don’t cost much at all.*

—White woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

*Career development is much more formalized... We’re identifying competencies and technical skills that people need... We’re advising people about their interpersonal skills, their judgment, decision-making. Those are now part of their career development.*

—Asian man,  
U.S.-based middle manager

Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of respondents suggested that companies pay increased attention

to their culture and norms to make sure that the underlying values support an inclusive workplace. Showcasing leaders as role models and identifying a variety of career paths, for example, can teach employees about their own options. A corporate vice president explained.

*On our website, we have a few people whom we’ve asked to post their career progression and what they gained from each step. And why that builds them to be considered for something else.*

—White woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

According to another woman, making career development more transparent is fundamental.

*Make career development like a big party. Hold sessions that focus on that... So often, upward mobility is a hush-hush thing—only special people get chosen.*

—Black woman,  
U.S.-based non-manager

A senior leader emphasized the importance of effective communication between leaders and employees as a way to address cultural assumptions.

25. Number of statements: N=105. Percentages do not total 100 because participants could discuss more than one approach in the course of the interview.

“

Because of my own experiences, what I try to do as a manager is be very transparent. So if somebody comes into my group, I have a little speech...This is what you should be able to expect from me, this is what I expect from you...

—White woman,  
U.S.-based senior leader

”



*We...have to equip our leaders in a better way to articulate to people who maybe are not successful as to why and where the gaps are... We also have got to equip our employees to accept feedback...understand what they have to work on, how they're coming across...When you have that kind of openness, you have... more transparency.*

—Man, Canada-based senior leader (race not available)

*to expect from me, this is what I expect from you...It sets the stage for, if you're wondering, ask. If you're seeing something, ask. And ask a colleague, ask me, as a supervisor...So if somebody does come in new [to the company] or new to my group, they get some of that. I [also] have a list of norms we developed as a department.*

—White woman, U.S.-based senior leader

Finally, 20 percent of participants spoke specifically of increasing awareness about organizational rules.<sup>26</sup> Individual employees can contribute as members of the organization and as managers through effective communication, increased transparency, and by creating a more inclusive workplace and climate. The quotations below exemplify some of these responses.

*Because of my own experiences, what I try to do as a manager is be very transparent. So if somebody comes into my group, I have a little speech...This is what you should be able*

*The benefit of talking about these unwritten rules [is that it] gives the company a chance to challenge those rules. Is that how we want to be working?...We have this kind of unwritten description of what a leader looks like. And if you're a global company now, [and] we're looking at it...is that the right definition? So I think by making the rules more written and less unwritten you get a chance to challenge some of these things.*

—White woman, U.S.-based senior leader

## In Summary

The data presented here show that organizations often function based on norms and rules that are not always communicated in formal or explicit ways. To learn these unwritten rules, participants leveraged professional networks and mentors. Constantly building and maintaining professional relationships through networking also emerged as one of the most important unwritten rules.<sup>27</sup>

Previous Catalyst research has shown that women—and especially women of color—lack access to informal professional networks, making it likely that unwritten rules are not equally available to

all employees.<sup>28</sup> Companies that work to recognize their unwritten rules and make them more explicit will benefit from the greater variety of talent that will be able to succeed.

A few ways that companies can begin to change their culture of unwritten rules include developing practices such as mentoring, networking, and career development programs; continually examining the organizational culture and how it affects advancement opportunities; and finding ways to encourage both leaders and employees to create a more inclusive workplace.

26. Although interview respondents were not directly asked about “writing down” unwritten rules, 22 brought up this option as a possible organizational strategy. Of these, 17 respondents (77 percent) thought writing down rules would be a good idea and that it would help the organization become more inclusive. Five respondents (23 percent), however, did not think writing down unwritten rules would help, not only because it would be difficult to do, but also because new unwritten rules would be created relatively soon.

27. Catalyst further develops this knowledge through a survey in a second phase of this research.

28. Catalyst, *Connections That Count: The Informal Networks of Women of Color in the United States* (2006).

# 6. SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY





# Respondent Profiles

Sixty-five women and men from a variety of industries and roles participated in a semi-structured phone interview about unwritten rules to advancement. Participants answered open-ended questions about their work experiences and, specifically, about the types of unwritten rules they had encountered at the beginning of and throughout their career.

Participants were recruited from a variety of settings, including Catalyst member organizations and professional networks. Snowball sampling (i.e., referrals from initial participants) was employed to recruit additional interviewees. Of the 65 interviewees, 55 were women and ten were men; among those who completed the demographic survey (N=62), 30 identified as white, 21 identified as Asian-American, six identified as black/African-American, and three identified as Latina/Hispanic. Seventy percent of respondents (N=43) were married or living with a partner, and 28 percent

(N=17) were single or divorced. More than one-half (N=32, or 52 percent) had children; among respondents with children, 63 percent (N=20) had at least two children under 18 living at home.

As noted in Table 5, the majority of respondents reported 11 or more years of work experience (80 percent; N=49), and held a managerial position within their organization (75 percent; N=46). One-third of participants (33 percent) had been with their current employer for fewer than five years. Respondents were employed in a variety of industries, including manufacturing and consumer products (26 percent), financial services (25 percent), pharmaceutical (8 percent), high tech (7 percent), and law (5 percent). Other industries included communication, entertainment, social services, consulting, and automotive. Of the 65 interviewees, the majority (N=53) worked in the United States, six worked in Canada, and six in Europe.

**TABLE 5: Respondent Profiles (N=61)**

Job Experience and Level

Years of Work Experience		Years With Current Employer		Current Job Level and Characteristics	
Years	Count (%)	Years	Count (%)	Level	Count (%)
<5	3 (5%)	<5	20 (33%)	Executive Officer	8 (13%)
5-10	8 (13%)	5-10	16 (26%)	Senior Director/ Partner	14 (23%)
11-20	22 (36%)	11-20	14 (23%)	Middle Manager/ Director	24 (39%)
20+	27 (44%)	20+	11 (18%)	Other	13 (24%)

## Interview Procedure<sup>29</sup>

The interview addressed the types and examples of unwritten rules to advancement that participants had encountered throughout their careers, how participants came to learn about and access these unwritten rules, and whether—in hindsight—they could think of any information about advancement that they wished they had known at the very

beginning of their careers. Finally, the conversation shifted to the organization’s role in creating and communicating unwritten rules to advancement, and participants were asked whether there was anything companies could do to equalize access to informal and unwritten advancement rules.

29. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted on the phone by two interviewers. Participants were also asked to complete a brief demographic online questionnaire.

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