

Unwritten Ground Rules:

Cultural Barriers To A Positive Customer Experience

By Eric Frateman

**'Unwritten ground rules (UGRs) exist in all workplaces, although staff do not always talk about them. They create a culture that governs everything employees and managers do'.
- From Australian author Steve Simpson's book 'Unwritten Ground Rules: Cracking the Corporate Culture Code'**

Why do so many so-called 'customer centric' strategies fail to make an impact? Why are work cultures so intransigent? Steve Simpson contends that it's because organisations focus on tweaking the official processes, but that these are only a partial determinant of the actual customer experience.

He argues the case for organisations to centre-in on the key determinant of business performance: culture. Steve says that managers prefer to ignore (or, in many cases, are simply unaware of) the Unwritten Ground Rules (UGRs) that dictate corporate performance and can get a lot of workplaces into trouble when dealing with customers.

'UGRs are people's perceptions of the way we do things around here', Steve says. 'They are rarely explicit, but their power is enormous. UGRs are most prominent in casual discussions between staff, in the talk that occurs after meetings, and in the difference between what people say and what people do.'

UGRs may range from an implicit understanding that it's not worth raising new ideas that cost money, or that the boss talks only to people who have done something wrong or interprets improvement suggestions from the front-line as implied criticism and a challenge to his or her authority.

Worse, for those on the outside trying to get good service, there's sometimes a feeling in-house that it's OK to shrug off customer complaints or hope the customer simply goes away rather than genuinely address the underlying issue that caused the complaint.

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The root cause of this is not employees sabotaging the company's efforts to improve. Quite the reverse. This kind of culture emerges when the company TALKS about putting customers first but ACTS at corporate level in a way that shows it is just lip service.

Research conducted at the University of Western Australia and Curtin University's Graduate School of Business confirms the power of the UGRs identified by Steve and adds a layer of complexity by pointing out that different parts of the same workplace can have localised UGRs that deliver variants of the culture from department to department.

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Common UGRs include:

- At our meetings it isn't worth suggesting improvements because nothing will get done
- The only time anyone gets spoken to by the boss is when something is wrong
- The company talks about customer service, but we don't have to worry about it
- A lot of the jokes we tell each other are at the expense of colleagues, other departments or customers
- We go through the motions with our bosses, but once they have gone we do what we want or have to do to get the job done
- New staff are not told about UGRs until they earn their stripes

To read more about UGRs, visit www.ugrs.net.