HOW WORKPLACE CULTURES STIFLE PERFORMANCE

AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT.

YOUR GUIDE TO

UGRS

the unwritten ground rules

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people say to us
**'This has changed
my life!'**

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LIKE TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY?

One of the great challenges for leaders nowadays is how to achieve more with less. It's fair to say that all workplaces have benefited from improvements that new technologies bring, but then what?

We have learned that there is potential for substantial performance improvement in most organisations. That potential is under the direct control of leaders and doesn't cost massive amounts to fix—it's the organisation's culture.

We undertook research that centred on one key question:

If the culture of your workplace was to become as good as it realistically could, how much improvement would there be on people's performance and productivity?
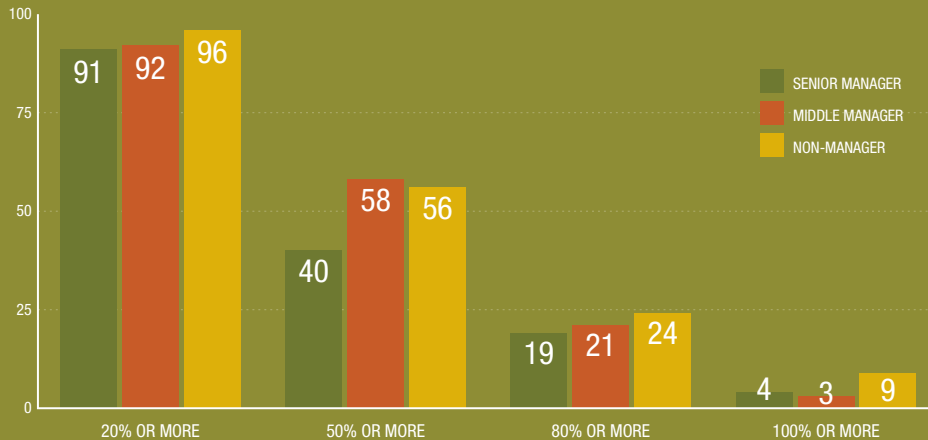

After having specialised in workplace culture for more than 20 years, the results we acquired from this study even surprised us.

- Of the senior leader respondents, 91% thought there would be a 20% or more improvement in performance/productivity if the culture was realistically improved.

- Of the middle manager respondents, 58% thought there would be a 50% or more improvement in performance/productivity if the culture was realistically improved.

What these results tell is that most senior people see huge potential gains that can be realised if the culture of the workplace is to be realistically improved.

IMPROVEMENT IN PERFORMANCE/PRODUCTIVITY IF THE CULTURE WAS REALISTICALLY IMPROVED

Chart legend:
- SENIOR MANAGER
- MIDDLE MANAGER
- NON-MANAGER

	20% OR MORE	50% OR MORE	80% OR MORE	100% OR MORE
SENIOR MANAGER	91	40	19	4
MIDDLE MANAGER	92	58	21	3
NON-MANAGER	96	56	24	9

Survey of 452 readers of 'Cultural Intelligence'

WITH THESE POTENTIAL GAINS, WHY ISN'T CULTURE ADDRESSED?

One of the biggest issues when it comes to improving workplace culture relates to the complexity of the concept.

What people don't understand, they don't manage. What people don't manage they become victims of.

So it is with workplace culture.

That's where the concept of UGRs® has a huge part to play …

WHAT ARE UGRs?

Unwritten Ground Rules or 'UGRs' are people's perceptions of **'this is the way we do things around here'**. They drive people's behaviour, yet they are rarely talked about openly.

It's the UGRs in an organisation that constitute its culture. Understand UGRs and we understand workplace culture.

Examples of UGRs include:
- At our meetings it isn't worth complaining because nothing will get done
- The only time anyone gets spoken to by the boss is when something is wrong
- The company talks about the importance of service, but we know they don't really mean it, so we don't really have to worry about it

UGRs can be **positive**, **neutral** or **negative**. Positive UGRs underpin teams that are upbeat, dynamic and productive. Conversely, if a team is not functioning well and there is a great deal of internal conflict, negative UGRs will be in place.

In any team there will inevitably be a mix of positive and negative UGRs. In some teams there will be more positive than negative UGRs. In other teams there will be more negative UGRs.

HOW ARE UGRs CREATED?

UGRs are created in a number of ways:

- **People watch what gets noticed.** For example, if someone gets frowned upon for speaking up, then a UGR might be 'Around here, you're better off not to speak up, even when you're asked'. Conversely, if leaders say that safety is vitally important, and someone gets into trouble for not conforming to safety procedures, then a UGR might be 'Around here, we're serious about safety'

- **People watch what doesn't get noticed.** For example, if someone speaks badly of a leader, and nobody suggests they shouldn't talk that way, then a UGR might be 'Around here, it's fine to criticise bosses'. Similarly, if a person goes out of their way to help a colleague and no one recognises that extra effort, then a UGR might be 'Around here, it's not worth your while to help others out'

- **People watch for any differences in terms of what people say and what they do.** For example, if a leader says 'In this organisation, we care for our people', and soon after that same person treats a person without respect, then a UGR might be 'Around here, the bosses say one thing and mean another'

HOW DO UGRs AFFECT ME?

UGRs affect all of us! Here's evidence …

When people are new to an organisation they are quieter than they normally would be. Why? So that they can deduce the UGRs. Why? So that they can conform. It's really interesting to note that leaders are not immune from the influence of UGRs.

One of our favourite stories comes from a CEO we worked with—let's call him Greg.

Greg had been part of a Mastermind Group comprising around 12 CEOs from non-competing organisations. He had moved location with his company and decided to join a new Mastermind Group, made up of a similar number of people, closer to his new residence.

We gave a presentation to a small group of leaders, including Greg. After introducing the notion of UGRs to the group, Greg became very animated.

'I can't believe it', he proclaimed. 'In my former Mastermind Group, there was a UGR for new members of the group that went something like: Around here, new members to the group are to be treated with the deepest suspicion, until they prove us wrong.'

'In my current group, the UGR is: Around here, new members are welcomed warmly for the contribution they can bring, until they prove us wrong.'

'In my former Mastermind Group, I was cold and aloof to new members. In my current Mastermind Group, I'm warm and embracing. Here I am, a CEO of my own company, and my behaviour has been in accord with the UGRs of a group I meet once per month!'

UGRs are **that** powerful.

BUT I SEE THINGS REALISTICALLY, SO MY UGRs MUST BE RIGHT!

UGRs are defined as people's perceptions of 'this is the way we do things around here'. Of course, the critical word in this definition is 'perceptions'. Because we are individuals with different life experiences, **we have different biases** and therefore our perceptions differ. This is easy to prove.

If two people watch a political speech on television, one person can walk out of the room saying that was the best political speech they have ever seen. The other can walk out of the room saying that was the worst political speech they have ever seen. These people have observed the same thing but have **interpreted it differently**.

This means that people's perceptions of 'the way we do things around here' are perfectly valid and correct **from the perspective of that person**.

Once people form their views on the UGRs within an organisation (more often influenced by others), there is a risk these will lock-in for the long term, almost irrespective of the actions of leaders.

In fact, cognitive scientists have put a name to this. They describe '**Motivated Reasoning**' as something that occurs when people actually seek out information that confirms what they already believe.

So here, we have a fundamental leadership conundrum, where people believe in the accuracy of their perceptions, then seek out information primarily to confirm those views.

An example?

If there is a UGR which says 'Around here, bosses don't care about us', then it almost doesn't matter what a leader says—in fact, people might become even **more cynical** if a leader says 'I'd really like to hear your views on this'. People harbouring the negative UGR about bosses will overlay a negative agenda on what might be a genuine question by saying something like 'He's only asking us that to soften us up for bad news he'll deliver tomorrow'.

SO HOW CAN UGRs BE USED IN THE WORKPLACE?

Now that you are aware of the concept of UGRs, **you will see things differently**! You will notice UGRs in the workplace and you will also notice how people conform to UGRs. After reading this guide, it's probably a good idea to simply be an observer for a little while—watching how UGRs impact on people and how they drive people's behaviour (including your own!).

After tuning-in to the UGRs in your organisation, you have the choice of deploying the concept with varying levels of complexity.

At its least complex, you might challenge yourself and the leadership team to consider your own behaviours and question the extent to which your own behaviours either **cause** or **allow** negative UGRs to exist (as a side-note, we have learned that leaders either cause or allow the vast majority of UGRs to exist).

At a more sophisticated level, you may wish to deploy the five-step UGRs process for strategically improving workplace culture.

FIVE STEPS

TO USING UGRs IN THE WORKPLACE

1. ENVISION

Clarify the Key Cultural Attributes (KCAs) necessary for the organisation's future success (or alternatively, reaffirm the organisation's Value Statements)

2. ASSESS

Evaluate the current culture by identifying the prevailing UGRs in relation to the KCAs (or existing Value Statements), and implement improvements based on that evaluation. We undertake what we call a 'UGRs Stock Take' to identify the current UGRs

3. TEACH

Familiarise as many people as possible, and especially leaders, with the UGRs concept, as it's possible people have been unconsciously subscribing to negative UGRs. Teaching people about UGRs forces them to make a conscious choice about their behaviours

4. INVOLVE

Involve people in creating and prioritising aspirational positive UGRs—linked to the KCAs or Value Statements—by which they would like to characterise the organisation into the future

5. EMBED

Identify and implement strategies to embed the aspirational positive UGRs

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT UGRs IN THE WORKPLACE?

We've been working with organisations across the globe using UGRs to improve culture for more than 20 years. So we've learned a great deal, including the following:

- Almost without exception, senior leaders see their culture more positively than middle managers, who in turn see their culture more positively than non-managers. This means there is a real risk that leaders think their culture is fine, while employees see things very differently. Remember, UGRs drive people's behaviour so if employees hold negative UGRs, their behaviour is being impacted accordingly

- Leaders often shoulder too much responsibility for the culture. Employees can take a 'cop-out' position by pointing upwards and saying 'If only they'd fix things up'. The concept of UGRs teaches people that we all choose to live by our

UGRs—although most of the time this happens sub-consciously. When people learn about UGRs they come to realise that while leaders play a primary role in creating and sustaining the culture, all individuals play their part. In a sense, learning about UGRs encourages people to share responsibility for the culture

- Many people feel unhappy about their workplace culture, but have given up hope of it being any different. Structured well, learning about and focusing on the UGRs concept can revitalise people and get them excited about the prospects for the culture into the future. We have literally had people say to us 'This has changed my life!'

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If you do nothing more after reading this guidebook,
think about trying to 'live' positive UGRs.

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SOME FINAL THOUGHTS …

There will always be room for people to find negatives in any situation. If we dwell on those negatives, then there's a good chance those negatives will be realised. Also, by dwelling on negatives, people tend to give up hope, which is a sad state for anyone.

Your opportunity lies in identifying positive UGRs you can live by and helping others live in a similar way.

Remember—if you do nothing, then nothing changes. You **can** and **do** influence others, **so you can make the choice** for your influence to be positive.

Good luck with your quest for even more positive UGRs and the **heightened performance that will follow**!

UGRs®

unwritten ground rules

www.ugrs.net