

Boosting Performance With 'UGR's'®

by Steve Simpson



If you could improve the performance of your team by 20% without an investment in technology or new systems, would you jump at it?

Recently, we conducted research that acquired views from over 350 people. In it, we asked the following question:

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

After having worked in the field of workplace culture for around 20 years, where we've seen cultures at their best and at their worst, the responses to this question even surprised us.

A total of 89% of senior leaders reported that their people's performance would improve by 20% or more if their culture was realistically improved.

Even more surprising was that almost seven out of ten non-managers (69%) felt that performance would improve by 50% or more if the culture was improved.

These are staggering statistics – as they tell us that there is huge untapped potential lying dormant in organisations. If leaders could tap into their workplace culture and actively work on improving it, who knows what performance gains could be made?

The workplace culture paradox

There is an interesting paradox when it comes to workplace culture. While many leaders realise the importance of culture, few understand culture in simple and practical terms. What we don't understand we don't manage. And what we don't manage we become victims of.

So it is with workplace culture.

This is where my concept of UGRs® plays a big role.

UGRs stands for 'unwritten ground rules'. The best definition of UGRs is that they are people's perceptions of 'this is the way we do things around here'. Sample UGRs in a company 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 good customer service, but we know they don't really mean it, so we don't really have to worry about it
- Our funniest jokes usually involve making jokes about our work colleagues
- We go through the motions with our bosses, once they've gone we do what we want

UGRs drive people's behaviour – yet they are seldom talked about openly.

How are UGRs created?

When a person is new to an organisation, they are normally quieter than they otherwise would be. That's because they are intuitively checking out the prevailing UGRs in their new organisation so that they can conform.

People watch a number of cues to deduce the UGRs in an organisation. These include:

- People watch what gets noticed (for example, if someone gets into trouble for speaking up, then a UGR might be “Around here, you’re better off not to speak up, even when you’re asked”)
- People watch what doesn’t get noticed (for example, if someone speaks badly of a boss, and nobody suggests they shouldn’t talk that way, then a UGR might be “Around here, it’s fine to criticise bosses”)
- People watch for any differences in terms of what people say and what they do (for example, if a manager 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 impact on people?

People’s behaviour is very heavily influenced by UGRs. For example, if a person speaks out at a meeting when there is a commonly held UGR that says “Around here, it’s best to say nothing at meetings”, then they will get a very interesting reaction from others at the meeting! Eyebrows might rise, smirks might appear on faces, and some people might even elbow the person sitting next to them. The person quickly finds out that this is NOT the thing to do at meetings.

If people continue to defy the prevailing UGRs, then there is a strong possibility they will be alienated from others. It won’t take long for them to be regarded as an outsider.

We should note of course that UGRs can act in positive ways. For example, there may be a UGR that says “Around here, when people are under pressure, we all pitch in to help.” But again, if people do not act in accordance with this UGR, they risk being alienated from others.

UGRs in the workplace

One company we have worked with has a very elaborate system for managing innovative ideas within the organisation. Rather than bombard the senior management team with a range of ideas, some of which might only be partially thought through,

the organisation has put in place a system that ensures proposals are rigorously vetted by a cross-section of staff before they are presented to senior management.

Some UGRs we uncovered in this organisation included:

- Around here, forget trying to implement a new idea because we are too bureaucratic to make it happen.
- It will take forever for someone to approve the idea, so you give up on coming up with new ideas. Especially demoralising for new and younger staff.
- You are encouraged to develop it, however in most cases too many road blocks are put in place to move forward on that idea.

These are literal anonymous comments from people within this organisation.

Another company we have worked with has an elaborate system of continuous improvement in place. New initiatives are reviewed and ongoing initiatives are systematically reviewed for improvement. Some of the UGRs we unearthed in this organisation include:

- We prefer small non-confrontational issues. When it comes to challenging big issues we don’t challenge enough as we are not supported by our managers (they don’t want to upset someone more senior or a long time colleague).
- The level of scrutiny is that high, that we move very slowly compared to others in the competitive space in which we play.
- The work involved vs the recognition / reward means it’s just not worth it.

Once again, these are literal comments from senior people within the organisation.

How to change UGRs

We have developed a five-step approach for using the UGRs concept to improve workplace cultures. The five steps, which have been deployed in organisations across the world, are:

- Envisage – this involves identifying the kind of culture that is necessary for the organisation to succeed into the future. We help organisations in this phase to identify the Key Cultural Attributes (KCAs) necessary for their future success.

- Assess – here, we identify the prevailing UGRs in the organisation linked to the KCAs identified in the first step. This involves doing what we call a UGRs Stock Take – where we uncover the real UGRs in the organisation. The step also involves identifying areas of concern from the Stock Take and putting in place strategies to address those concerns.
- Teach – this step involves teaching everyone in the organisation about the UGRs concept. We’ve learned that many people subscribe to less-than-positive UGRs but do so unconsciously. Learning about UGRs is often a revelation for people that results in big changes in behaviour.
- Involve – this step gets people to identify and prioritise the positive UGRs by which they would like to characterise the organisation into the future.
- Embed – this step involves putting in place strategies to embed the positive UGRs identified in the previous phase.

For too long, the culture of organisations has been left to chance. During tough times, there are huge benefits to be gained by identifying the kind of culture necessary for the organisation’s future successes, and re-shaping the UGRs accordingly.



Steve is an international speaker, author and consultant on organisation

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To find out more about Steve visit www.steve-simpson.com