

UGRs®: The Way We Really Do Things Around Here

BY STEVE SIMPSON CSP

Recently, the 248-page report of the Accident Investigation Board into the Columbia space shuttle disaster, in which seven people lost their lives, was made public. The report was divided into two broad sections. One section reported on the technical issues that led to a tile coming off the shuttle, and subsequently to the ultimate destruction of the craft.

The other section of the report was dedicated to the cultural aspects of NASA that needed to be attended to. Specifically, the report identified the following four problems with NASA's culture:

- Reliance on past success as a substitute for sound engineering practices
- Organisational barriers that prevented effective communication of critical safety information and stifled professional differences of opinion
- Lack of integrated management across programme elements
- Evolution of an informal chain of command and decision making processes that operated outside the organisation's rules

These are profound observations that shed light on the power of an organisation's culture. Put simply, culture can literally bring down a space shuttle.

I have read many articles and books over the years that have focused on the concept of an organisational culture. For many years I passed the concept off as an academic one that had little practical application in the workforce.

During that period however, I remained confused. As a consultant, going into various organisations, I could 'feel' the culture. In one organisation there would be a positive, upbeat feel to it. In another, there was a little tension in the air. In another, you could cut the air with a knife!

The confusion I felt centred on recognition that culture played a fundamental role in every organisation. Yet I could not understand it in simple or practical terms.

That remained the case until I came across an explanation of culture that was powerful in its simplicity. It was proposed that 'culture' could be thought of as:

This is the way we do things around here

That definition got me thinking a lot more about the practical application of culture in organisations. It led me to the generation of another concept, which I think has direct and practical application in any organisation. If an organisation's culture could be considered as 'the way we do things around here', then this could be considered in practical terms through its 'unwritten ground rules'—or UGRs®.

UGRs are rarely, if ever, documented or spoken about. In fact, what is written down, in the form of policy and other related business materials, is sometimes the opposite of the presiding UGRs. To explain further, here is a list of UGRs in one organisation with which I worked:

- 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



When I showed these in a recent training session to a group of workers in another organisation, they said, "Have you been watching us?"

UGRs exist in every organisation. They are rarely explicit, but their power is enormous. UGRs can be deduced by watching how people react to each other, and by determining what is 'right and acceptable' within the organisation. UGRs are most prominent in the casual and informal discussions between staff, in the 'talk' that occurs after meetings, in the way people under pressure react to other staff and customers, and in the difference between what people *say* and what people *do*.

Nothing is more influential on the levels of internal and external service than an organisation's UGRs. UGRs are integral to how a team functions, because they define behavioural boundaries in terms of how people work together.

Recently, I made a presentation at the World Conference on Customer Service Management, where I asked people to respond honestly in terms of how their people might complete the sentence to 'Around here, customers are':

- Considered intrusive
- Demanding. They want what they want, when they want it, and have no regard for what this means for me
- Uninformed and stupid
- An interruption to a working day
- Stupid and rude
- A necessary evil

These UGRs show the real drivers behind service in some US companies which I suspect may not be too different from some Australian organisations.

So the next time you as a manager are considering why a change programme is not working in your organisation, consider your UGRs!

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