

Informal Rules of the Workplace¹

I've worked in a variety of roles and positions during the past 50 years—men's clothing salesman, department store clerk, supermarket worker, paper plant laborer, public school teacher, professor, and higher education administrator. The jobs, requirements, and organizations were diverse, yet there was a set of informal practices that worked well regardless of the setting. In what I call my informal rules of the workplace, I offer seven tips for success in organizations and in life.

The Best Model Rule: Be the best you can be, and inevitably good things follow.

Early in my career, work was a means to sustain myself. For example, four years as a grocery store clerk paid the bills and put me through college. My store manager was authoritarian, rigid, and generally mean-spirited, not a nice person to work for and yet he was the boss. One of the first lessons learned was that regardless of what I did, it was never good enough. He even criticized the way I swept the floors. My response to his disapproval was always the same: "Just show me what you want, and I'll do it." I developed a "thick skin."

In the end, he begrudgingly saw value in me as a reliable, conscientious, and hard-working employee. My best was far more than good enough. The experience was enlightening in many ways. For one thing, it reinforced the value of a college education. I graduated and quickly moved on, but the experience also taught me to take harsh criticism and tune it out when it was unreasonable. Most workplaces have some managers who are autocratic, mean-spirited, and like to "lord their authority" over workers. Learn to adapt to such superiors without getting bent out of shape or blowing up. Your conscientious best effort is more than good enough in most situations.

The Persistence Rule: Persistence rules and grit wins.

Another life lesson is that persistence and grit almost always lead to success. "No quit" and "never give up" are expressions of grit. Whether on the wrestling mat or teaching in the classroom or working in a supermarket, there is no substitute for persistence, passion, and practice. All of us find ourselves in positions that seem futile, yet extreme persistence and passion form the path to success. Such ferocious determination unfolds in those who are resilient, hardworking, and know in an intensely deep way what they want to achieve; they have grit.

Such determination reminds me of a story told by Charles Blow of the *NYTimes*. In his search for work after college, he went to a job fair in Atlanta. When he arrived, he was told that he would not be interviewed because applicants had to sign up in advance and there were no more slots available. In his own words:

I said that I understood, but that I was going to wait there until someone didn't show up for the interview. I sat for about six hours, so long that they seemed to forget I was there. I listened in as other applicants sat for interviews, and as the

recruiters discussed each candidate when they left. It was the absolute best opposition research. When one of the recruiters finally relented and offered to interview me, I knew the perfect way to answer every question.

The rest is history! Blow is now a well-known journalist at the New York Times¹.

A final story about grittiness. It took Thomas Edison nearly 10,000 attempts to perfect the filament in a light bulb. Not surprisingly he concluded, “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” Contemporary research (*Flourish*, Seligman, 2011; *Grit*, Duckworth, 2016) continues to confirm that the potent combination of perseverance and passion paves the road to achievement and success. The power of passion and perseverance is clear.

The Competition Rule: Work harder, longer, and smarter.

Closely aligned to exhausting effort (persistence and grit) is competitive spirit. You don’t have to be the brightest person in the group to succeed. You do, however, often need to work harder and longer than others. We all have the same 24 hours each day. Challenge yourself to work harder and longer than your colleagues. Let no one outwork you. You can always find an “extra” hour or two. Do what it takes; choose your goals wisely, and then work until you succeed, that is, work smarter.

As a young, inexperienced professor faced with the challenge of “publishing or perishing,” my goal was to write and publish a paper every three or four months, but writing was difficult for me. I had never published anything, so I struggled and persisted. I wrote one page every day, five days a week, which gave me two days to catch up if I fell behind.

My strategy of a “page-a-day” was realistic. I did write a page a day no matter how bad or good the result. Granted, it took me longer than my more experienced colleagues to produce a publishable paper. I had to work harder to do it, but my page-a-day rule was a smart and productive strategy. For those of you who think a page-a-day is not difficult, you are wrong. Look at the numbers: $5 \times 50 = 250$ pages a year over a 50-year career = 12,500 pages, which translates to twelve 500-page books and 216, 30-page articles. I learned to outwork my competitors and the outcome was rewarding—intellectually, professionally, and financially.

Cooperation Rule: Find a group of like-minded colleagues to work with and support.

Most of us either work in groups or have a group focus. No one is an island. Create a network of dependable friends on the job. It only takes a few friends to develop an informal system of support. Of course, support is a two-way street, it is reciprocal. The more you support others, the more they support you. I call it the “iron rule of reciprocity,” one of the few basic principles of sociology.

As a professor, I sought and developed a small cohort of colleagues to work on research together. The benefits of the group were innumerable. Our skills were similar as well as complementary.

The interactions produced friends and comradeship, created shared sentiments and values, enhanced intellectual interest and curiosity, spurred motivation and engagement, and promoted solidarity and personal bonds. A kindred group spirit emerged that generated both cohesiveness and loyalty. We always had each other's backs.

This model of cooperation was so successful with colleagues that I also incorporated it with doctoral graduate students. I typically put together a group of three or four students, defined a broad research topic of interest, and then gave them a chance to engage in a cooperative project. We met as a group until we had divided the research project into separate, complementary parts. Typically, the sum of these parts was greater than the whole; that is, the parts usually led to future, serendipitous questions. Both the research hypotheses and methods were dependent on the group, with individuals developing their own predictions, collecting data, sharing that data, and testing their hypotheses. Every group member collected data not only for his study but also for all the other research questions. Two advantages became obvious. First, the sample size was much larger because students shared data and tested their hypotheses with the pooled sample. Second, students worked together and developed lasting friendships, cohesiveness, and loyalty to each other and to the group. In fact, we created a situation in which the success of each depended on the success of all.

Transformation Rule: Turn negatives into positives.

My undergraduate experience was uninspiring at best; I went to a small and undistinguished teachers college while working virtually full-time at a local supermarket. I did not have the stellar education of many of my colleagues. One of the first things that I learned on the job, however, is no one cares where you went to school or how impressive your grades. What counts is how well you perform your job.

Charles Blow² of the New York Times had a similar experience. He had not gone to an elite private school or an Ivy League college, but through his strong work ethic and persistence he became part of an elite organization. He resolved early that he would compensate for his disadvantages with a plan to overcome the deficiencies in his education. He read the classics he had missed in college, visited museums, took extra classes when possible, read as many new books as he could, watched countless documentaries, and resolved no one would ever allude to *The Merchant of Venice* again without him understanding it. In brief, Blow transformed his disadvantage into an advantage, which was the basis a distinguished career as a *NYTimes* journalist².

So, confront your disadvantages by determining what you need to know to succeed, then master that knowledge and those skills. You may have to work harder and longer than others, but you can overcome your disadvantages. In the process, you will take a substantial step toward lifelong learning and improvement. The transformation of disadvantages to advantages is a powerful tool for success.

Golden Rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated.

The “Golden Rule” is both instrumental and expressive; that is, it helps you succeed as well as cultivates good interpersonal relations in route. Have you ever needed a strong reference? Of course. We all do from time to time. Former colleagues, superiors, or subordinates are the ones called upon to assess your talents, sometimes at your suggestion but sometimes not.

One specific illustration leaps out. I had a distinguished colleague and close friend who was nearing retirement, but was clearly several years away. The Dean of our school decided to improve the bottom line of his budget. Out of the blue, he asked how she felt about being promoted to Distinguished Professor. She clearly merited the formal title. She was one of the most well-known and productive professors in the school, a star with a national and international reputation. At first blush, it sounded wonderful, but then came the details. Everyone knows the devil is in the details, and this was the old “bait and switch.” He wanted her to retire a year later. When she told him, she did not plan to retire for three years, he withdrew the offer. She was surprised, offended, and lost all respect for the Dean. I was one of the few people with whom she shared the story. A year later, I got a call from a colleague who was chair of a search committee at a prestigious university. He asked me to assess our Dean’s human relations skills. I simply repeated the story.

So, remember that everyone you work with or for is a possible reference. Be kind, respectful, helpful, authentic, and reap the benefits of good will. Always do your best no matter how inconsequential the matter. You just never know who might be asked to provide a reference.

Rule of Enlightened Self-interest: Helping others is often in your own self-interest.

At first blush, self-interest seems narrow, selfish, and self-centered. It need not be; in fact, enlightened self-interest is based on the principle of helping others succeed, a strategy that results in helping you succeed. In brief, your own self-interest frequently rests on helping others.

Recognize the importance of understanding not only the requirements of your position, but also know the expectations held for people above you. A few examples should help. First, make your superiors look good; never try to show them up. Second, simply don’t make them look better, but help them to be better. Finally, defer taking credit; in fact, strategically give credit to others, which usually means talk less and do more. All these actions, including the other informal rules, are investments in your development, and many of the practices have the side benefit of making your superiors look good and be better. What a powerful set of tools. Use them skillfully.

^{1, 2} An article in the *NYTimes* by Charles Blow (June 5, 2022) stimulated me to develop this set of workplace rules.