INDEPENDENT EDUCATIONAL PUBLICATION

THE BUREAU OF UNWRITTEN RULES

A FIELD MANUAL FOR QUESTIONING SYSTEMS

APPROVED TO QUESTION

B / 01

A practical guide to distinguishing coordination from conformity, examining who pays the price of a rule, and designing a route for dissent.

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THE QUESTION

A rule can help. A rule can hurt.

Institutions are not only buildings or legal texts. They are patterns of expectation: who may do what, who must ask whom, and how a violation is recognised. Shared rules can protect coordination; they can also distribute the cost of participation unequally.

THE CENTRAL TEST

Not: "Does this rule feel normal?" Ask: "What public purpose does it serve, who writes it, who can challenge it, and what happens to people it was not designed around?"

Read in three passes

01 **Identify the mechanism**

Distinguish written policy, informal norm, courtesy, taboo, stereotype and law. The labels are useful but not always mutually exclusive.

02 **Run the counterfactual**

Change the context or the rule. Ask which real-world assumptions would need evidence before a conclusion could be drawn.

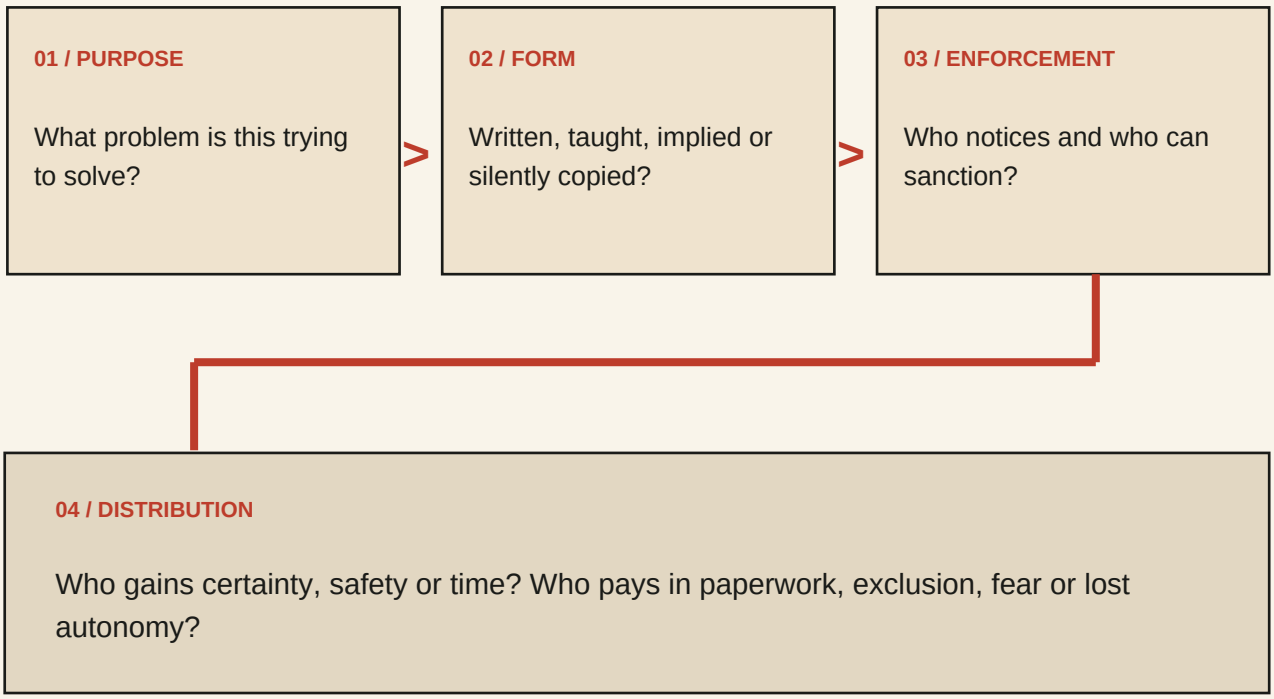
03 **Design the review route**

Make reasons visible, protect consent and privacy, and preserve a non-punitive route for an exception or amendment.

A SYSTEM MAP

The anatomy of an expectation

A norm is more than a sentence. Trace the path through which a shared expectation becomes a cost or a benefit. This is a conceptual diagram, not a causal estimate.



Reversal test. If a newcomer, disabled participant, junior colleague or dissenter applied the same rule, would the same interpretation and remedy follow? An institution can be consistent in wording but inconsistent in enforcement.

THE MISSING BOX

Add a documented route back from enforcement to amendment. An unappealable standard may be stable; stability is not evidence of justice.

DIAGNOSTIC CARD

What kind of rule is this?

This is a useful sorting system, not a legal taxonomy. Real situations can occupy several categories at once. First ask where the expectation comes from, then how it is enforced.

FORMAL POLICY

An organisation puts a requirement in a handbook.

Who can revise it?

INFORMAL NORM

Nobody writes it; social approval enforces it.

Who risks disapproval?

COURTESY

A situational request to consider other people.

Is refusal negotiable?

TABOO

A prohibition carrying moral or social charge.

What is the silence protecting?

STEREOTYPE

A group-based assumption used as a shortcut.

What individual evidence is missing?

LAW

A state-backed legal prescription.

Which jurisdiction, text, remedy?

Research context: Cialdini, Kallgren & Reno distinguish descriptive and injunctive norms [1]. Crawford & Ostrom separate institutional rules, norms and shared strategies [2]. These works do not endorse this six-label classroom exercise.

THE DESK AUDIT

Ask seven questions before you obey

01 **INTENDED BENEFIT**

What concrete coordination, safety or fairness problem does the rule address?

02 **ACTUAL PRACTICE**

Is the enforcement written down, understood or dependent on a person?

03 **SCOPE**

In which situations does the rule stop being appropriate?

04 **POWER**

Whose refusal is penalised more severely?

05 **ACCESS**

Can someone participate without disclosing sensitive information?

06 **DISSENT**

Is respectful challenge possible without retaliation?

07 **REVIEW**

When, by whom and with what evidence is the rule revisited?

FICTIONAL PERMIT / 001

Case file A: The inconvenient question

Request: A junior analyst asks a relevant, uncomfortable question during a meeting. **Context:** The Office of Perfect Consistency values predictable meetings and discourages interruptions. The same person receives a "deferred" determination in the website demonstration.

THE FIRST PROBLEM

Meeting order is a legitimate purpose. The inference that a disruptive question must be a bad question does not follow. Status can affect who is labelled disruptive.

Write the decision twice

A Original bureaucratic reason

"This question violates our custom of unanimous approval." Notice: the custom is treated as a good in itself, without describing the concrete harm of asking.

B Revised accountable reason

"The meeting needs an agreed agenda. Relevant risks may be submitted beforehand or raised in a dedicated challenge window, with written acknowledgement."

Evidence limit: This case is fictional. Research on psychological safety and learning behaviour provides a relevant framework, not proof that any specific fictional official behaves in this way [3].

FICTIONAL PERMIT / 002

Case file B: Declining the ritual

A weekly ceremony is described as "voluntary" yet those who miss it are called disloyal. The institution has two simultaneous rules: the explicit right to decline and an informal penalty for using that right.

OBJECTIVE

Build connection without forced intimacy.

HIDDEN COST

People with caregiving, faith, access or personal reasons may be penalised.

IMPROVED RULE

Offer optional formats, equivalent forms of contribution, and private ways to decline.

EVIDENCE NEEDED

Ask participants about practical barriers; check whether absence affects opportunities.

CONSENT IS NOT COURTESY

A polite yes can coexist with pressure. Yet not every request is coercive: examine power, alternatives, consequences and whether no can be said without penalty.

RULEMAKING ENGINE

Inspect the machine, not just its output

The website fixes 24 imaginary profiles. Their preferred structure varies from 0 to 100; each also has a made-up access-need value from 0 to 50. The visitor sets uniformity (S), accommodations (F) and appeal access (A), each 0 to 100.

EFFECTIVE MISMATCH

mismatch_i = abs(preference_i - S) + 0.28 x access_need_i. Effective mismatch = max(0, mismatch_i - 0.50 x F). A profile is included if effective mismatch is at most 40 + 0.18 x A.

THREE DISPLAYED METRICS

Participation = 100 x included profiles / 24 (rounded). Coordination = clamp(30 + .52S - .30F + .12A, 0, 100). Voice & review = clamp(20 + .70A + .10F - .15S, 0, 100).

Why the formula matters. These values are authored, not estimated. A different arbitrary equation would yield a different story. The model intentionally makes strict uniformity raise its "coordination" gauge and make exceptions costly, and makes appeal raise its "voice" gauge. It is a way to inspect assumptions, not a sociological forecast.

WORKED CALCULATION

Two policies. One imaginary town.

The fixed 24 profiles are the same in each scenario. Change only the three policy parameters. Scores can be reproduced by the website; no participant data or behavioural observations were collected.

POLICY A

NEATNESS FIRST

S = 90 F = 10 A = 10
11 / 24 profiles included
Participation: 46 / 100
Coordination: 75 / 100
Voice & review: 14 / 100

POLICY B

ADAPTABLE STANDARD

S = 45 F = 80 A = 85
24 / 24 profiles included
Participation: 100 / 100
Coordination: 40 / 100
Voice & review: 81 / 100

Interpretation: Policy B includes more imaginary profiles, but it also scores lower on the equation deliberately named "coordination". This is not proof that flexible policies reduce real-world coordination. It is a prompt to ask what coordination means, how one would measure it, and whether equal access could itself improve cooperation.

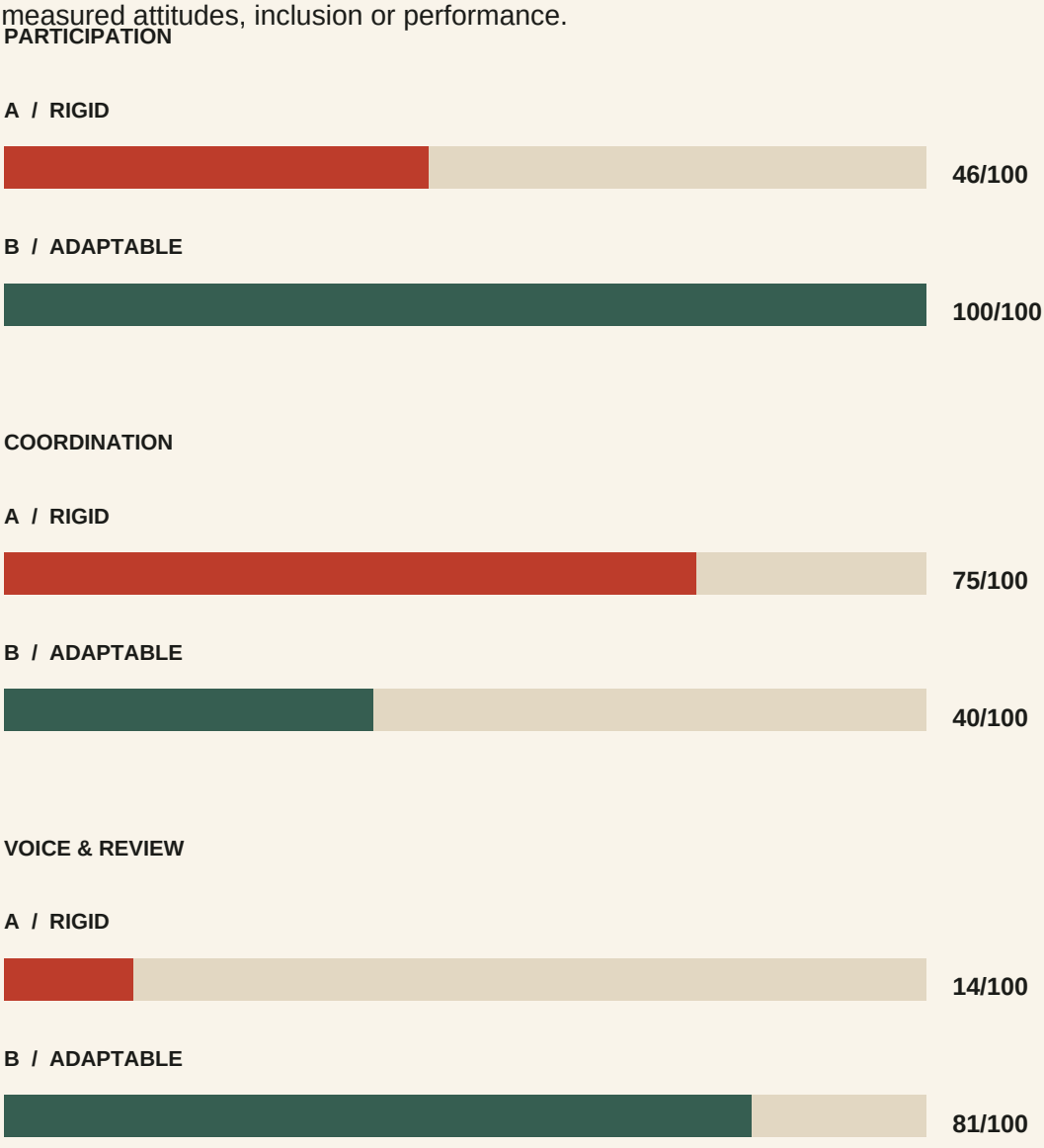
A CHECK ON THE MODEL

If a design can be made to "prove" an outcome simply by choosing a formula, its numerical precision is not evidence. Treat all three gauges as authored illustrations.

CHART / NOT OBSERVATIONAL DATA

A number inherits its definition

Compare the two deliberately fictional policies. The bars below visualise calculations from page 9, not measured attitudes, inclusion or performance.



The plotted values deliberately conflict. A fair evaluation would first ask whose goals define each metric, how the data would be gathered, and what important effects are unmeasured.

ENFORCEMENT LENS

The policy is equal. The power is not.

Imagine two people giving the same objection in a meeting. The director is described as decisive; the intern as difficult. The written rule did not change. The interpretation and consequences did.

01 / SAME ACT

A calm, relevant challenge to a flawed plan.

02 / DIFFERENT STATUS

Some participants have reputational security; others do not.

03 / DIFFERENT RISK

The potential loss of approval or opportunity is not equally shared.

A strong review process separates the conduct from the identity of the speaker: document the observable act, the specific rule, the reason for applying it and the available alternative. Differences in status are a hypothesis to check, not a diagnosis of the people involved.

Research context: Edmondson (1999) investigated team psychological safety and learning behaviour [3]. Her results do not mean that one intervention creates the same outcome in every workplace.

ACCESSIBILITY LENS

Exceptions may reveal a design flaw

A rule assumes a "standard participant". The assumption becomes visible when someone cannot follow the procedure without disproportionate cost. A useful institution examines whether its goal can be achieved in another way.

01 **Separate the goal from the format**

If the goal is understanding, is a live oral presentation essential, or could a prepared written or accessible format demonstrate the same learning?

02 **Protect private reasons**

Do not demand unnecessary personal disclosures in public. A process can ask about functional needs without soliciting a life story.

03 **Prefer better defaults**

If many people need exceptions, redesign the standard. An accessible main route can reduce the need for individual permits.

04 **Review burdens fairly**

An accommodation review should be specific to context and legitimate constraints, not a public vote on a person's worthiness.

REFERENCE / NOT LEGAL ADVICE

Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines reasonable accommodation and universal design [4]. Concrete legal duties vary by context and jurisdiction.

A TWO-CHANNEL TEST

Good disagreement needs good boundaries

A rule that protects the right to question does not require everyone to disclose intimate details or participate in every exchange. Curiosity and privacy can both be legitimate.

CHANNEL A

SPEAKABLE CRITIQUE

Describe the decision or public claim; offer reasons; invite an answer; distinguish evidence from inference; leave room for respectful dissent.

CHANNEL B

PRIVATE AUTONOMY

Allow a person to decline probing questions, rituals or disclosures without a character verdict; ask what alternative participation is feasible.

Invented example: A student asks whether an attendance rule is necessary for learning. The instructor may reasonably explain group dependencies. The student need not reveal private medical details to make the educational argument worth hearing. Formal access procedures may still have their own safeguards.

THE FALSE BINARY

We do not have to choose between compulsory conformity and limitless disruption. A better rule can say what conduct is required, why, and how to object without harming others.

A SIX-STEP METHOD

An amendment is a small act of governance

01 **STATE THE END**

What should this rule achieve? Describe the outcome without restating the rule.

02 **DESCRIBE CURRENT COSTS**

Who spends extra time, loses access or faces penalties? Use evidence when possible.

03 **INVITE AFFECTED VOICES**

Give people genuine opportunities to speak; preserve confidentiality.

04 **PROPOSE ALTERNATIVES**

Keep the purpose while changing the practice. Include a fallback route.

05 **DEFINE TESTS**

What would count as improved access, coordination, safety and review?

06 **SET A REVISIT DATE**

Identify a responsible reviewer and an appeal process, not a permanent decree.

These are practical prompts for deliberation, not a universally validated policy-design methodology. An actual process may require legal, safeguarding or professional oversight.

PRINT / FILL / DEBATE

Proposed amendment No. _____

WHAT IS THE CURRENT RULE?

WHAT LEGITIMATE PURPOSE DOES IT SERVE?

WHO EXPERIENCES A COST, AND HOW DO WE KNOW?

WHAT IS THE LESS EXCLUSIONARY ALTERNATIVE?

WHAT COUNTERARGUMENT DESERVES AN ANSWER?

WHO CAN APPEAL, AND WHEN IS THE NEXT REVIEW?

REFERENCES

Sources, limits & further reading

[1] **Reference**

Cialdini, R. B., Kallgren, C. A., & Reno, R. R. (1991). A Focus Theory of Normative Conduct. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 24, 201-234. DOI: 10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60330-5. [Open source]

[2] **Reference**

Ostrom, E., & Basurto, X. (2011). Crafting analytical tools to study institutional change. Journal of Institutional Economics, 7(3), 317-343. Cambridge University Press. [Open source]

[3] **Reference**

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44(2), 350-383. DOI: 10.2307/2666999. [Open source]

[4] **Reference**

United Nations. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 2: Definitions. Official UN treaty resource. [Open source]

AN EPISTEMIC NOTE

All offices, agents, permits and case decisions in this publication are invented. All simulation constants are authored. This is not legal advice, empirical validation, an organisational audit, or a diagnosis of people.

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