

2b4

Unwritten Rules

Do

Examine the expectations and traditions in the setting that no-one talks about but everyone obeys.

Story

Richard wanted to get involved in life at his local pub. Without realising it, he sat in a seat that everyone else knew 'belonged' to regulars and didn't know the unwritten rule about 'winner stays on' at the pool table. These things led to some difficulties in being accepted.

Alex goes everywhere with a bag and checks that it is at his feet every few minutes when he is sitting down. He likes old things and big buildings, so we visited the local museum. We didn't realise that the staff at the museum entrance would insist that all visitor's bags were put in lockers. Alex wouldn't go in.

Hints & Hazards

If an 'insider' had made the introductions and guided him, then Richard would have been accepted more easily. Some people will need the unwritten rules spelling out, and might need help to learn to follow them. It helps to make links with key local people.

Sometimes it is necessary to challenge these rules if they are based on discrimination and prejudice. Ask someone who is well established in the group about the unwritten rules. Facilities may be in place, but the unwritten rules may dictate that they are not used.

In some communities, going out in the morning (after rush hour) identifies you as an unemployed person. This is an example of an unwritten rule

in the neighbourhood and shows that these rules need to be recognised, but not necessarily obeyed. Some places have rules that are rigorously maintained by everyone involved – such as the rule of silence during calling in a bingo hall.

The process of starting a friendship is controlled by unwritten rules "... the social dance can serve as an obstacle to possible relationships ... If there is one piece of advice we get from people who are successfully supporting students to have the social lives their desire, it is this: Ask. Ask again. Ask one more time. And don't stop asking." (*Tashie et al 2006, p101*). For a longer exploration of unwritten rules, see Fox 2004.