

THE
UNWRITTEN LAWS
OF BUSINESS

W. J. KING

WITH REVISIONS AND ADDITIONS BY
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FOREWORD

Every day we see examples of business leaders who have successfully reached the top. I've met a lot of these leaders in my work as a speaker and executive coach. Even working closely with them, it can still be hard to connect the place they've arrived at with the road they took to get there. How do we know that what they're doing now is what's taken them to such heights? Sometimes, as you know if you've read *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, even the best leaders have bad habits!

Of course every industry is different—as is every person (and every leader). But what all successful leaders have in common is a well-defined sense of *where* they're going and

how. *The Unwritten Laws of Business* helps you to answer the “how”.

First written in 1944 and distributed only to a select few, its recent transformation into a bestseller is a testament to the wealth of hard-earned wisdom it contains—wisdom that not even the best managers achieve on their own. As well as practical, common sense rules for people just starting out on their careers there are helpful reminders of the simple things even the most experienced of us forget from time to time.

The Unwritten Laws are built around a timeless code of workplace conduct that will make you a more effective worker and leader, and help you stand out as someone people admire and respect. But they are about the destination too, because it’s the “how” that will get you (back) on track—onwards and upwards. Imagine a world where everyone is blessed with equal talent and opportunities. How would you distinguish yourself from others? Chances are you’ve come to the same answer I did: it’s the way you conduct yourself that stands out.

Business leaders may seem to have reached the very top based on their talent alone, but in reality they graduated alongside a dozen people just as talented and just as driven to succeed. It’s not enough to be smart. You have to be smart—and something else. That “something else” is exactly what these *Unwritten Laws* are all about.

Life is good.

—Marshall Goldsmith

P R E F A C E

When I was first updating an earlier edition of this book, which was written with engineers in mind, people reviewing my drafts remarked that its advice applies to anyone in the workplace, and not only to its intended audience. It was first published in 1944 as *The Unwritten Laws of Engineering*, and has been available ever since, but mostly to engineers and engineering managers. Some readers suggested that the book should be extensively rewritten for a broader audience. Nevertheless, in 2001 we decided to update it without changing its scope and its unique style.

Although I revised substantial portions of this book in 2001, I tried to make my changes as unnoticeable as possible. Most

revisions were in response to shifts in societal values, employment laws, and corporate structures, all of which had evolved over time. I offer no apology for omitting references to the latest technology (e-mail, computers, Internet): the book's advice transcends the mere implements of the workplace. Although some words and phrases were changed for being painfully archaic, many of the old-fashioned words remain—they add to the fun.

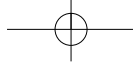
What I did not fully understand about *Unwritten Laws* until recently is that it is suitable for anyone in business largely as it is. There was no need for extensive revisions for the rules to appeal to a wider audience. Apart from replacing “engineers” with “businesspeople,” this trade edition is only modestly changed from its predecessor.

What I did understand upon first reading this book, along with how fun it was to read, was how well it has held up over the decades. Most of the advice from the 1944 version is still relevant today. I hope this edition retains this timelessness and is enjoyable to read, my efforts notwithstanding, in another six decades.

I would like to acknowledge Mary Grace Stefanchik, the ASME Press book-publishing manager, for entrusting me with updating this classic book, and W. J. King, the original author, for writing it.

—James G. Skakoon

INTRODUCTION

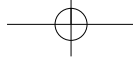


Prior to writing the first text of this book, the originating author admitted to having become very much aware that in any organization the chief obstacles to success are of a personal and administrative nature. It was apparent that both he and his associates were getting into much more trouble by violating the undocumented laws of professional conduct than by committing sins or errors relating directly to their work. With suitable laws appearing to be unwritten at that time, "laws" were formulated and collected into a scrapbook as a professional code of sorts. Although they were, and in this latest edition still are, fragmentary and incomplete, they are offered here for

whatever they may be worth to younger businesspeople just starting their careers, and to older ones who know these things perfectly well but who all too often fail to apply them.

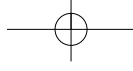
None of these laws is theoretical or imaginary, and however obvious they may appear, their repeated violation is responsible for much of the frustration and embarrassment to which employees and managers everywhere are liable. In fact, the first edition of this book was primarily a record derived from direct observation over 17 years of four different departments, three of them newly organized and struggling to establish themselves by trial-and-error. It has been confirmed by the experience of others as gathered from numerous discussions, observations, and literature, so that it most emphatically does not reflect the unique experience or characteristics of any one organization.

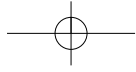
Many of these laws are generalizations to which exceptions will occur in special circumstances. There is no thought of urging a servile adherence to rules and red tape, for there is no substitute for judgment; vigorous individual initiative is needed to cut through formalities in emergencies. But in many respects these laws are like the basic laws of society; they cannot be violated too often with impunity, notwithstanding striking exceptions in individual cases.



PART I



WHAT THE BEGINNER
NEEDS TO LEARN AT ONCE





IN RELATION TO WORK

*However menial and trivial your early assignments
may appear, give them your best efforts.*



Many young businesspeople feel that minor chores are beneath their dignity and unworthy of their college training. They expect to prove their true worth in some major, vital enterprise. Actually, the spirit and effectiveness with which you tackle your first humble tasks will very likely be carefully watched and may affect your entire career.

Occasionally you may worry unduly about where your job is going to get you—whether it is sufficiently strategic or significant. Of course these are pertinent considerations and you would do well to take some stock of them. But by and large, it is fundamentally true that if you take care of your present

job well, the future will take care of itself. This is particularly so within large corporations, which constantly search for competent people to move into more responsible positions. Success depends so largely upon personality, native ability, and vigorous, intelligent prosecution of any job that it is no exaggeration to say that your ultimate chances are much better if you do a good job on some minor detail than if you do a mediocre job as a project leader. Furthermore, it is also true that if you do not first make a good showing on your present job you are not likely to be given the opportunity to try something else more to your liking.



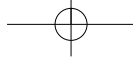
*Demonstrate the ability to
get things done.*

This is a quality that may be achieved by various means under different circumstances. Specific aspects will be elaborated in some of the succeeding paragraphs. It can probably be reduced, however, to a combination of three basic characteristics:

- initiative—the energy to start things and aggressiveness to keep them moving briskly,

- resourcefulness or ingenuity—the faculty for finding ways to accomplish the desired result, and
- persistence (tenacity)—the disposition to persevere in spite of difficulties, discouragement, or indifference.

This last quality is sometimes lacking in the make-up of otherwise brilliant people to such an extent that their effectiveness is greatly reduced. Such dilettantes are known as “good starters but poor finishers.” Or else it will be said: “You can’t take their type too seriously; they will be all steamed up over an idea today, but by tomorrow will have dropped it for some other wild notion.” Bear in mind, therefore, that it may be worthwhile finishing a job, if it has any merit, just for the sake of finishing it.

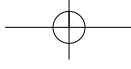


In carrying out a project, do not wait passively for anyone—suppliers, sales people, colleagues, supervisors—to make good on their delivery promises; go after them and keep relentlessly after them.

Many novices assume that it is sufficient to make a request or order, then sit back and wait until the goods or services are

delivered. Most jobs progress in direct proportion to the amount of follow-up and *expediting* that is applied to them. Expediting means planning, investigating, promoting, and facilitating every step in the process. Cultivate the habit of looking immediately for some way around each obstacle encountered, some other recourse or expedient to keep the job rolling without losing momentum.

On the other hand, the matter is occasionally overdone by overzealous individuals who make themselves obnoxious and antagonize everyone with their incessant pestering. Be careful about demanding action from others. Too much insistence and agitation may result in more damage to one's personal interest than could ever result from the miscarriage of the item involved.



*Confirm your instructions and
the other person's commitments in writing.*

Do not assume that the job will be done or the bargain kept just because someone agreed to do it. Many people have poor memories, others are too busy, and almost everyone will take the matter a great deal more seriously if it is in writ-