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SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
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HOW TO FOSTER RULE FOLLOWING IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Following an organization's established rules is a fundamental task for all public employees. Doing so not only has organizational benefits but societal ones as well. For example, rule following is often associated with the effectiveness of how groups function and advancing public values, such as equity, transparency, and accountability.

In a **study** recently published in *Public Administration*, researchers examine how the formalization and consistent application of rules influence whether employees follow those rules. Formalization pertains to the extent to which organizational rules are written down, while consistency is the reliability with which those rules are applied to individuals and groups.

Researchers hypothesized that:

- Employees will follow written rules at higher rates than unwritten rules.
- Employees will follow consistently applied rules at higher rates than inconsistently applied rules.
- Employees are more likely to follow rules that are both written down and consistent, as opposed to those that are only written down or only consistently applied.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers used three studies to test the relationship between rule formalization, consistency, and rule following. In two of the studies, they presented hypothetical situations to gauge participant response. The final study surveyed employees of two local government organizations.

For the first study, the research subjects were 75

Masters of Public Administration (MPA) students enrolled in two organizational analysis and two public finance courses at a large university in the Midwestern United States. The research subjects for the second study were 150 public works managers in the Southeastern United States. A third study collected survey data from the employees of two local government organizations: a medium-sized college town and a consolidated city-county mental health department in a state of the Southeastern U.S.

RESULTS

In each study, researchers found that formalizing rules led to higher rates of employees following the rules. This suggests that having written rules within an organization helps to legitimize the rules in the eyes of employees, allows employers to focus employee requirements on those rules, and can help achieve organizational goals.

Rule consistency also correlated with rule following across studies, suggesting that public employees pay close attention to peripheral cues about appropriate behavior.

Lastly, researchers found mixed support for whether rule formalization and consistency, when combined, would positively impact rule following. Results from the government employee survey found there was an interaction, but the second study did not find the same effect. In fact, in the survey, consistency only increased favorable attitudes toward rule following when many or all rules were written. This result makes intuitive sense: written rules provide a standard by which consistent application can be measured. If rules are perceived as

less formal—in this case, not written—then consistency may have less meaning.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that formal structure is a powerful determinant of whether employees will follow an organization's rules, but that the organization's informal social structure—including the consistency by which the rules are applied—also regulates employee behavior.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Examining the attributes of organizational rules and rule following marks a new direction in public management and organizational research. Our focus on rule attributes not only enhances understanding of effective organizational rules, it also offers practical implications that can be acted upon by public managers in the pursuit of organizational effectiveness. Given the instrumental role of organizational rules in public sector functioning—whether to symbolize public values, ensure efficient and effective operations, or signal organizational legitimacy—the ways in which public managers can foster rule following merits attention when seeking to train and develop organizational leaders.

Rule compliance increases from 34 percent to 97 percent if (a) you use written instead of unwritten rules, and (b) organizational leaders consistently apply the rules



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The Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University is a professional school with 140 full-time faculty serving more than 4,000 students on two campuses: Bloomington and Indianapolis. Founded in 1972, the school was the first of its kind to combine public policy, management and administration with environmental studies. The O'Neill School provides international scope, influential research and focused opportunities for students to pair with a comprehensive foundation of knowledge and hands-on experience in the field. O'Neill's more than 34,000 alumni work in the public, private and nonprofit sectors around the world.

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