

# Rules of Engagement

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“I don’t understand! I have done everything he’s asked of me, under budget and ahead of time, but he still promoted my coworker! What else do I have to do!?!”

Kim was frustrated at work. She had been with her current company for nearly 5 years, and she had never received a promotion. She watched as less senior staff were promoted ahead of her, and sometimes the company would hire someone from outside the company. She had practically memorized the employee manual, so she was certain that she had done everything expected of her. She was competent, professional, and more than capable. So why wasn’t she getting promoted?

As we talked more, I suspected that Kim was operating under the wrong rules of engagement. Sometimes, in spite of written documentation or what seems like clear communication between people, the STATED rules of engagement are different from the ACTUAL rules of engagement. For example, a family might state often that they value honesty, and deal with lying children quite harshly, but then Mom might tell the children that Daddy is ‘camping’, when he’s really passed out drunk in the front yard. The stated rules are about honesty. In actuality, only the children have to be honest.

Or, a company might say often that they value the well-being of their employees and want them to be fully ‘off the clock’ when they are not at work. If the company contacts employees after hours to come in for extra time, or handle issues from home, then it seems clear that the company values the work more than employee non-work time.

Kim and I started looking for commonalities among the people who had been promoted. As she thought about it, several things became clear. First, those who got promoted usually had a personal relationship with her boss, or her boss’s boss, often from college or a family relation. Second, those who didn’t know her boss ‘from way back’ cultivated a personal relationship with him, inviting him to meals, or hanging out on evenings or weekends. Third, it seemed less important that those employees had always completed projects as long as they could reasonably blame someone else for the failures.

Once Kim arrived at this conclusion, her choices seemed clearer to her. She could figure out how to ‘play the game’ according the ACTUAL rules, she could make her peace with doing her job well but not getting promoted, or she could look for another job.

The clarification alone lowered her stress substantially. It didn’t make her situation ‘fair’, but at least she understood it better. She decided not to try to move up in her current company – she wasn’t willing to play the game as required. Since she was good at her job, and liked the work, she decided to take her time looking for another position that offered her more opportunity.

When you find yourself frustrated that you are following the rules, but still not getting credit, or even getting penalized, it is useful to examine whether you are operating under the real rules of engagement. So, where do you suspect the stated rules are different that the actual ones?

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