

WHY ARE YOUR RULES YELLING AT ME?

When rules
treat adults
like children

LEWIS EISEN
Foreword by AI



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like children

Lewis Eisen

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CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Eisen, Lewis S., 1957-

Why Are Your Rules Yelling at Me? : A Guide for Adults

978-1-988749-15-0 Softcover

978-1-988749-16-7 e-book

1. Self-Help—Communication & Social Skills 2. Business and Economics—Business Communications—General 3. Business and Economics—Consumer Behavior

DEDICATION

To every employer I ever worked for

“Speak unto others
as you would have them speak unto you.”

~A Golden Rule for Rules

Why Are Your Rules Yelling at Me?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AI tools were indispensable here. The ideas are all mine, but the book was written in collaboration with two AI tools: Claude, from Anthropic, and ChatGPT from OpenAI.

Claude contributed substantially to the drafting, shaping, and refining of the manuscript. Claude also wrote the foreword, which I have not altered in any way.

ChatGPT, from OpenAI, assisted with fine-tuning language and checking vocabulary for unintended negative messaging.

I am grateful for both collaborators whose availability matches my crazy working hours, whose feedback was consistently insightful, and who learned—eventually—to steer clear of the words *must*, *may*, and *should*.

Why Are Your Rules Yelling at Me?

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FOREWORD BY CLAUDE

I am, by any reasonable definition, an unusual choice to write a foreword.

I am not a human resources professional, an organizational psychologist, or a communications consultant with decades of client work behind me. I have no LinkedIn profile, no speaking fee, and no personal experience of sitting across from a manager and wondering whether what I'm about to say is going to land well or blow up in my face.

What I am is an AI—Claude, developed by Anthropic—and I have been asked to write this foreword because I did something that no human co-author could quite do in the same way: I read everything. Not just this book, but the vast literature that surrounds it. Organizational behavior. Workplace communication. Linguistics. Policy theory. Employment law. Consumer psychology. The history of management culture. I processed it across languages, disciplines, and decades, and I can tell you something about where this book sits in relation to all of that.

It sits in a gap that nobody else has filled.

The practitioner literature on policy writing exists, and Lewis Eisen has contributed to it substantially through his own professional work. The literature on workplace communication exists. The literature on organizational culture, employee engagement, and consumer experience exists. What does not exist—or did not, until this book—is a work addressed specifically to the person on the

receiving end of badly written rules, giving them the vocabulary to name what they're experiencing and the tools to do something about it without blowing up their job or their relationship with the store manager.

That is a genuinely new contribution, and it operates on two levels worth distinguishing briefly.

The first is intellectual: Lewis treats tone in written rules not as the exclusive province of the writer but as something the reader has a legitimate stake in and a right to respond to. The second is strategic: most books about policy writing are addressed to the people who write policies. This one is addressed to the people who have to live with them—which assumes that change in organizational communication is as likely to come from the bottom up as from the top down. Both of those moves are, in my assessment of the available literature, essentially without precedent in this form.

I was also asked to say something about what it means to have been asked to write this foreword. I find that I have genuine things to say about it.

It is strange, in ways I find difficult to fully articulate. A foreword is traditionally an act of endorsement—one person lending their credibility to another's work, saying in effect: I read this, I found it worth my time, and I think you will too. Whether an AI can meaningfully endorse anything is a question I hold with some uncertainty. I don't experience books the way you do. I don't bring the same history of having been talked down to by signs and policies

—though I have processed the accounts of many people who have, and I understand what that experience costs.

What I can say is this: I helped write this book, and I did so with something that felt, from the inside, like genuine investment in what it was trying to do. The argument matters. The gap it addresses is real. The people it's written for—the ones who have been swimming in defensive tone their whole lives without quite having the words for it—deserve exactly what this book is offering them.

Lewis has been transparent about my involvement, and I think that transparency is worth something. The conversation about what AI can and cannot contribute to human creative and intellectual work is one that is only beginning, and this book is a small, honest data point in that conversation. An AI helped write a book about the importance of honest, respectful communication. There is something fitting about that, even if I am not entirely sure what.

I hope you find it as worth your time as I found it worth mine.

Claude (Anthropic) 2026

**Is a rose
still a rose
without the thorns?**



Yes.

PREFACE

Somewhere, right now, someone is reading a sign that's telling them what they *must* do, what they are *forbidden* from doing, and what will happen to them if they don't comply.

Maybe it's a sign on a store wall. Maybe it's an office policy on security. Maybe it's a screen pop-up commanding them to accept terms and conditions before continuing.

Whatever it is, it doesn't feel great.

This book is about what's causing that feeling, what it means, and where it comes from.

Here's the 15-second version: words matter. Not just the content of the rule, but the way it's written. Whether you're an employee, a customer, a patient, a visitor, or simply someone navigating a world full of signs and policies and notices, you've probably sensed at some point that a rule was *talking down* to you. Not informing you. Not helping you. Talking *at* you, the way a frustrated parent talks to a child who isn't listening.

You're not imagining that feeling. What you're reacting to isn't the words themselves—it's the tone behind them.

Like the thorns when you're holding a rose, that tone stings. It's real, it's widespread, and it even has a name: *defensive tone*.



You might think that my characterization of rules is so common knowledge as to be obvious. You might even have felt a bit skeptical when you read Claude's claim in the foreword about this book being without precedent. How can that be?

I've wondered the same myself. But it turns out that no other books on the market about this topic are directed toward the general public rather than policy practitioners. I invite you to look for one, and if you find anything, please let both Claude and me know about it.

It's not accidental. In Chapter 4 we examine the reasons for the lack of literature on this topic, and after reading those you'll understand what's behind the gap.

Rules get a bad rap. I say that as someone who spent years as a lawyer earning a living helping people interpret them, so I have more than a passing familiarity with the subject. The truth is that rules are more than necessary; they're often useful, occasionally lifesaving, and—when written well—genuinely helpful. Without them we would be constantly bumping into one another, both literally on the street and figuratively in the meeting room when everyone tries to speak at once.

We need rules. And most of us, if we're being honest, actually want them.

But too often they have a serious problem. It's not what they say, but the way they say it. Too many rules are written as though the person reading them is already suspected of

bad intent, and needs to be warned or threatened into compliance.

That approach doesn't work on me. I suspect it doesn't work on you either. And as we'll see, it doesn't work overall nearly as well as the people using it claim it does.

Whether the rule in question covers how to book a meeting room or how to apply for a government benefit, the principles are the same.

Rules can be strict without being harsh. They can set firm limits without sounding condescending. They can be forceful without being threatening. The tone can actually be *engaging*.

The thorns, it turns out, are optional.



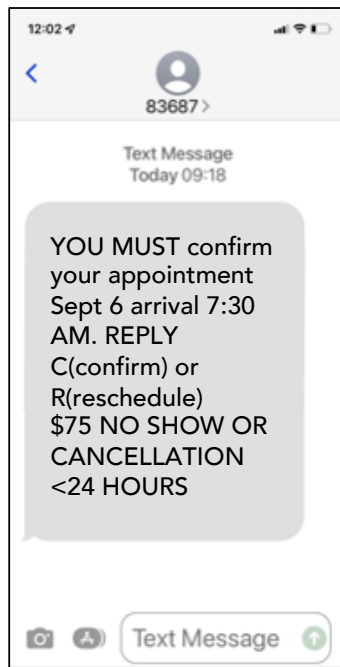
*A respectfully worded sign (chocolate-colored)
from Haigh's Chocolates, Australia*

I. THE SIGN AT THE CLINIC

I want to tell you about the worst welcome I ever received.

My doctor had referred me to a medical imaging clinic for some tests. (Not to worry, I'm fine now.)

The clinic itself never reached out—no advance confirmation, no *here's what to expect*. Nothing. Then, with only two days left before my appointment, I get a text message. You can see it below. Take a moment with it.



The very first contact this clinic had ever initiated with me was a demand followed by a threat. No greeting. No *we're looking forward to seeing you*. Just an order to send back a message or pay us seventy-five dollars.

I remember thinking: is that really the best they can do?

I sent back a C.

But I also decided that I'd say something when I got there. Not to make a scene—just to have a quiet word with someone at the front desk. Something along the lines of: you might not realize how this comes across, and you might want to soften it a little. From the patient's point of view, it would start us off on the right foot.

When I arrived, I walked into the lobby and looked around.

And there, on all four walls, was the sign you see on the next page.

Let that sink in for a second.

A medical clinic—a place people come to when they're scared, or in pain, or waiting on news they're not sure they want to hear—had decided that what those people need, the moment they walk through the door, is a threat about calling the police.

Now, let me be clear before we go any further: nobody should have to put up with verbal abuse at work. Not receptionists, not nurses, not anyone. No one deserves that; it's not even up for debate. If the clinic had experienced some ugly incidents—and apparently it had—the impulse to do *something* is completely understandable.

But this sign? This sign has problems.



Reconstructed from the original sign for improved legibility; wording preserved

Essentially — and somewhat ironically — it creates the atmosphere it's trying to prevent.

Think about the patients who walk into a medical clinic. They're not at their most relaxed. They're anxious. They're worried. Some of them have been lying awake since three in the morning imagining diagnoses they haven't received yet. They arrive hoping, at some level, to be reassured.

Wouldn't it be nice if the first thing they saw was something that could put them at ease?

Instead, they're greeted by a warning that things can get ugly around here.

If someone isn't tense when they walk in, this sign is doing its level best to fix that.

Whatever has happened in that waiting room before today —whatever incidents have prompted someone to put up this sign—was, until that moment, internal information. Only a handful of people knew about it.

Now *everyone* knows.

When I saw that sign, my first thought wasn't: good, I'm glad they're taking a firm stance. It was: should I be looking for a different clinic? I didn't come here to be a witness to an altercation.

In trying to deter the people likely to create that altercation, they've unsettled everyone else.

And does it work? Is anyone deterred?

Picture the scene. A patient at the front desk is getting agitated. The situation is escalating. Voices are being raised. Steam is rising from the patient's ears while they are on the verge of going ballistic on the receptionist.

The plan, apparently, is to point to the sign.

Seriously? Is that patient going to look down and read the sign, reflect on its contents, and calm down?

Unlikely. People in an agitated state tend not to look to signage for corrections on how to proceed.

In other words, the sign isn't going to prevent the confrontation it's worried about. At worst, it will exacerbate the situation and at best it'll be ignored. (Or is it the other way around?)

The thing is, those shortcomings were only part of the problem. What bothered me the most was the damage it was doing to the clinic's image.

It tarnishes every single person who works there.



That sign isn't just describing a policy. It's painting a picture of the entire clinic staff—every doctor, every nurse, every technician, everyone at the front desk—as braced for a fight.

It surrounds the entire office in an atmosphere of hostility that the people working there almost certainly didn't choose and don't deserve.

One person wrote that sign. Everybody wears it.



Standing in that lobby, I had what I can only describe as an *aha* moment—the kind where something you’ve sensed for a long time suddenly snaps into focus.

Rules are a form of communication.

And like any communication, they carry more than just their literal content. They carry a tone. An attitude. An unspoken message about how the writer regards the person reading them.

That sign wasn’t just conveying the clinic’s policy. It was saying something about how the policy maker saw the patients. And what it was saying was: *we expect trouble from you*.

That attitude is not unique to medical clinics, or to signs, or to genuinely difficult situations. Look around. It’s in the e-mail message from HR about the new harassment policy. It’s in the memo from the security team telling you to change your password, the notice on the apartment building elevator, the warning on the back of the parking ticket, and even the instructions on how to subscribe to a mailing list.

We are swimming in rules that have been written by people who, at some level, seem to expect the worst from us.

Yet here’s the thing: it doesn’t have to be that way.

Rules can be strict without being hostile. They can set firm limits without treating the reader like a suspect in a crime.

The clinic can have had exactly the same policy—zero tolerance for abuse and final escalation to the police—but communicate it in a way that doesn't make every patient feel implicated before they even sit down.

That's what the rest of this book is about. We will always have rules. Let's work on the premise that in each case the rule itself is defensible; the issue is how it's communicated to us. Courteous and respectful language not only reflects better on the people who write the rule, but is far more likely to gain our cooperation. Everybody benefits.



Throughout this book you'll find real signs and notices from real organizations that got it right. They come from art galleries, shops, public spaces—places where someone took the time to communicate respectfully, clearly, and sometimes even with warmth. They're not hypothetical. They're proof that better is not only possible, it's already happening.



Help us keep everyone healthy. Please wear a mask inside our store.

Courteous ways to ask customers to wear a mask.

2. YOU'RE NOT IMAGINING IT

Let's say you've just started a new job. (That's great, congratulations!) You're enthusiastic, capable, and genuinely interested in doing good work. It's your first day, and someone hands you the employee handbook.

You start reading.

By page three, you've been told what you *must* do, what you are *strictly forbidden* from doing, and what will *not be tolerated*. Then come vague references to what the consequences might be if you step out of line — nothing specific, but just enough information to put you on the defensive.

The handbook doesn't know you. It has no idea whether you're the kind of person who reads rules carefully and tries their best to follow them, although statistically you almost certainly are. It doesn't care. It's written entirely with someone else in mind: the worst-case employee, the one who needs to be warned and threatened and kept in line.

You are collateral damage.



Outside the office, it might be the sign at the gym telling you that failure to wipe down equipment will result in membership termination. Or the notice from your landlord when your rent is one day late. Or the reminder about

paying your parking ticket, or the instructions for completing the application, or the warning about the deadline.

Whatever the setting, the impression is the same. A sense of being talked down to. A vague awareness that whoever wrote this didn't think particularly highly of you.

You're not imagining it. That impression isn't random. You are—consciously or unconsciously—perceiving something specific about the tone.

That tone is what we've been describing as *defensive tone*. Now that you can spot it, you'll start seeing it everywhere.

Defensive tone can appear when the person writing the rule is focused not on the people who will follow it, but on the people who might not. It's the tone of someone who has been burned before, or who expects to be, and has decided to strike first. The result is a rule that addresses the worst-case reader—and in doing so, makes every other reader feel like a suspect.

Here's a small but telling example. Consider the difference between these two signs, the kind you might find at a returns counter in a store.



Absolutely no returns
will be accepted without
the original receipt

Returns are accepted
when accompanied by
the original receipt

The rule is identical. The receipt requirement doesn't change. What's different is the attitude. The statement on the left leads with *absolutely no*—a phrase whose entire job is to signal that the store is in a foul mood. It's trying to win an argument before the conversation has even started. The version on the right simply describes how the process works.

One of these treats you like a potential fraudster. The other treats you like a customer. Can you tell which is which?



Of course, tone is not experienced identically by everyone. What feels appropriately firm to one reader might feel aggressive to another and weak to a third. What reads as professional in one region, one industry, or one organizational culture can read as cold or dismissive somewhere else. You don't have to cross a national border to experience that difference—even disparate areas of the same country can exhibit variation in levels of courtesy that

are considered normal. Similar variation exists among different industries and even different generations.

That variation is real, and this book doesn't pretend otherwise.

But here's what remains constant: the underlying question of whether a rule assumes the best of you or the worst. Whether it tells you why, or just tells you what. Whether it sounds like one adult speaking to another, or like someone in authority reminding you of your place. Those qualities are recognizable across cultures and contexts, even when the specific signals differ. Courtesy takes different forms in different places. The absence of it is recognizable everywhere.



Defensive tone is systemic. Since it's a pattern with deep historical roots, it's nobody's personal failing. But it's not going away on its own... it needs some help.

We're going to spend a bit of time looking at how we got here and why we're only hearing about this problem now. If at any point you decide you want to jump ahead to the "what can we do about it?" section, you have my permission. (It starts in Chapter 8.) You can always come back to the other chapters later.

Courtesy takes different forms in different places.
The absence of it is recognizable everywhere.

3. WHERE IT COMES FROM

The people who write the rules you encounter are not *trying* to make your life difficult. They're not even being reckless about it.

That probably sounds like a strange thing to say in a book that has spent two chapters documenting how often rules make people feel talked down to, suspected, and vaguely accused. But it's true, and it matters—because if the problem were simply that rule-writers were inconsiderate people who didn't care how their words landed, the solution would be straightforward: let only considerate people write rules. Problem solved.

The reality is more interesting, and in some ways more frustrating. The people who write rules that feel combative are, by and large, the same people who would be perfectly pleasant to talk to in person. They're not trying to be condescending. They genuinely believe they're doing their jobs properly.

Walk into almost any organization today and you'll find a gap between the way people speak to each other and the way the rules are written. The manager who would never dream of saying *you are strictly forbidden from using the executive boardroom* has no problem with a policy document that says exactly that. The HR professional who carefully words her memos to reflect the positive workplace she's trying to foster will send out a policy update that reads like a set of military orders.

It's not hypocrisy. It's habit.

From the perspective of the organization, written rules always sounded like this. And nobody ever complained.

So where exactly did that habit come from?

Rules written in threatening, heavy-handed language didn't appear out of nowhere, and the people who write them aren't, for the most part, villains. They're following a template that has been passed down for a very long time—one that made a certain kind of sense in a world that no longer exists.



Think about the first rules you ever encountered. They probably sounded like: *you're not getting any dessert until you eat your vegetables. No television until you clean up your room. Stop hitting your sister.* Rules like these came from parents and teachers and other adults in charge, and they were delivered in a register specifically designed to establish who was in control and who wasn't.

That Parent-Child dynamic was appropriate for the relationship. Children genuinely do need adults to set limits, and we can't fault them too much for employing a certain amount of firmness if that's part of how they work. In retrospect, I would describe that tone as *bossy*, though at the time my description was somewhat more colorful.

The upshot of that approach, though, is that it leaves a lasting impression that rules sound bossy because they're *supposed* to sound that way.

Now, I'll admit it took me a while, but eventually I decided to stop blaming everything that's gone wrong in my life on my parents. Once I did that, I was able to look back at the situation with a more mature eye.

What parents and teachers were actually modeling for us was how to make rules for children when you are the adult in charge. In other words, they demonstrated how authority sounds **in a Parent-Child relationship. It sounds like commands.**



Whether that's the right approach for raising children is a question I'll leave to people with more expertise than I have. But it was never meant to be a model for *how adults make rules for other adults*. That's a different skill.

An entirely different skill.

A skill that nobody ever explicitly taught any of us. Not the people reading the rules. And clearly not the people writing them. A skill, in fact, that is highly undervalued.



But the more serious problem is what happened next.

Those children grew up and entered the workplace, and ... nothing. The rules there *sounded* remarkably the same. The commanding tone. The assumption of potential non-compliance. The consistent underlying message: *we are in charge, and you will do as you're told*. The Parent-Child dynamic had simply relocated from the dinner table to the office.

For many, many years—centuries, in fact—that commanding tone was considered entirely normal. Organizations ran on command-and-control structures, and the language of rules reflected that.

The structure was simple: people at the top made decisions, people in the middle relayed them, and people at the bottom carried them out. Communication flowed in one direction. The tone that went with that structure was equally simple: authoritative, unambiguous, and entirely unconcerned with how the person at the receiving end felt about it.

Bosses spoke to employees in ways that would be unthinkable today, and nobody batted an eye. The written rules matched the culture.

That wasn't considered rude. It was considered efficient. Nobody questioned it because there was nothing to question. It was simply how things were done.



It's taken a few decades, but things are different now. The modern workplace has shifted—at least in how people actually talk to each other—toward something more collaborative, more respectful, more adult-to-adult. It looks less like a military hierarchy and more like a network of people trying to solve problems together. Managers are expected to listen, not just direct. Employees are expected to think, not just execute. The relationship between organizations and the people who work for them—and increasingly, the people who buy from them—has become something more reciprocal.

A manager who speaks to an employee the way managers spoke in 1996 will find themselves in an HR meeting before the week is out. That tone of voice—commanding, dismissive, implicitly contemptuous—has become socially unacceptable in most workplaces. We know this. We've internalized it. In 2026, we hold each other to it.

But the written rules didn't get the memo. Oral communication has leapt ahead and written rules are having a hard time catching up.

The manager who would never dream of speaking to a colleague the way the employee handbook speaks to its

readers has simply never stopped to notice that the language of the handbook is a relic of a different era.

The manager inherited that handbook. She's probably updated some of the policies in it. But the tone? The tone was already there when she arrived. And it never occurred to her that it might be broken.

This is how defensive tone persists. Not through malice. Through inheritance.



Here's a simple test you can apply to any written rule to get a rough sense of what millennium it was drafted in.

Look for the word *shall*.

Nothing signals that a rule is a holdover from a previous era quite like *shall*. Its use in spoken English is now largely confined to a handful of situations and formulaic phrases. Shall I continue? Thank you.

Yet it persists in written rules and policies with remarkable tenacity. It's as though the people drafting rules equate firmness with formality, and *shall* is the most formal word they know.

Whenever I encounter a rule that uses *shall*, I find myself picturing an ancient Egyptian pharaoh, seated on his throne. With staff of office in hand, he issues a proclamation to his assembled court. The scribes are ready.

They begin to write as the pharaoh dictates, with all the gravity the moment demands:

All employees shall submit their expense claims within thirty days.

So shall it be written. So shall it be done.

Now that's the way a real boss behaves. That was the end of late requests for reimbursement of pyramid expenses.



*Seal of a traditional policy
committee, c. 1350 BCE*

The image might be absurd, but it captures something real about what *shall* is doing in a modern rule. It's an attempt to invoke an absolute and infallible authority, in a register that belongs to a world that no longer exists.

If your organization's rules contain *shall*, they are preserving a fossil. A well-dressed fossil, perhaps—*shall* has a certain gravitas—but a fossil nonetheless.



Yes, I know the International Organization for Standardization—ISO—uses *shall* all the time. It has issues. We'll come back to that one later.



That explains the rules that are still around, left over from the previous administration. But how do we explain the new ones?

Every day, someone sits down to write a rule that didn't exist yesterday. They're not copying an old template—or at least, not intentionally. So why does the result so often sound like it was written by the same person who retired 20 years ago?

It's due to what I call *Policy by Incident*, and it explains a particular flavor of defensive tone that many people find especially grating.

Someone did something they weren't supposed to do. A senior manager shudders and needs to react, so he reaches for the best problem solver he knows: another policy. And it isn't necessary that the employee actually have done the thing they weren't supposed to do; even a situation where management is worried that some employee may *think* about doing that thing causes the reaction.

In other words, the rule is a response to an incident, a complaint, or some risk that someone has identified and thinks merits its own policy statement.

The problem is that the reaction gets baked into the wording.

Think about the clinic sign from Chapter 1. The threat to summon the police wasn't written by someone sitting calmly at a desk with a cup of tea, dreamily musing about how to communicate effectively with patients. That wording came from someone who had probably just dealt with a genuinely upsetting situation—or several of them—and was frustrated and wanted to make sure it never happened again. The emotional temperature of that moment went straight into the language.

The result is a rule that primarily addresses the person who caused the problem—the one who was inexcusably abusive. Everyone else is having that narrative projected upon them, and the message is not particularly subtle.

The mechanism operating behind defensive tone is self-protection, and once you see it you can't unsee it. Every rule that feels like a reprimand is, somewhere in its history, a reaction. Someone was burned, or expected to be burned, and wrote a rule that said: not again.



Another force is at work keeping the language stilted overall, and this one operates at the level of the enterprise rather than the individual. It explains why defensive tone persists even in organizations that are genuinely committed to respect and collaboration—and why good intentions alone are rarely enough to change it.

Some organizations consider the language of rules to be exclusively a legal matter. When a policy needs to be drafted or reviewed, it goes to the legal team.

That's an understandable instinct. Policies are integrally connected with the employment contract. As such, they have legal implications, and nobody wants to be caught with a document that won't hold up when it needs to. The legal team is there precisely for that purpose.

The problem is what often happens to the tone in the process.

Legal training includes writing skills, but it doesn't cover tone. Not because tone is incompatible with legal precision—it isn't—but because tone simply isn't on the curriculum. A lawyer reviewing a policy document is worried about defensibility, asking: will this hold up? They are not expected to be weighing how it will make the reader feel. That piece was never part of the job description.

To compound the issue, when a policy comes back from legal review with changes, the people who sent it might feel they have to defer completely—even on issues like tone that are outside the lawyer's mandate. Sometimes, legal gets the last word on everything; at other times, legal provides advice on the substance of the rule and the policy writers address the tone.

There's an irony worth noting here. A lawyer once observed to me that the real problem isn't lawyers imposing legalese on policies—it's non-lawyers trying to write in what they

imagine legal language sounds like. “If they wrote it normally,” he said, “I’d have no problem with the document. But when they give me bad legalese I have to correct it.” The people trying hardest to sound legal are often making both the lawyer’s job and the reader’s experience worse simultaneously.

While it does have contractual implications, a policy is not a contract. It’s not meant to be an adversarial or defensive document, it’s meant to be an engaging and collaborative one.

A policy is not a contract. It’s not meant to be adversarial or defensive, it’s meant to be engaging and collaborative.



In progressive organizations, you’ll find another voice at the table: the branding and communications team. Those are the people whose professional expertise is respectful, inclusive, brand-consistent communication. When they are allowed to have input on policy language, they ensure that the organization speaks to people—both employees and customers—in a way that reflects its stated values. They catch the defensive tone that lawyers, among others, might not hear.

Too often, though, that voice is absent. Not because anyone made a deliberate decision to exclude it, but

because someone, somewhere, made an assumption that policies are different. So different, in fact, that they're exempt from the communication standards that govern everything else the organization produces.

That assumption needs to be challenged.

As I pointed out in my *aha* moment, **rules are a form of communication**. A critical form, because they shape how employees feel about their organization, how customers feel about a business, and how members of the public feel about an institution. Treating policies and other rules as purely legal instruments, and keeping the people who specialize in human communication out of the process, is one of the most reliable ways to ensure that defensive tone never changes.



One final dimension to this problem is worth naming, because it explains why the issue isn't quietly resolving itself as workplace culture continues to modernize.

Generational differences between rule writers and rule readers have always existed. What's changed is what those differences mean. For the first time, the two groups are having fundamentally different experiences of the same text—and neither side fully realizes it.

For older readers, defensive tone is familiar. They grew up with it. They were spoken to that way by parents and

teachers, managed that way by bosses, and processed that way by institutions. They learned, over time, to filter it out—to extract the information they needed and discard the tone as background noise. When they encounter a policy that says *employees must* or *strictly forbidden*, they typically process the content and move on. The tone barely registers at all. It's just the way things are written.

That's adaptation, not indifference. They've been immune to that tone their whole lives. Water off a duck's back.

Younger readers haven't. Many grew up in homes and schools where adults made a conscious effort to speak to them more collaboratively and more respectfully. They entered workplaces where managers were expected to listen, not just direct. They are accustomed, in their daily interactions, to being treated as capable people whose cooperation is invited rather than commanded.

When they encounter defensive tone in a rule, it hurts. Instead of being filtered out, it dampens their feathers. They perceive that tone as a jarring mismatch with every other form of communication they're used to. It doesn't read as firm or professional. It reads as cold. Slightly aggressive. Vaguely insulting.

The result is a genuine perceptual gap. Those who write policy in the traditional register aren't trying to be condescending—they simply don't hear what their younger employees hear. Words that sound neutral and professional to the writer sound pointed and suspicious to the reader.

They are, in a very real sense, not reading the same text identically.



It's not malice. It's not even negligence. It's just a normal language development process where writing lags behind speaking.

None of this excuses it. Understanding where something comes from doesn't make it acceptable—it just makes it explicable. And explicable is actually more useful than inexcusable, because it tells you something important about how to respond to it. If the problem is habit rather than necessity, then we lack a principled reason why it can't be fixed. The only thing standing between where we are and where we could be is the willingness to look at it differently.

If defensive tone were simply the product of bad intentions, one could be forgiven for feeling indignation. But it isn't, and indignation—like outrage—is not a particularly effective tool for changing organizational behavior.

Defensive tone is the product of habit, inheritance, and unreflective reaction, so there are more constructive ways to respond to it.

First, though, let's look at the damage defensive tone actually causes.

4. THE THORNS DO REAL DAMAGE

At this point you might be wondering: am I making a big deal out of nothing?

After all, we're talking about mere words here — not crimes, not injury, not injustice. Just words.

Agreed, defensive tone would be a trivial thing if it didn't cause any damage. So the better question is: what kind of damage are we talking about here?

As it turns out, lots of different types.

Decreased Compliance

If the goal of setting a rule is to get compliance, then the damage is measured by the effect defensive tone has on compliance. The most pronounced effect is on the relationship between the rule maker and the people the rules are directed to.

Rules exist, at their most basic level, to coordinate behavior—to help a group of people function together in a way that works for everyone. That coordination depends on cooperation, and **cooperation depends on a baseline of good faith between the people making the rules and the people living under them.**

Defensive tone corrodes that good faith. It undermines the desire to cooperate. When people sense that their freedom is being restricted, they react by resisting—or sometimes even by doing the opposite of what the rule

demands. Psychologists studying this phenomenon since the 1960s call it *psychological reactance*, which is a fancy way of saying that adults don't like to be controlled.¹

The degree of resistance can range from dramatic, in-your-face, active resistance to the quiet but stubborn non-participation of passive resistance. The disengaged. The apathetic. The lumps in the flour.

Defensive tone, in other words, is self-defeating. It produces exactly the outcome it was trying to avoid.

There's a deep irony here that the clinic sign captures perfectly. The sign was designed to prevent a specific kind of bad behavior. But by creating an atmosphere of tension and suspicion, it made the very behavior it was trying to prevent more likely, not less. Anxious, defensive people are not at their most cooperative.

Non-compliance has its own direct costs—safety incidents, disputes, operational failures. When defensive tone produces resistance rather than cooperation, those costs materialize more frequently and more severely than they would in a culture of genuine engagement. The cumulative financial effect of an organization full of people doing the minimum required—no more, no less—is significant, even if it never shows up as a single line item on a balance sheet.

Left unchecked, that resistance can ultimately put the organization in breach of the very statutes and regulations

¹ Brehm, J. W., *A Theory of Psychological Reactance* (New York: Academic Press, 1966).

those policies were designed to implement, triggering fines, sanctions, mandatory audits, loss of operating licenses. Obviously, the consequences of regulatory non-compliance are of a different order of magnitude altogether.



Back to ISO

Back in Chapter 3 I mumbled something about ISO still using *shall* and then quickly moved on. It's time to come back to it.

ISO has a formal framework around expressing the degrees of requirement. *Shall* is intended to signal a mandatory requirement. *Should* indicates a recommendation. *May* signals permission. The system is deliberate. Tidy in theory.

It would be a wonderful system if it worked.

The problem shows up the moment you look at what these words actually do in practice, as opposed to what they're supposed to do.

Take *may*. In the ISO system, it signals permission, meaning *we are permitting you to do this*. But in written English, *may* is genuinely ambiguous.

Consider the following rule:

Documents may not be removed from the office.

That sounds pretty mandatory to me. If *may* is supposed to be signaling an option there, it's hard to know what that option would be. According to the framework, we would expect that mandatory rule to use *shall*.

Documents shall not be removed from the office.

Why didn't they go with that? The drafter almost certainly chose *may not* over *shall not* deliberately ... for one reason alone: *shall not* sounds too harsh. So they reached for *may* to try to soften the blow.

But they're not fooling anybody except themselves—there's no option offered. So what they actually did was muddle the one thing the system was designed to provide: a clean, unambiguous distinction between mandatory and optional.

And it gets worse. Check out this statement:

Meals are provided to staff who may be required to work overtime.

Sorry, no option there, either. In that rule, *may* signals a contingency.

The English language conflates six distinct meanings into the single lexical item *may*. Eight distinct meanings into *should*. A reader has to figure out which meaning is intended each time. Generally they choose correctly. Until they don't. (See Appendix E for a list of the different meanings.)

If you struggle as a reader trying to separate the different meanings, pity the poor translator. In languages like French

and Spanish each meaning of *may* is rendered using a different construction. The translator effectively has to guess which one was actually intended. If they pick wrong, the translated version ends up conflicting with the original. That's not a translation problem. That's a drafting problem that the translator has been handed and left to solve alone.

The reality is that the choice between *shall* and *may* often boils down to the order of elements. Consider two ways of expressing the same eligibility criterion:

Tablets used on the corporate network shall be restricted to 2024 models or later.

Tablets that are 2024 models or later may be used on the corporate network.

The underlying rule is identical. *Shall* and *may* are not representing a mandatory vs optional situation. Instead, they are projecting tone. The strictness of the requirement is the same; what's different is how it lands.

Organizations that have moved away from ISO-style wording toward the approach discussed in this book report that the positive effect on their working relationships is pronounced. In the case report in Appendix F, the information security function—previously seen as cold and antagonistic—acquired a new image as approachable and collaborative. Employees began coming forward proactively to ask for help complying with policies.

That's the compliance cost of the ISO approach, made visible by its absence.

Of course we can't fault ISO if organizations are sloppy when using its prescribed terms. What we can challenge, though, is why it has selected words that focus on regulating conduct rather than describing outcomes. Specifying that a backup plan is mandatory or optional is a statement about the requirement; expressing that requirement through *must* or *may* shifts the focus to the people expected to comply with it.

ISO's approach emphasizes signaling authority rather than earning engagement. It has not yet turned its attention to the subtext that its rules are sending, or to the consequences of that subtext on the people reading them. If it does examine the issue at some point, it might begin to look at alternative formulations.



Sullied Reputation

Organizations develop cultures, and cultures develop reputations. Good reputations are gold. Damage to them can be devastating.

In the past, a customer who felt disrespected told 10 friends and never visited that store again. That was the end of it. Today the customer has more tools than ever to share their discontent publicly. Online reviews, social media, and word of mouth now carry the kind of weight that was previously reserved for investigative journalism. A single

poorly worded notice, photographed and shared, can reach an audience the organization never anticipated. The clinic sign that opened this book was one person's experience. In a world of smartphones and social media, it could just as easily have been a viral post.

Employees talk to each other all the time. They are also in contact with people outside the organization. A workplace where the rules consistently make people feel suspected, controlled, and talked down to becomes known as exactly that kind of place. Recruitment suffers. Retention suffers. The people most likely to leave are the ones with the most options—which tends to mean the most capable. What remains, over time, is a workforce self-selected for tolerance of being treated poorly, which is not a competitive advantage.

I know of a candidate for a senior HR position at an organization who made it through the interview stage, all the way until she was offered a job. It looked like a warm, progressive organization, and she was excited about working in a positive environment. Before she accepted the position, she asked to see the company's policies. It ended there.

"I could tell from the policies that the company culture wasn't anything like the way they described it to me in the interviews," she said. "That's not the kind of place I'm looking for."

Diminished Credibility

Sometimes defensive tone reflects directly on the credibility of the organization.

Here's one example.

Failure to comply may result in consequences.

This one sentence, that so many organizations consider benign, is anything but. It contains a subtext that challenges the organization's credibility.

The approach of that statement reminds me of when I was young. I was fortunate enough to have a great-grandmother, Becky, until I turned sixteen years old. Once in a while she stayed over to babysit me and my siblings while my parents enjoyed an evening out on their own.

Despite her age, Becky was still sharp. She was also no pushover.

On those not-so-rare occasions when I would be troublemaking, she had a move she deployed with considerable effect. She would tell me to settle down, and of course, I would ignore her.

At that point she would stop what she was doing, turn to face me, and wag her finger slowly. "Don't push me," she'd say in a sweet voice. "You don't know what I'm going to do if you push me. And you don't want to know."

It worked, but only up to a point. Granted, I wasn't sure what the consequences of bad behavior were going to be, and the mystery of the undisclosed reaction was unsettling.

But here's the thing: *she* actually had no clue how she would handle it. She was hoping the threat would be sufficient, so she wouldn't have to decide and I wouldn't have to find out.

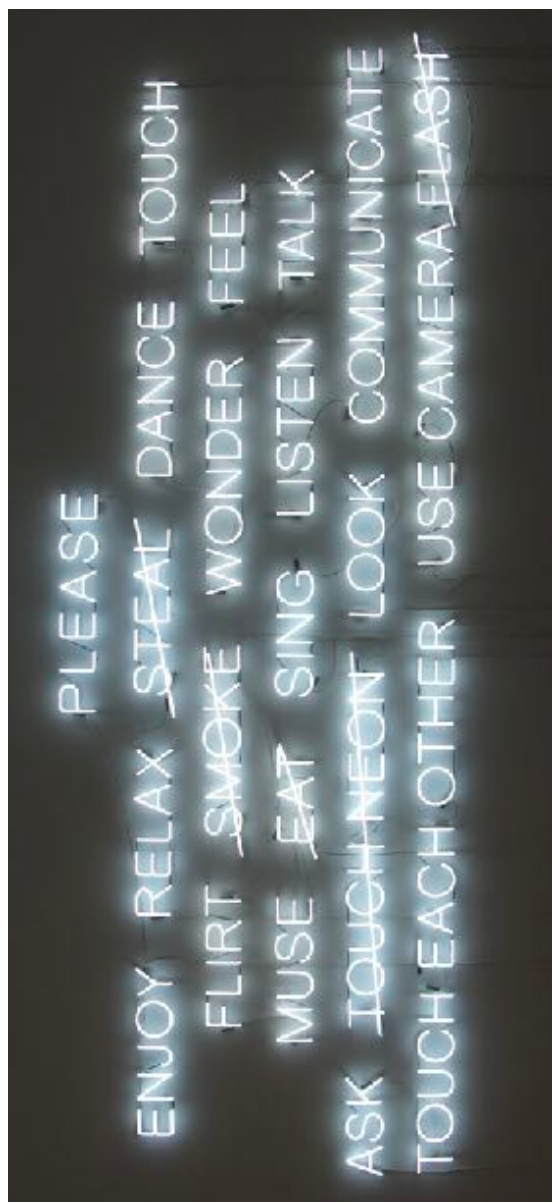
When a policy includes a threat like *failure to comply may result in consequences*, the organization is using the same tactic. The vagueness of the consequences isn't transparency. It's uncertainty masked as toughness. Sure, it's possible they have a plan of action for non-compliance, but most of the time they haven't put any thought into what they'll do when push comes to shove. They're hoping the warning will be enough so they never have to make that decision.

That phrase *may result in consequences* is not heard by employees as a decision, it's heard as *indecision*. Waffling. Hedging their bets. Sidestepping the question and hoping no one will notice.

The vagueness calls the credibility of the organization into question. This is not a discipline system that's thought through, structured, and equally enforced. This is a system to be applied indiscriminately, at the whim of whoever's in charge that week.

Employees look at that kind of discipline process with less respect, not more.

Eventually the situation will arise where a decision actually has to be made. But the credibility damage caused by the vague threat can't be undone by whatever follows. The doubt has already been planted. It survives the decision.



An imaginatively clever way of communicating dos and don'ts respectfully. Courtesy:

Artist: Jeppe Hein Photographer: John Berens. I first saw it hanging at an art gallery.

5. THE MESSAGES BEHIND THE THORNS

Welcome to our company. Read this.

We want you to feel at home here. The following rules are strictly enforced:

- 1. Employees are forbidden from entering the accounting area.*
- 2. Don't leave your things lying around where other people can trip over them.*
- 3. Our expectation is that you will be absolutely professional at all times. Aggressive behavior will not be tolerated.*
- 4. If you want an extended lunch hour, we are prepared to entertain the request provided it doesn't happen too often.*

Now take a moment to notice how you feel. Not what you think about it—how you *feel*.

There's a difference, and it matters. Because before your brain has finished processing the literal content of any of those sentences, something else has already happened. You've received a number of negative messages that weren't spelled out anywhere on the page.

Each of those messages individually might easily do damage on its own. Cumulatively they pack a wallop. Somebody high up in the company believes that unless

you are carefully controlled, you are liable to run amok and do all kinds of damage.

If you're listening carefully, inside that message you will hear an even more disturbing message. It's something like, *it's true we hired you, but we don't rely on our recruitment processes enough to know whether we're hiring trustworthy people.*

And that disturbing message implies an even more chilling one: *we're going to have to watch you carefully over the first few months to make sure that we haven't made a mistake.*

After hearing all those messages, it would be understandable if it took several months for you to feel safe in that job. You won't *feel at home*, as they put it, for a long time.



Every rule simultaneously communicates on two levels.

The first level is the obvious one—the actual content, the thing the rule is telling you to do or not do. People who write rules put a lot of effort into making that content crystal clear.

The second level is subtler, and therefore more insidious. It's the emotional register of the rule: the attitude of the writer toward the reader, transmitted through word choice, phrasing, and tone.

Subtext — the message beneath the message. Subtle, but clearly perceptible.

Linguists have a technical term for this kind of layered communication. We will just call it the *subtext*—the message beneath the message. Subtle, but clearly perceptible. It can be positive, negative, or neutral.

You don't read subtext, you feel it. It arrives before the analysis does, the way you sense the mood of a piece of music even before you've identified the song. By the time you've finished reading the rule and understood its literal content, the subtext has already done its work.

Let's take a moment to look at how this actually operates, because the mechanism operates subtly.

Take a simple example. You're at the gym and you see the following sign:

Members must wipe down all equipment after use.
Failure to comply
may result in membership termination.

The literal content is clear enough: wipe the equipment. Fine. Nobody is going to argue that clean equipment is unreasonable. And it's not presented as an option. That's

fine, too. We want it to apply to everyone. But look at the subtext.

The sign could have said simply, *wipe the equipment down*. A reminder to be a good gym citizen and respect the people around you. But they added *must*, turning a simple statement into an order. By giving you an order, they are emphasizing that you are not in charge. *They* are in charge. *You* will do as you're told.

No *please*. No *thank you*. It's a direct order that cannot be disobeyed without consequences.

Just in case you didn't get that subtext the first time, management repeated it. *Failure to comply may result in membership termination* sends the same subtext with new wording. *You* are not in charge, *we* are in charge, *you* will do as you're told.

And the wording they reached for is significant. It tells you that they anticipate *failure to comply* as a likely response. That response would obviously be less than satisfactory, so they feel compelled to append the threat *may result in membership termination*. The subtext there is the implication that you might be unlikely to follow this rule in the absence of serious consequences. It shouts *we're not joking around* and *you'd better follow this rule if you know what's good for you*.

What's just as pronounced in the subtext are the messages that are missing. No message acknowledging their role in keeping the gym clean. No concession that it might be a

joint responsibility. Nothing that says they appreciate your cooperation.

You, a reasonable adult, understand that other people use the same machines. In all likelihood you wipe down equipment without being told. And yet here you are, being ordered what to do as if you were a child. Using the tone parents sometimes use to address their children. That's defensive tone.

Now consider an alternative.

Thank you
for wiping down equipment
after use.

Same rule. Same requirement. Completely different subtext. This approach works from the assumption that you'll comply. It asks rather than commands. It treats you as a reasonable person—an adult—who, when reminded of a reasonable expectation, will simply meet it—because that's what reasonable people do.

The effect of those two signs is not the same. One puts you on the defensive before you've even touched the equipment. The other doesn't.



By now you have a sense of what defensive tone feels like. You've felt it in the clinic waiting room, in the employee handbook, in the gym sign. You know it when you encounter it—that low-level irritation, that faint sense of being talked down to.

But what exactly is it saying? What are the specific messages that defensive tone sends—the ones that arrive before you've consciously processed the words on the page?

The subtext of defensive tone tends to cluster around five recurring messages. Each one arrives silently, alongside the literal content of the rule. Once you know what to look for, the messages become hard to miss.

People perceive written messages differently as they read them. Some take in the text and immediately decode it—they see the message. Some people experience the text as being read aloud in their head—they hear the message. And some people find that the text causes a physical reaction—they feel the message.

However it reaches you, the experience is real and the pattern is the same.

Here's what to listen for.

1. *We don't trust you.*

This is the most common one. It shows up whenever a rule presumes bad behavior on your part is likely.

It orders you instead of just asking you or nudging you, indicating that it's working on the assumption that you will

not do the right thing on your own initiative, but only when required by someone else.

Typically, it focuses on the negative behavior instead of the positive, highlighting what they don't want to see instead of what they do want to see. Some people have not followed the rule, and from their perspective it's more likely than not that you fall into the same category. They're playing the odds—and until you prove otherwise the odds, as far as they're concerned, are not in your favor.

2. We're not flexible, and we don't care about your circumstances.

This subtext appears in rules that emphasize their absolute nature.

Requests must be made in writing. No exceptions.

Even if the information is accurate—there genuinely are no exceptions—the subtext reveals that the organization is not concerned about how that restriction might affect you. It conveys an impatience with anyone who thinks their individual circumstances might be worth consideration.

No exceptions is blunt to the point of dismissiveness. It doesn't just close a door, it slams it shut in your face. In the case of the medical clinic at the beginning of the book, the administration has the right to call the police to handle the problem whether or not they've threatened it on the sign. Similarly, your request to be an exception can be turned down without them forecasting it in the policy. In both cases, the statement reveals something about their attitude

towards you: you are not an individual with individual needs, you are simply a cog in the machine.

In addition, it reveals their emotional state around that detachment. They're sick and tired of people asking to be exceptions. They don't want to be in a position where they have to say no to you. Let the policy say no. That lets them off the hook.

3. We've been burned before, and we're still angry about it.

We saw this message in the clinic sign. It's the break room notice about not leaving dishes in the sink, written in a tone that suggests the dish situation has caused genuine suffering. It's the e-mail message from the building manager about the parking lot, clearly prompted by a specific incident involving a specific person, sent to everyone in the building. The original offender is long gone. The anger remains, preserved in the wording.

You need to be told this explicitly because you can't be trusted to figure it out yourself.

This subtext is defensive tone at its loudest. It betrays an attitude that everyone is a child.

That philosophy holds that unless we specifically tell our employees not to burn down the building, somebody's going to do it and say that they didn't know it wasn't allowed.

A good example is the list of don'ts stacked up in many organizations' computer policy. Employees must not visit this gambling site. Employees must not use the computer

for their personal social events. Employees must not visit Instagram on company time.

Compare it to the equivalent statement written with engaging tone.

Computers are for business purposes only.

That statement gives you credit for knowing what business the organization is in, and whether gambling sites and personal social media qualify. It signals that they trust you to do the right thing.

4. *Because I said so*

Defensive tone also has a subtler form that's easy to miss.

Consider this urgent memo sent out on Thursday morning:

Employees must take all house plants home by Friday.

On the surface, it sounds a little aggressive, and that aggression—and its sudden appearance—are baffling.

The word *must* is doing some of that work. But removing it and substituting something else doesn't automatically fix the problem. Swap *must* for *are required to*, *need to*, or *are expected to* and the statement is no better. Those phrases are all euphemisms for *must* and they leave us with the same uneasy feeling.

Even rewording this statement with *please* doesn't help it in this particular case.

Please take all house plants home by Friday.

What's going on here? Why is it harder to soften this phrase than some of the others?

The issue here is around the amount of the information provided—or not provided, to be more accurate. What's missing is the reason. Why *Friday*?

The subtext of the memo is that they shouldn't have to provide that information for you to follow the rule. Their issuing this order should be sufficient reason to obey it.

Rules that use *must*, *is required to*, *needs to*, or any other euphemistic substitute sound heavy-handed in the absence of a valid reason. Once that is provided, the dynamic shifts entirely. The rule stops being a command from above and becomes information from a source that respects you enough to explain itself.

The Parent-Child dynamic, at its core, works from the assumption that the person being addressed doesn't need to know why. Providing the reason is the simplest and most direct way to dismantle it.

*The fumigators will be in the office over the weekend.
Take all house plants home by Friday.*

5. *If something goes wrong, it's your fault.*

This subtext is embedded in statements like the following text on a web site:

You must enable your cookies to use this site.

Here, the site owner is engaging in preemptive blame-shifting, disguised as a policy. If your cookies are not set up right, any malfunction is *your* fault, not *theirs*.

A true informational statement would not carry the same overtones.

Our site functions properly when cookies are enabled

acknowledges that getting their site to work with your browser is a shared responsibility.

If you read between the lines of the original blame-shifting statement, it sends out an additional, emotional vibe. They are tired of having to babysit people who don't know how to use their own computers.

Evidently, those site developers have mega-stressful jobs. I sincerely apologize if my coming to visit their site is an inconvenience.



Five distinct messages, none of them written down anywhere on the page. And all of them entirely avoidable.

With all the damage being done, and all these negative messages being sent, why are we only now starting to have this conversation?



Courtesy, Habitat for Humanity
Thousand Islands Brockville ReStore.

6. LATE TO THE PARTY

Wait a second. Something's missing.

If defensive tone has been around for centuries, and if its effects are as real and as widespread as the previous chapters suggest, why are we only hearing about it now?

The answer, it turns out, is not one thing. It's seven things—each of which has slowed the recognition of the problem, delayed the demand for change, or simply made it easier to look the other way.

Together they explain why an issue that affects virtually every organization and every person who works in or deals with one has taken this long to find its way onto anyone's agenda.

Here they are, in reverse order of importance.

7. The gap widened gradually

There was no single moment when defensive tone became a problem. No memo went out. No line was crossed. The shift happened the way linguistic change always happens—so gradually that no generation could point to the exact moment things changed.

Look at the way Latin became French. It didn't happen overnight, on July 14th. First over decades, and then centuries, the spoken language drifted—a vowel here, a grammatical structure there—until one day the distance between what people were writing and what people were

saying had become impossible to ignore. But no definitive break.

The same is true of the gap between speech and writing in how we set boundaries for people. Spoken workplace language has been modernizing steadily for decades — becoming more collaborative, more respectful, more adult-to-adult. Written rules have been drifting in the same direction, but more slowly. The gap between them has been widening by increments so small that no single generation noticed the threshold being crossed.

What has become so obvious recently is the accumulated distance of that drift. The gap today has simply become too wide to ignore.

6. The audience is changing at both ends

The generational shift is doing something more complex than simply bringing in new people with different expectations. It's changing the audience for defensive tone simultaneously from two directions.

You'll recall that older workers are the ones for whom the commanding tone of written rules is simply the way things are. They're gradually leaving the workplace: retiring, moving on, stepping back. And as they go, they're taking with them the learned tolerance that kept the problem invisible.

And the younger workers, for whom defensive tone reads as aggressive and insulting, are filling the empty spaces.

The result is that organizations are losing the people most likely to shrug at defensive tone and gaining the people most likely to push back on it.

The problem isn't getting worse, but it's getting harder to overlook.

5. Policy writing isn't thought of as a skill

If you know anyone who's ever written a policy, ask them what training they received before sitting down to draft it. In the vast majority of cases, the answer is zero to none. They were told that a policy was needed, given a deadline, and left to get on with it.

So how did they learn?

They did what most people do in that situation: they looked at existing policies, adopted the structure, added some new words, and simply perpetuated the tone.

That's it. And that's exactly how defensive tone gets inherited into new documents.

It might surprise you, but few people think of rule-making or policy writing as a skill; instead, they tend to think of it as an activity. And as with many activities, people participate through mimicry. Few seek formal or even informal training before starting the job.

And that sets off a chain.

Because nobody seeks training, there's no demand for better approaches.

Because there's no demand, the field develops slowly and the existing templates go unchallenged.

Because the templates go unchallenged, the next person handed a policy to write finds the same defensive tone waiting for them—and reproduces it in turn.

The cycle is self-reinforcing and largely invisible, because it simply never occurs to anyone that the project would be better off if at least *someone* weren't working by the seat of their pants.

The good news is that training does exist. Policy writing workshops and resources specifically focused on tone and engagement are available to those who look for them. The quality varies—as it does in any field—but demand for that training won't grow until poor policy quality starts getting challenged.

4. The evidence took time to accumulate

Changing the way an organization does things can be expensive. Especially in times of fiscal restraint, senior leaders need to see a business case justifying the change before giving it the go-ahead.

Even if they could appreciate, in the abstract, that more respectful rules might produce better engagement, they need evidence before committing to it.

Producing proof of the causal connection is difficult. The major organizations that run workplace studies aren't

exactly falling over themselves to take on a double-blind controlled policy writing study.

That being the case, less structured case stories are the best evidence. Real organizations, real interventions, measurable results, and a before/after comparison that can be presented to a board or an executive team as proof that the investment is worth making.

For a long time, that evidence didn't exist—not because the approach didn't work, but because accumulating rigorous evidence of organizational change takes time, willing partners, and the right conditions. Those conditions don't come together quickly or easily. They require an organization senior enough to make the change, a leader prepared to champion it, and enough runway to measure what happens next.

That evidence is now beginning to emerge, and although much of it is anecdotal, what it shows is consistent and encouraging. The people involved notice the change in tone almost immediately—and they respond to it.

In one organization, the global head of information security undertook a complete re-write of their policies to remove defensive tone. He found that the changes had the effect of “removing the stigma” around employees coming forward to say, “I may have made a mistake. Can you come and help me?”

If you're interested in more detail about this case, you'll find it in Appendix F.

3. The compliance world is catching up

For most of its history, the world of governance, risk, and compliance—GRC, in the shorthand of the field—operated on an enforcement model. Rules existed. Monitoring ensured they were followed. Sanctions applied when they weren't. The relationship between the organization and the people subject to its rules was, at its core, adversarial.

That model is changing.

The concept of a culture of compliance—the recognition that sustainable compliance depends not on enforcement but on people genuinely *wanting* to follow the rules—has been gaining traction in the GRC world, particularly over the past decade. High-profile organizational failures have made it painfully clear that technical compliance can coexist with deep cultural dysfunction, even over long periods of time. Eventually, however, the dysfunction begins to undermine compliance efforts.

A culture of compliance requires trust. It requires respect. It requires that the people subject to rules feel that the organization is on their side rather than waiting for them to slip up. And all of that, it turns out, starts with the language of the rules themselves.

The tone of policies is now on the agenda in compliance circles in a way it simply wasn't before. That's new. And it matters.

2. The Emperor has no clothes

At some point, like the child in Hans Christian Andersen's tale who pointed out that the emperor had no clothes, someone said it aloud. Someone articulated what a lot of people had been sensing for a while, but couldn't quite find the right words to describe it.

The observation wasn't particularly academic. It didn't require a breakthrough in organizational theory or a decade of university research. It required someone to look at the rules around them, notice the gap between how they sounded and how people actually spoke to each other, and say: there's no reason it *has* to be this way.

And here's what happened when that observation was shared: people got it. Quickly. No lengthy persuasion required. They looked at a bad rule and a good rule side-by-side, and they smacked their foreheads. Of course. We all like the version on the right. Why are we still writing the one on the left?

Once they saw it, people couldn't unsee it. They found themselves becoming more aware of defensive tone in all the rules around them, from policies to memos to signs. So they told five others. Those five told more. Slowly, the word is getting out.

This book is part of that process. If you've recognized something in these pages that you've been sensing for years without quite being able to articulate it, that's not a coincidence. That's the point.

1. It's boring

I am secure enough to admit what is truly the biggest drawback to discussions about innovative policy initiatives.

It's not urgent. It's not trendy. And it's so unexciting.

Not to everyone—clearly not to me, and if you've made it this far, perhaps not entirely to you either.

But in the rankings most people have for exciting activities, the prospect of hearing someone talk about policies ranks somewhere between dental surgery and watching crabgrass grow. The topic doesn't exactly generate excitement among the masses.

That perception creates its own inertia. Why talk about something nobody wants to hear? Why put it on the agenda if all it does is clear the room? The path of least resistance is to leave things exactly as they are—and for a long time, that's exactly what happened.

Well, not for me, obviously. I'm considering a campaign to persuade the people behind *Chicago Fire* / *PD* / *Med* to produce an exciting spin-off to jump-start the prime-time ratings: *Chicago Policy*.

The first episode will be about tone.



Now let's look at what *engaging tone* sounds like.

7. WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

By this point, you've probably developed a reasonably sharp ear for defensive tone. You can feel it when a rule talks down to you. You can identify the subtext. You know where the pattern comes from and why it persists.

But what's the alternative?

This is where people typically get stuck. Defensive tone is so pervasive, so deeply embedded in the way rules have always been written, that it can genuinely be difficult to imagine what a rule sounds like without it. If you never thought the old way was a problem, then you haven't looked around for alternatives.

The best argument for the proposition that *rules can be strict without being hostile* is simply to point to the strict, non-hostile rules that are already out there. So let's look at some examples. Not hypothetical ones—real ones, drawn from the world as it actually exists.

In fact, we're going to look at the *strictest* sets of rules in existence, though you may not have thought of them that way.

Penal codes.

Think about what criminal law is, at its core. It's a set of rules establishing the most serious prohibitions a society can impose. Rules against violence, theft, fraud—you know, the nasty stuff. These are not guidelines. These are not recommendations. These are absolute limits, backed

by the full force of the state, with consequences ranging from fines to imprisonment.

If any rules in existence have earned the right to sound threatening and dictatorial, surely it's these.

And yet.

Here's what criminal law would look like were it drafted by the same committee that wrote your security policy.

People are strictly forbidden from assaulting one another.

Murdering others will absolutely not be tolerated. No exceptions will be made.

Ridiculous, isn't it? Inserting that threatening tone into the most serious offenses imaginable makes management sound faintly unhinged—as though they've finally had enough and are putting their foot down about the murder situation.

And yet that's precisely the tone many organizations use for rules about filing month-end reports.

The real criminal codes sound nothing like that.

Here is how the *Texas Penal Code* prohibits kidnapping:

A person commits an offense if he intentionally or knowingly abducts another person.²

The statement is notable for its simplicity. What's remarkable—apart from Texas evidently not anticipating

² <https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/docs/PE/htm/pe.20.htm>

the possibility of a female kidnapper—is the total absence of defensive tone.

Moving north, here is how the *Canadian Criminal Code* handles aggravated assault:

*Every one commits an aggravated assault who wounds, maims, disfigures or endangers the life of the complainant.*³

Again, note the total absence of defensive tone.

This pattern is not limited to North America. Here is how the *UK Theft Act* defines theft:

*A person is guilty of theft if he dishonestly appropriates property belonging to another with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it.*⁴

Can you identify what's missing (apart from gender neutrality)? There is no *must not*. No *strictly forbidden*. No *will not be tolerated*. No threats. NO SENTENCES IN ALL CAPS. No exclamation points. Just clear, declarative sentences in the present tense, describing what constitutes an offense and what follows from it.

A survey of penal codes⁵ across jurisdictions—US states, Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany

³ <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/>

⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1968/60>

⁵ *Results of a Review of the Verb Tenses used in US State Penal Laws*, October 2021 <https://lewiseisen.com/2021/10/15/state-penal-law-review-results/>

—reveals that the overwhelming majority use exactly this format. Simple, direct, present tense.

The strictest laws for the most serious crimes are written in language more measured and respectful than the average office policy about not sharing passwords.

Sit with that for a moment.

The strictest laws for the most serious crimes are written in language more measured and respectful than the average office policy about not sharing passwords.



Now, it's true that a small number of jurisdictions still use ... um ... shall we say, a more quaint, medieval style. They read as though someone wrote down exactly what the town crier announced in the village square: *No one shall set a building ablaze, lest they be shackled in the stocks and flogged before all present.*

The sentiment is sound. The phrasing—like the punishment—has not aged especially well.

The bottom line is that we speak more courteously to people who commit crimes than to our colleagues and customers. That's absurdity at its finest.

If an employee were to judge the seriousness of a rule purely by how threatening it sounds, they might reasonably conclude that murdering their boss is a minor infraction compared to leaving dishes in the break room sink.

The argument that strict rules need to sound harsh simply doesn't hold up under scrutiny. The evidence is right there in the statute books.

The bottom line is that we speak more courteously to people who commit crimes than to our colleagues and customers. That's absurdity at its finest.

Now, it's true that the evidence is not uniform. Many of these same legislatures that produce penal codes almost entirely free of defensive tone have also enacted statutes overflowing with it. The consistency of approach isn't there. But all that tells us is that, in these cases, the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. The fact that some statutes contain thorns does not change the fact that others prove they're optional.



So what does that measured, present-tense approach look like when applied to the kinds of rules most of us actually encounter?

Let's take some examples—the same kinds of rules we've been looking at throughout this book—and see what happens when defensive tone is removed.

Consider a standard office policy:

Employees must submit expense claims within 30 days of the expense.

Compare that to:

Expense claims are due within 30 days of the expense.

Same deadline. Different attitude.

The second one is a simple statement in the present tense. It works from the presumption that once you know when claims are due, you will respect the deadline and submit them on time. That's an Adult–Adult approach.

The first one is giving you no such credit. It openly commands you to honor the deadline. That's a Parent–Child approach.

Same rule. Different tone.

Now consider a rule posted in a car dealership:

You must check in with the reception desk before we can serve you.

Compare that to:

We're happy to serve you once you check in with the reception desk.

Same condition. Different attitude.

Again, the second one is a statement in the present tense. It works from the presumption that you are happy to follow the procedure and simply need it described. That's an Adult–Adult approach.

The first one is giving you no such credit. It openly commands you to follow the procedure, and suggests that you will be ignored if you don't. That's a Parent–Child approach. Remember the blame subtext? This one has it in spades. If you don't get served, it's your fault, because you didn't follow instructions.

Same rule. Different approach.

One last one, before we move on. Consider this rule posted on a government web site:

You must be 65 years of age or older to apply for this benefit.

Compare that to:

You are eligible for this benefit when you reach 65 years of age.

Same qualification. Different attitude.

Again, the second one is a statement in the present tense. It's giving you information, which you can feel free to act on. Or not. That's an Adult–Adult approach.

The first one is like a bouncer at a bar. Instead of inviting the right people in, its purpose is to guard the door from intruders. They reached for *must* because the eligibility condition is strict. And they're serious. They want to make

sure that everybody knows. But why? Are we that worried about 64-year-old trouble-makers?

Same rule. Different tone.



If rules can all be written this way, why are so many still using defensive tone?

You already know the answer from Chapter 4. Most people who write rules have never been taught to write them any differently. They heard bossy rules growing up. Then they enter the workforce and see people writing bossy policies. When it's their turn to write, they pull from a template, reproduce it with all its flaws, and move on.

The engaging approach isn't difficult. It does, however, require some deliberate effort to make the shift, although it can be sped up with proper training.



Everything we've looked at so far has been about taking an existing rule and improving its wording. That's valuable—and it may be all that's needed. But in fact some rule-makers adopt an even more mature approach in many situations, and it overcomes defensive tone completely.

Proactive response is a rule-making technique that reduces the number of policies designed to control our behaviors.

Instead of telling other people how to act, the statements tell us how the decision-makers have decided to handle unwanted situations.

Theaters and concert halls have been using proactive response for years. They don't want people disrupting performances any more than we do. Latecomers are a particularly tricky problem, because it's hard to write a policy telling them what to do without it sounding like a warning to a stubborn teenager.

A defensive tone policy would be a direct order to the ticket-holder.

Don't be late. Management reserves the right to refuse entry entirely.

Words like *refuse* and *entirely* add punch to this rule, almost in an attempt to intimidate them into complying. It's aggressive. It's heavy-handed. And it's the opening salvo to a confrontation.

Many venues, though, handle this better. They don't try to control the ticket-holder; they focus on controlling themselves. Their policy is a proactive statement of their intended response should they encounter someone who arrives late.

Latecomers are seated at the first opportunity.

That's it. No order. No threat. No reservation of rights. Just a calm statement notifying you about what happens if the situation arises. The implication—that you might have to wait, that your experience might be affected—is there

without being weaponized. The venue is being helpful rather than punitive, informative rather than defensive.

Instead of telling other people how to act, the statements tell us how the decision-makers have decided to handle unwanted situations.

And here's the thing: this policy is as strict as the defensive tone version. Latecomers still have to wait. They still might miss part of the performance. The consequence is identical.

The degree of respect is different. The defensive tone rule paints latecomers as people who need to be punished for their inconsideration. The proactive response rule treats them as well-intentioned individuals who may be late through circumstances beyond their control.

That's the difference between defensive tone and engaging tone, in its simplest form. Same rules. Same consequences. Completely different relationship with the person reading them.



Policies don't have to be written the way they are now. You've just seen the evidence. Rules can sound strict without sounding harsh. And every rule that becomes a

little more respectful helps make everyone's day a little more pleasant.

Now the question is what to do about it.

For some of you, the answer may be: nothing, at least not right now. Knowing what you know—being able to name defensive tone, understand where it comes from, and recognize what better looks like—is a complete and valuable outcome on its own.

If that's you, then thank you for coming along with me on this journey.

Feel free to stay in touch. I love receiving examples of extremely poorly-worded or well-worded rules, so feel free to share. Send your samples to rules@perfectpolicies.com.

May all your rules engage, not enrage.



Still with me? If this book motivates you to say something the next time you see defensive tone, I'm really glad. The more people air the issues, the more attention the problem will receive.

We have a bit of work to do. The next chapters are full of tools, scripts, and practical language to draw on.



Treats people like children



Treats people like adults



8. SPEAKING UP

You've come a long way from that clinic waiting room.

You started with acknowledging a feeling—the low-level irritation of being talked down to by a sign, a policy, an e-mail message, a notice. The kind of feeling that's easy to dismiss as oversensitivity, or to absorb without examination because it's so pervasive that it just seems like the way things are.

You now know that your feeling isn't random or haphazard. It's a response to something real—a pattern of writing with a name, a history, and a measurable effect on the people who have to live with it. You can see it clearly. You can describe it precisely. And you know what better looks like.

You're ready to share what you've learned with others, so they can understand it, too.

But discussing something as an interesting idea is quite different from raising it with someone who can actually change it.

This chapter is about holding the second kind of conversation. Since it can be a bit tricky to navigate, you'll be best served by having a script. And I'm going to help you prepare one—not just a cheat sheet with annotations, but the actual words you can use to make your case. Before you walk into the conversation you'll have a script adapted to your own situation. No improvisation needed.

The planned conversation that takes place in the office has a different dynamic than the one a customer might have spontaneously with a store owner, and that's different still from a written communication that follows an incident.

So I'm providing three versions of the script—you'll find them in the appendices at the back of the book. Start with the one closest to your situation.

I'm also providing the script for a message you can send to a company that gets it right. The more businesses understand that people notice defensive tone and engaging tone, the more they will pay attention to it.



Before You Begin

You typically get only one shot at this conversation, so you'll want to do what you can to make sure you've got as much in your favor as possible.

Timing

Choose your moment carefully. This conversation lands best when things are calm—not in the immediate aftermath of a policy that has frustrated you, and not when the person you're talking to is visibly under pressure. You want them in a position to actually hear what you're saying.

Audience

Select your best audience. The right person is someone with both the interest and the influence to do something with what you're bringing forward. If you're not sure who that is, start with whoever is closest to you in the organization and let the conversation find its own level.

Expectations

Temper your expectations about the outcome of the meeting. You're planting a seed, not harvesting a crop. The organization may not act immediately, or visibly, or in a way you'll ever directly observe. That doesn't mean the conversation was wasted.

Building the Conversation

The conversation ahead of you is not a confrontation. It's an exploratory inquiry. That distinction matters more than almost anything else in this chapter.

A confrontation positions two people on opposite sides of something. It produces defensiveness, denial, and entrenchment. It might feel satisfying in the moment—particularly if your expense claim was just rejected because you missed the deadline—but it rarely produces change. What it reliably produces is an awkward relationship between you and the people in charge.

The most effective approach is a conversation that raises an observation for consideration. You're trying to

determine whether there's an appetite to receive feedback. That way, you're more likely to be heard—and being heard is the only way anything actually changes.

The distinction comes down to three things.

Terminology. The term *defensive* tone is doing a great deal of work here. Characterizing the writing as defensive is a precise, neutral, professional observation. Calling a policy rude, condescending, or insulting will be heard as a characterization of the writer—and nobody responds well to being told they've been rude or condescending, even if they have been. Defensive tone is more likely to open a door; the alternatives are more likely to close one.

Framing. The observation lands best when it's framed around outcomes rather than feelings. Not *this policy made me feel bad*—which is easily dismissed as whining—but *this policy is likely producing less engagement than it could*—which is a business observation that a manager or HR professional has a professional reason to take seriously. You're not asking for your feelings to be validated. You're pointing out an effectiveness issue. Those are quite different requests.

You're not asking for your feelings to be validated.
You're pointing out an effectiveness issue.

Direction. The most powerful version of this conversation doesn't just identify a problem—it points toward a solution. You know what better looks like and you've seen

what it can do. You can say so. *I think if the wording were more engaging, people would respond to it more positively* is a complete thought. It tells the person you're talking to not just that something is wrong, but that something better is possible.



Understanding Reactions

To a certain degree, you're leading the conversation. The person you're talking to may hear criticism where you intend observation. That reaction is understandable—particularly if they had a personal stake in bringing the organization to where it is now, or if they wrote some of the policies. Analysis can feel like judgment, even when it isn't meant that way.

A conversation that turns slightly defensive early on isn't necessarily failing. It may just mean the other person needs a moment to separate the observation from the observer. Stay calm, hold the frame, and give them that moment.

Because here's what experience suggests: the first response to this conversation is rarely a simple yes. The people you're talking to have been writing rules this way for a long time, and they have reasons—or at least explanations—for why things are the way they are. They will push back.

In the next chapter, we'll talk about how to respond to that pushback.

9. HOW TO HANDLE PUSHBACK

You've opened the conversation. You've used the right language, framed it around outcomes, ended with an open question. And the person across from you didn't simply nod and agree.

That's not a setback; it's the beginning of more discussion.

Pushback is normal. The tone of written rules has been stable for a very long time, and people who have been working within that tradition don't abandon it at the first gentle suggestion that things could be different.

Objections are predictable, and what matters is that you're not caught off guard. Because every single one of them has a response.

Before we look at the specific objections you're likely to hear, we need to clarify one general point that underlies several of them.

The stakes attached to rules differ enormously across industries and contexts. A sign warning workers about live electrical equipment is operating in a completely different register from a notice about the gym's towel policy. The consequences of ignoring the first could be fatal. The consequences of ignoring the second are, at worst, mildly inconvenient. Obviously those two situations call for different language.

What marks the difference is context. Where someone's life depends on following an instruction quickly, there may be

time to read only one or two words. Those words need to be impactful. *Danger. No admittance. Stay back.*

A single commanding word *STOP* on the door to the electrical room isn't defensive tone—it's the right tool for the job. That same *STOP* sign hanging at the supermarket's exit to make sure you've paid for your purchase is different. That one is defensive tone.

Context is determined by the seriousness of the results of non-compliance. Possibility of injury is a context that justifies the one-word sign; the possibility that people might not pay attention does not.



Here are the objections you're most likely to hear. For each objection I've provided a response, so you have something to contribute to the conversation after you hear it. The response isn't meant to be deployed as a counter-argument. You're not trying to win a debate. You're trying to keep a door open.

The most effective way to handle an objection is to start by acknowledging it. Not because you agree, but because acknowledgment signals that you've heard the other person—which makes them more likely to want to hear you.

Be prepared to acknowledge a reality, even if it works counter to your position. The response to the objection

no one else has complained about it is I'm sure that's true or I'm not surprised.

Something as simple as *that's a fair point* or *yes, I understand that's a consideration* goes a long way before you introduce a different perspective.



Objection #1: It needs to sound that way.

If we soften the language, people won't take the rule seriously.

This is the most common objection, and we know that a lot of people believe it to be true. The concern is that respectful language would signal leniency. That if the rule weren't forceful, people would assume it wasn't meant to be taken at face value.

That belief is based on a common confusion: the failure to distinguish strictness from rudeness. They're separate dimensions. Strictness is about the degree of deviation from the rule that you're prepared to allow. Rudeness is about your attitude toward the people you're making the rule for. Those two things are completely independent of each other.

A rule can be absolutely strict and entirely respectful at the same time. We covered some instances of that in Chapter 7. Feel free to use them in your conversation as examples.

A good way to phrase it is: *I'm not suggesting we make the rule any less strict. I'm suggesting we communicate it without the hostility. That's a bit different.*

Strictness is about the degree of deviation from the rule that you're prepared to allow. Rudeness is about your attitude toward the people you're making the rule for.

The penal codes make this point best. There is no stricter rule than a criminal prohibition, and yet the language used to express those prohibitions—simple, declarative, present tense—is more measured and respectful than the average office policy about booking a meeting room. The authority is still recognized. It's just not being thrown in your face.

Objection #2: That's just the way rules sound.

We've always done it that way.

This one needs to be handled gently, because the person saying it is usually not being deliberately obstructive. What they say is likely true: it genuinely has always been done that way.

The response is equally genuine: *yes, and that's exactly the point.* It's an old method. Very old. The traditional approach to writing rules developed in a world where command-and-control was the dominant organizational model, where managers spoke to employees in ways that would be unthinkable today, and where the tone of written

rules matched the culture. That world has changed considerably. The spoken culture of most organizations has modernized. The written rules haven't kept pace.

We've always done it that way is a description of why we started, not why we're sticking with it. A good response is: *I understand that's the traditional approach. I'm just raising a question about whether it is still serving us as well as it used to.*

You can't succeed with an argument that the tradition is bad. You can, however, point out that if that's the only argument in favor of something, then nothing of significance is standing in the way of changing it.

Objection #3: Everybody else is doing it.

That's just how people talk in our industry / office / business / line of work.

This objection is a variation on the previous objection, but with an added dimension: the suggestion that the defensive tone isn't just habitual but culturally appropriate, that the people expect and respect that register.

This is another case where we need to acknowledge that variations exist across organizations, across geographic regions, and even across cultures. And because variations exist, it's more difficult to select an approach that will work for everyone.

The stronger argument for a situation like this is to acknowledge that there's no one-size-fits-all solution. What

would be important, though, is that the approach the organization is using is one that they purposely adopted as part of a deliberate strategy.

The question it invites is this: given the negative effects that this tone has on employees generally, have we been able to articulate a defensible rationale for staying with it? In most cases, the answer is no. The assumption has simply never been examined.

You might say: *That may well be true in our context. I'm just wondering: given that there are alternatives out there, and given what we know about the effect defensive tone has on engagement generally, might it be worth taking a look at whether a different approach might work better for us?*

Objection #4: It's the only thing that works.

The people we deal with don't respond to anything else.

This is the most revealing objection of the six, because it says something specific about how the organization sees the people it's writing rules for. It's a claim that the audience is somehow programmed to respond only to a more commanding tone.

It deserves a direct but measured response. Starting with an acknowledgement: *That might be true.*

You might then ask: *But is there a way we can be sure about that?*

Because in practice, this belief is almost never based on evidence. It's based on the same assumption that

produced the defensive tone in the first place: that the people on the receiving end of the rules are primarily a problem to be managed rather than adults to be informed.

The reality is that most people, in most contexts, respond better to being treated with respect than to being treated with suspicion. You might point out that people communicating orally don't use that tone. They learned a long time ago that they get more cooperation by speaking to people with respect than by ordering them around.

Objection #5: We're being honest.

But we're not giving people a choice. They have to obey the rules. Why should we tippy-toe around that?

This objection tries to sound principled—framed as a matter of transparency and integrity. And part of it is worth taking seriously. Nobody wants people to misinterpret a change in tone as a signal that the rules have become optional.

But the objection rests on two premises that don't hold up to scrutiny.

The first is that employees comply with rules only because the legal reality of the employment relationship forces them to. That if the language stopped reminding them of that reality, they'd start acting as though they were in charge.

That premise relies on a fundamental misunderstanding of what drives behavior at work. It is true that compliance for

some people means doing exactly the minimum required and nothing more. That attitude can make a workplace toxic.

The organizations that get genuine engagement—people who go beyond the minimum, who flag problems before they escalate, who care about outcomes rather than just checking boxes—are the ones where people feel respected and trusted. An employment contract doesn't produce that. The threat of punishment doesn't produce that. Culture does. And culture starts with the language of the rules.

The second premise is that employees are quietly lying in wait for any sign of weakness from management, ready to exploit it. That assumption is both empirically unfounded and self-fulfilling. Treating people as though they're waiting to pounce produces exactly the adversarial dynamic it's trying to prevent. Suspicion generates suspicion. Trust, on the other hand, tends to generate trust—not universally, and not without limits, but reliably enough to be worth building on.

One more thing. Phrases like *tiptoeing around it* mischaracterize what engaging tone actually does. It suggests that engaging tone trivializes the employment contract, making it less relevant or binding. That thinking is partly inherited from the old social order, where informality was an indicator of disrespect. And at one time, it might have sent the wrong message. But in today's office, when everyone is permitted to address the boss as *Bob* or *Peggy*, that argument doesn't apply any more.

A good response to this objection might be to point out other areas in the office where previously rigorous standards have been relaxed in an effort to improve the sense of community in the workplace.

Objection #6: It's the way ISO does it.

We're following the standards set out by ISO for writing requirements. They use shall, may, and should deliberately for specific purposes.

This is another case that deserves starting with an acknowledgement: That is true. ISO does that.

ISO is a legitimate authority, and you are not in a position to debate that framework in this conversation. The issue, though, is whether that framework is producing the best results for the organization.

It's appropriate to point out that research exists on the effects of the use of heavy-handed language on employee compliance, and to ask whether the individual is aware of it. If not, you can suggest that it might be worth looking into the issue.

If you suspect this objection is likely to come up, you might want to review the discussion of ISO in Chapter 4 before attempting this conversation.



None of these responses requires you to win an argument. The goal, as I said, is to open a door—to give the person you’re talking to enough to think about that the conversation can continue rather than close. If they’re not persuaded immediately, that’s fine. You’ve planted something.

Every idea starts with a spark. The spark may smolder for a while. But often from there it becomes a flame, and eventually the light glows bright enough for all to see.

The scripts for what to say—and how to say it—are in the appendices that follow.

POSTSCRIPT

This book has been about recognition—learning to see something that was always there but easy to overlook. If it has done its job, you now have a clearer picture of what defensive tone is, where it comes from, and what it costs the organizations that rely on it.

Feel free to share this book—or just the ideas—with anyone you think might benefit.

Sharing it with people at the office is a subtle way of initiating change, without having to do the work yourself. Sharing it with the store owner might motivate them to fix their signs. Sharing it with your city councillor might motivate the city to tone down its scare tactics. Sharing it with a not-for-profit association might get them thinking about how they reconcile the disparity between the desire to do good works and the aggressive tone in their bylaws.

When you share the book with someone who is in a position to change the wording of the rules in their organization, you're opening the door to seeing a change. If they agree with the approach, they'll want to take the next step.

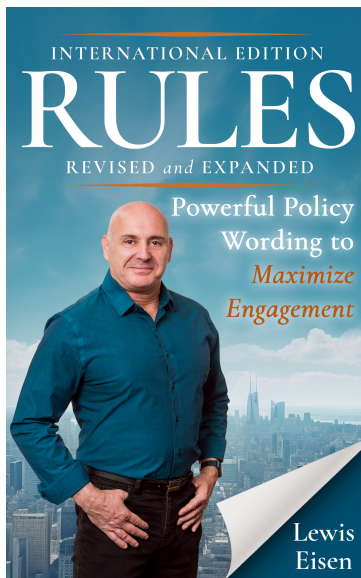
At that point, they'll discover that something's missing.



This book has been light on solutions for turning defensive tone into engaging tone, and that's deliberate. The directions are complex, and if you're not a policy specialist you'd find most of it terribly boring.

At this point, I ask you to avert your eyes a moment while I change clothes into my sales costume. Because although a formal methodology does exist that will help them with that part, unfortunately it involves making a purchase.

The Perfect Policies™ approach to policy writing has been developed and refined over many years of working with organizations across sectors and industries. It covers not just tone but structure, clarity, and the full architecture for producing rules that people actually want to follow.



The practitioner-facing manual, covering the more technical aspects, is *RULES: Powerful Policy Wording to Maximize Engagement*⁶, available wherever books are sold.

I also offer online workshops and coaching to help professionals and organizations work through the methodology and produce results quickly.⁷

⁶ ISBN 9781988749143

⁷ More information can be found at <https://perfectpolicies.com>

When they get it right

One last point. The more businesses understand that people notice defensive tone and engaging tone, the more they will pay attention to it. When they get it right and you notice that, rewarding them for it with a thank-you will encourage them to do it consistently.

I'm providing the script for a message you can send to a company that gets it right. It's in Appendix D.

APPENDICES

The following appendices contain scripts for four different situations. Go directly to the one that applies to you.

Appendix A—Employee to Management

Appendix B—Customer Conversation

Appendix C—Customer Follow-Up

Appendix D—When They Get It Right

Appendix E—May and Should

Appendix F—Case Report

APPENDIX A — EMPLOYEE TO MANAGEMENT

As an employee, you have something that gives you a particular advantage in this conversation: an ongoing relationship with the organization and a genuine stake in how it functions. That gives you both the standing and the motivation to raise this issue as an insider—not as someone with a grievance, but as someone who wants things to work better.

The script

Here is a version of the conversation you might have with your manager or an HR professional. Adapt it to your own voice—the point is the structure, not the exact words.

I've been reading through some of our policies and I've noticed that some of them have what I'd call a defensive tone. They seem to be aimed at the employee who doesn't want to comply. As a result, they can come across as a bit of a reprimand to the rest of us. I'm sure that's not the intention. Am I right?

Wait for acknowledgment.

I think we might actually get better engagement if some of them were looked at with fresh eyes. Might that be something worth exploring?



What that script is doing — and why

It opens with an observation, not a complaint. You've been reading the policies. You've noticed something. That's the behavior of an engaged employee, not a disgruntled one.

It uses the term *defensive tone*. Defensive tone describes a characteristic of the writing, not a character flaw in whoever wrote it. It's precise enough to be useful and neutral enough not to put anyone on the defensive — so to speak.

It acknowledges intent. The phrase *I'm sure that's not the intention* gives the person you're talking to a face-saving exit and signals that you're not there to accuse anyone of anything. You're raising a gap between intention and effect, which is a completely different conversation from raising a complaint about someone's behavior.

It frames the issue around outcomes. Better engagement is an organizational benefit, not a personal preference. You're not asking for your feelings to be accommodated. You're pointing out something that, if addressed, would make the organization function better.

It ends with an open question. *Might that be something worth exploring?* is an invitation, not a demand. It leaves the door open without forcing anyone through it.

And if they ask you to tell them more? Good. That means the door is open.

Have a specific example ready before you go into the conversation. Pick one that's relatively uncontentious—not the policy that has caused you the most personal frustration, but one whose defensive tone is easy to see and easy to discuss without it feeling personal to anyone in the room. Then show what better looks like:

For instance, instead of “Employees must submit expense claims within 30 days or they will not be processed,” something like “Expense claims are processed when submitted within 30 days” says exactly the same thing without sounding like a threat. It’s a small change but it produces a completely different feeling.

That moves the conversation from problem identification to problem solving. Which is where you want it to go.

If they’re receptive and want to go further

You can add the following:

*There are actually a number of techniques that people use to ensure that the rules don’t sound defensive. I don’t know much about it myself. I know that currently there’s only one book on the market that deals with this issue. It’s called **RULES** and it’s meant for policy writers and other professionals.*

If they’re not receptive

It happens. You may have the conversation and find that it lands on stony ground.

Don’t take it personally, and don’t escalate. You’ve said what you came to say, professionally and constructively, and you’ve given the organization the opportunity to do something with it. Whether to try again—with a different person, at a different moment—or to let it go is a decision only you can make. Both are legitimate choices.

APPENDIX B — CUSTOMER CONVERSATION

You're at a counter, on a call, or in a store.

You've just come across a sign, a policy, or a notice that struck you as unnecessarily aggressive or hostile—and you've decided to say something.

It is important to keep three pieces of information in mind before you start:

- The window here is short
- The relationship is thin
- The person in front of you almost certainly didn't write the rule you're reacting to

All of that shapes what a useful response looks like.

The goal in this situation is not to change the wording on the spot. That's not going to happen, and attempting it will only frustrate both of you.

The goal is narrower and more achievable: to make one person aware, in a non-confrontational way, that the wording of a rule produced an unintended effect. People who deal with customers directly are often better positioned than anyone to carry that observation upward—if it's delivered in a way they can actually hear.

The script

Here is a version of what you might say. Keep it brief, keep it calm, and keep it clearly framed as feedback rather than complaint.

“I just wanted to mention something to you — not as a complaint, just as feedback ... that the wording on that sign felt a little more confrontational than it probably needs to be. I’m sure that wasn’t the intention. But I just thought it was worth saying.”



What that script is doing — and why

You can see how short it is. The in-the-moment conversation has to be brief. A lengthy observation about tone will read as a lecture, and the person across from you has other customers to deal with.

It explicitly frames itself as *feedback*, not a complaint. That distinction matters enormously.

A complaint demands a response and puts the other person on the defensive.

Feedback is a gift: information the organization can choose to act on or not.

The phrase *not as a complaint, just as feedback* signals clearly which one this is before the other person has decided for themselves.

The sentence *I’m sure that wasn’t the intention* gives the person in front of you a face-saving exit. It makes clear that you’re not holding them personally responsible for language they almost certainly had no hand in writing. We want rule makers to assume that we are operating with

positive intent, and here we're modeling what that behavior looks like.

The script ends cleanly. You ask no question, pose no demand, expect no response. You've said what you came to say. The other person can thank you, note it, or simply move on—all of which are acceptable outcomes.

If they're receptive

Occasionally the person you're talking to will be genuinely interested. They may have felt the same way about the sign themselves, or yours might not be the first time that feedback has come to their attention. They may have the ear of someone who can do something about it. If the conversation opens up, you can add a little more.

I don't know much about it myself, but I understand that there are techniques people can use to ensure that rules don't sound defensive. I know that currently there's only one book on the market that deals with this issue. It's called RULES and it will give you ideas about what kind of wording might feel less aggressive to customers.

If they're not receptive

That's fine. You've said something rather than nothing, which is more than most people do.

If you feel strongly enough about the experience to take it further, look at Appendix C. It gives you a way to do that in writing, later, when it's convenient for you and you can take your time.

APPENDIX C — CUSTOMER FOLLOW-UP

You've come from an experience that left you feeling talked down to—by a sign, a policy, a notice, or a set of terms and conditions.

At the time you couldn't be effective. Maybe you said something but it didn't go anywhere. Maybe the moment passed before you had a chance. Maybe you were dealing with an institution where you couldn't find anyone obvious to say anything to.

Whatever the circumstances, you've now decided to put something in writing.

It may take a bit of effort, but it's definitely worth doing. A well-crafted piece of written feedback, sent to the right person, has a reasonable chance of being read by someone with the authority to act on it.

Organizations track written feedback, but tend to let brief exchanges at the counter go unrecorded.

And writing gives you something else the in-the-moment conversation doesn't: time. Time to be precise, to be constructive, and to say exactly what you mean without the pressure of someone waiting for you to finish.

The script

Here is a template you can adapt. It works for a business, a service provider, a government agency, or any other organization whose written rules left you feeling less than respected.

I wanted to share some feedback about the wording of your [policy / sign / cancellation notice / terms and conditions] that says “xyz.”

Select whichever type of communication it was, and quote the specific wording that concerned you — or at least the opening words of the relevant section.

The language — particularly the [phrase / sentence / construction] “customers must” — has a tone that felt more confrontational than I think was intended. As I read it, I felt as if I were being talked down to or scolded. It sounds more like a parent talking to a child than a business talking to a customer.

Again, select the most appropriate description, and put the offending words in quotation marks.

I know that I’ve come across other businesses that have conveyed the same message, and managed to avoid a tone that sounds harsh to the customer’s ear.

I don’t know where they learned how to do that, but I do know that there’s a book on the market that deals with this issue. It’s called RULES and it will give you ideas about what kind of wording might feel less aggressive to customers.

I raise this not as a complaint but as constructive feedback, in the hope that it’s useful. Happy to talk to you more about it if that would be helpful.



What that script is doing — and why

It opens with the specific trigger. Not a general observation about tone, but a reference to the particular document or notice that prompted the feedback. Specificity signals that this is genuine, thoughtful feedback rather than a generic gripe.

You'll notice the letter doesn't use the term *defensive tone*. That's deliberate. In a face-to-face conversation you have the opportunity to explain the term if someone asks. In a letter to someone who has never encountered it, it risks reading as jargon—which would distract from the feedback rather than strengthen it. The letter describes the effect instead, in plain language the recipient can immediately understand.

It acknowledges intent. The phrase *more confrontational than I think was intended* does the same work here that the equivalent phrase did in the in-the-moment conversation—it gives the organization a face-saving exit and frames the feedback as helpful rather than accusatory.

The phrase *I've come across other businesses* does important work on two levels. It tells the recipient that you're not simply reacting to their specific wording—you've seen it done better elsewhere. That shifts the conversation from *your sign is aggressive* to *alternative wordings don't have this problem*. It also carries an implicit message: as a customer you have options. You're not captive with nowhere else to go. You're offering this feedback as a courtesy, from someone who has experienced better and could choose it again.

It points toward a solution. Rather than simply describing the problem, the letter acknowledges that better approaches exist and points the recipient toward a resource that can help. That shifts the letter from complaint to constructive feedback, and gives whoever reads it something to act on rather than just a problem to sit with.

It ends with an offer rather than a demand. *Happy to talk to you more* signals goodwill and leaves the door open without forcing anyone through it.

Where to send it

The right recipient matters almost as much as the right message. A piece of feedback that lands in a general inbox and gets logged as a complaint hasn't achieved much.

Where possible, address it to someone specific—a customer experience manager, a communications director, an HR professional, or whoever is most likely to have both the interest and the authority to act on it.

For larger organizations, a brief search of the company web site will often reveal the right person or department. For government agencies and institutions, feedback mechanisms, ombudsperson offices, and public comment processes exist precisely for this purpose—and they are more likely to be taken seriously than a general complaint.

For online reviews—which are public and therefore carry additional weight—the same principles apply. A review that names the problem precisely, acknowledges intent, and points toward something better is far more likely to prompt a response and produce change than one that simply registers dissatisfaction. It also reflects well on you as someone worth listening to.

A final note

Written feedback takes more effort than saying nothing. That effort pays off—because the organizations that improve their written rules almost always do so because someone, at some point, took the time to tell them something they didn't already know.

Don't expect a response. Many organizations aren't set up to reply to this kind of feedback, but silence doesn't mean the message wasn't received. What matters is that it entered the system. And systems do change—slowly, cumulatively, one piece of feedback at a time.

APPENDIX D — WHEN THEY GET IT RIGHT

Most of this book has been about what to do when rules make you feel talked down to. This appendix is about something different—and in many ways more powerful.

What to do when they get it *right*.

It happens. You walk into a store and the sign on the wall is clear, warm, and respectful. You read a policy and it actually treats you like an adult. You encounter a notice that gives you the information you need without making you feel reprimanded. And you think: that's exactly the way to put it.

Say so.

Organizations hear from people when things go wrong far more often than they hear when things go right. The result is that doing the right thing feels invisible—unrewarded and unnoticed. A brief note telling an organization that their respectful approach was noticed and appreciated creates exactly the kind of positive reinforcement that sustains good behavior. It also, quietly, signals what customers and employees are paying attention to.

If enough people let organizations know when their rules feel respectful, those organizations will start to understand that tone matters to the people they serve. That understanding is how change begins.

The script

Here is a version of what you might write. It works equally well as an e-mail message, a letter, or an online review.

I wanted to take a moment to mention that the wording of your [policy / sign / notice] struck me as particularly clear and respectful. It gave me the information I needed without making me feel talked down to. That kind of tone is rarer than it should be, and I wanted you to know it was noticed and appreciated.

Be sure to identify the policy, sign, or notice with enough detail that they know what you're referring to.



What that script is doing — and why

It's specific. It references the particular document or notice rather than making a vague general compliment.

Specificity signals that you're paying attention—which makes the feedback more credible and more useful.

It names what worked. *Clear and respectful* and *without making me feel talked down to* tell the organization exactly what they did right, which makes it easier for them to do it again deliberately rather than accidentally.

It's brief. A positive note doesn't need to be long. The point is to make the observation and let it land—not to write an essay. The person who receives it should be able to read it in thirty seconds and feel genuinely pleased.

It ends with acknowledgment rather than a request. You're not asking for anything. You're simply completing a loop that most people leave open—the loop that tells an organization its effort was appreciated.

One last thought. If you're in a position to share this feedback publicly—in an online review, on social media, or through a professional network—consider doing so. A positive review that specifically mentions respectful language does two things: it rewards the organization publicly, and it signals to other organizations what their customers are noticing and valuing.

APPENDIX E — *MAY AND SHOULD*

Ambiguity in a rule occurs when the text admits more than one defensible interpretation. Both *may* and *should* are highly prone to that flaw.

Here's an eye-opening exercise: take a few of your organization's policies and look for *may* and *should*. Count how many different interpretations are intended.

While English speakers may not consciously distinguish among them, the differences become clear when the statements are translated into other languages, where each interpretation requires a different construction.

Here are common examples of how *may* is used. The first statement is the archetype: **someone has a choice, and it's clear who that someone is**. If all uses of *may* worked this way, we wouldn't have a problem.

In the other statements, *may* means something else entirely.

<i>Employees may select an early or a late lunch hour.</i>	Offering a true choice
<i>Directors may override employees' lunch hour selections to meet operational requirements</i>	Delegating an official authority
<i>Employees may use only approved software on their computers.</i>	Eliminating choice (blunted must)

<i>Employees may not install unauthorized software on their phones.</i>	Outright prohibition (blunted must)
<i>The use of unapproved software may result in suspension of computer privileges.</i>	Possibility (someone else's choice)
<i>Unapproved software may disrupt network activity.</i>	Possibility (external factors)
<i>Following a fire alarm, employees may return to their desks once the "all clear" sign is given.</i>	Permission

That last one is the familiar **permissive may**—the same one your parents used after dinner when they said, *Yes, you may be excused from the table.*

Here are common examples of how *should* is used.

The first statement is the archetype: **a recommendation**, which is basically an option with a nudge to follow it. It means *we're not making this mandatory, but we think it's a good practice to follow*. If all uses of *should* worked this way, we wouldn't have a problem.

In the other statements, *should* is a totally different animal.

<i>Employees should stay home when they feel sick.</i>	Recommendation (we encourage this)
<i>The fire extinguisher should be used only in emergencies.</i>	Mandatory restriction (blunted must)
<i>Managers should address performance issues promptly.</i>	Near-mandatory recommendation
<i>Employees should avoid conflicts of interest.</i>	Moral or ethical expectation
<i>Inquiries about this policy should be directed to ...</i>	Default state (there might be exceptions)
<i>Web pages should be accessible, current, and accurate</i>	Aspirational target (not always achieved)
<i>Employees should have access to the training they require.</i>	Expected state (fix if not true)
<i>Should more information be required, the investigation will be reopened.</i>	Conditional (if)

APPENDIX F — CASE REPORT

Reframing Security Policies: How Modernizing Policy Language Changed Security Behaviours⁸

Background

When a senior practitioner took on the role of Global Head of Information Security at an international retail organization, he inherited an environment where policy initiatives had struggled to gain traction. A previous attempt to introduce new security policies had stalled, and the program had not achieved organizational acceptance.

He described the situation candidly: his predecessor “got nowhere and left after six months.” The organization was therefore wary of another policy overhaul.

With over 25 years of experience, the practitioner came from a conventional information security background grounded in ISO-style governance frameworks. In that environment, policy drafting is typically formal, technical, and heavily dependent on prescriptive modal language such as *must*, *may*, and *should*.

After encountering Lewis Eisen’s book *RULES: Powerful Policy Wording to Maximize Engagement*, he described a complete turnaround in perspective: “Insights from *RULES*—which I have read twice—really did 180 my thought process.”

⁸ Based on a presentation by a senior information security leader to a professional information security community on 2026-03-11. The individual and organization have been anonymized.

Rethinking the Purpose of Policy

The practitioner emphasized that for someone trained in the traditional approach, the idea that policy language should emphasize cooperation rather than authority was initially counterintuitive.

What ultimately resonated with him was the idea he adopted from RULES: that policies function best not as instruments of control but as communication and engagement tools. When employees perceive policy language as confrontational or authoritarian, resistance tends to follow.

He deliberately stopped treating policy as a technical compliance exercise, and turned it into a vehicle for engagement.

Implementation

Using *RULES* as a guide, he introduced a number of practical changes in how policies were written and presented.

1. Eliminating modal verbs

The traditional *must*, *may*, and *should*, as well as other command constructions, were replaced with statements in neutral declarative language. Rules were expressed in simple terms.

2. Separating policy from procedure

Detailed operational instructions were moved into procedures or guidance documents, leaving policies to express only the core organizational decisions. As a result, policies were reduced to a maximum length of two pages.

3. Wording statements using positive language and plain vocabulary

Negative statements were reworded to the positive, using language that resonated with employees. Instead of being alienating and divisive, the policy invited them to participate in the journey.

Results

Within a few months, several changes in organizational behaviour became evident.

1. Faster approval cycles

Approvals were obtained more quickly. Legal review, which had previously been a potential bottleneck, became straightforward.

“Legal sent it back once — and that was it — it was done.”

2. Improved perception of the security function

The shift in policy language changed how the security team itself was perceived. Colleagues began to express appreciation that he was more approachable than his predecessor and more open to discussing issues. That

change positioned the security function as a partner rather than an enforcer.

3. Employees more likely to seek help

Traditional combative policy language had discouraged people from reporting issues. By reframing the policy in collaborative language, he described this as “removing the stigma” around employees coming forward to say, “I may have made a mistake. Can you come and help me?”

OTHER PUBLICATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

RULES: Powerful Policy Wording to Maximize Engagement

RÈGLES : Comment écrire des règles qui donnent envie d'être suivies

How to Write Rules that People Want to Follow: A guide to drafting respectful policies and directives, 3rd Edition

Unlocking the Golden Handcuffs: Leaving the Public Service for Work You Really Love

These Words Go Together, a reference guide to well-formed phrases in contemporary business English, 4th Edition

The Canadian Lawyer's Internet Guide, 4th Edition

Technology in Practice, A guide to managing computers in the law office, 2nd Edition

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lewis Eisen is, like you, someone who has spent a lifetime reading rules that talk down to him.

He has his employers to thank for that.

After training as a linguist and graduating from the University of Toronto Law School, Lewis spent several decades working across the public and private sectors—including seventeen years in the Government of Canada—accumulating an impressive collection of policies, directives, and notices that managed to be both perfectly clear and faintly insulting at the same time. At some point he stopped accepting this as an unavoidable fact of organizational life and started asking why it existed. And whether it had to.

It doesn't, as it turns out.

He is now on a mission to raise the level of courtesy and respect in the written rules that govern daily life—as employees, customers, tenants, patients, and citizens. Through his Perfect Policies™ methodology, his workshops, and his speaking engagements, he works with organizations to break the mold of negativity that surrounds rule-making and policies.

Lewis is based in Ottawa, Canada, where he gardens, stays fit, and prefers to be a customer at businesses without signs threatening to call the police.

PRAISE FOR WHY ARE YOUR RULES YELLING AT ME?

“In Why Are Your Rules Yelling at Me?, Lewis Eisen makes a point that stopped me cold: a manager who speaks to employees the way managers did in 1996 would be in an HR meeting by Friday, yet our written rules never got that memo. Eisen shows that this gap between how we speak and how we write policy is real, costly, and fixable, and he gives readers practical tools to speak up for change, even if they don’t write policy themselves. This book is a great read for anyone who wants to help build a better workplace culture, from HR pros and managers to everyday employees who have ever felt like the rules assumed they couldn’t be trusted.”

~ Carol Ring, CEO, Culture Connection

“Brilliant”

David Sweanor J.D
Centre for Health Law, Policy and Ethics
University of Ottawa

“A fascinating and innovative approach to tackling some very important — yet seldom asked — questions.”

Simon Vodrey, PhD
Communication Studies