

Group Rules, Walking Off, Suffering, and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was growing up, I lived a few doors down from a very observant Catholic family that had strong opinions about what is right and what is wrong. There was a son around my age whom I liked to play with now and then, but his parents eventually banned me from fraternizing with him. The reason was that, after being warned by his parents a few times not to do so, I forgot and shouted "Jesus Christ!" during some game. The first time I had done this, I had received a very stern lecture about using Jesus' name in vain. The next time I was sent home and my mother was spoken to. The final time this happened I was banned.

I always puzzled over this episode when I was growing up. A part of me found it somewhat humorous, even at a young age; at the same time I felt hurt and even fascinated as to why my neighbors had judged my conduct as so outrageous and wrong. As I have grown older, I have watched, with the fascination of a sociologist visiting a far away land, many similar incidents involving different groups of people.

For example, my wife has many friends who are Persian, and generally speaking, under the moral code of this group of people, a woman is still expected to be a virgin when she gets married. If the woman gets a reputation for not being a virgin, her own people may shun her, and she may have a difficult, if not impossible time finding a husband in the Persian community.

Every group has a series of ideals that its members are expected to meet. Different societies around the world have different expectations for their members, which are usually based on a concept of *what is right or wrong*, *what is moral or immoral*, and so forth. Group members who do not adhere to these ethics are considered *personae non gratae* and are shunned by the group.

What are these various ethics and rules? In most cases they consist of numerous verbal, nonverbal, and written agreements that bond the group and help to ensure its survival over time. Whenever a group of people gets together, its constituents create a series of agreements that establish which behaviors shall be deemed acceptable and which shall be deemed unacceptable. If people within the group do not follow these rules and instead choose to violate them, then the group cannot be cohesive and strong; therefore it may not survive.

My neighbors, who had strong opinions about the use of Jesus' name, were protecting their group. If every Catholic out there went around using Jesus' name in an inappropriate way, this behavior would project a message of a lack of respect for Jesus, which would undermine the group and its defined belief system. Similarly, if all Persian women were very promiscuous, then historically this would be viewed as undermining the solidarity of the family, and the cultural preference for families to come together to form alliances in marriage. I am not agreeing or disagreeing with these examples. I am just illustrating how various principles and rules can provide cohesion and solidarity within a group.

If every person in a given group were to start violating these various principles and rules, the group would inevitably disintegrate. This is why various groups have maintained and have often strictly enforced their own respective codes amongst their members. For example, for many generations the worst thing that a Jewish person could do in the eyes of his or her family would be to marry a non-Jew. Jews have survived for more than 4,000 years largely due to a very strict social code relating to marrying outside of the Jewish faith.

Countries are also bound by certain constitutions and rules of behavior. For example, the right to bear arms, the right to free speech, and other principles are part of the American order. These rules define what the United States is, so naturally our courts and politicians uphold and enforce them quite seriously. If we did not have these rules and did not enforce them through law, the identity of the United States would be drastically different.

The way people alienate themselves from their group is by violating the rules and expectations of the group. It is as simple as that. Many times these actions are very visible, such as someone marrying outside of their faith; other times they are less visible, such as a woman being secretly promiscuous, even though this behavior is harshly viewed by members of her faith or group. In most Western marriages today, it is widely accepted as a social contract that being married means that the husband and wife will not be intimately involved with others during their marriage. This is a social and moralistic sort of contract that exists. This code can be violated publicly, or it can be violated secretly; the point is that when adultery is committed, one or both members of the married couple have violated a rule that exists mainly to keep the marriage intact.

Group rules also exist within companies and organizations. An example of a group rule is one that my company, [BCG Attorney Search](#), has had in place for quite some time. We require our recruiters to draft long and in-depth cover letters about the candidates they are representing. This serves many functions:

- It ensures that the recruiters educate themselves in great depth about their candidates' strengths and weaknesses.
- It invests the recruiters in their candidates.
- It gives the law firms very good information with which to evaluate the candidates.

We then require our recruiters to send out the letters that they write by mail, e-mail, and fax to each law firm that seems to be a good fit for their candidates. The most important thing about all of this is that we ensure that the law firm receives the information. Different firms often have different procedures. Some will only respond to e-mails, as opposed to letters or faxes. At other firms, e-mails may be deleted. Of course, we always make sure to send a letter, because law firms tend to give mailed articles special consideration.

At BCG Attorney Search, these procedures are important in that they define our recruiters and our strategy as a group. Our recruiters provide a high level of service, and it is a company code to always provide this level of service to each candidate.

we are serving. This is how we do business. Nevertheless, one of the persistent problems we have had is that there are recruiters from time to time who will attempt to write very short cover letters (or no cover letters at all), and will simply e-mail résumés with no introduction. This violates our moral code. The company will always discover and eventually come down on recruiters who do this; it is something the company always has to look out for.

When the company discovers someone is not following procedure, a manager usually speaks to the person. At this point, the person will most often attempt to justify why he or she is not following procedures.

- The person may say the procedure is unnecessary.
- The person may say there is a problem with the database, and that he or she actually is doing the procedure properly.
- The person may say the procedure prevents him or her from getting a candidate's résumé to [law firms](#) before other recruiters. Thus, writing the detailed cover letter is disadvantageous.

Or the recruiter may begin to *discredit the messenger*, and start attacking the manager or me behind our backs--or even publicly. This is a very common thing for people to do once they have been caught violating the rules of the group. When someone does something wrong, which is against the interest of the group, there usually follows an effort to minimize the importance of the person who creates and/or enforces the rules of the group. Companies and organizations are continually under this sort of pressure.

When you hear scathing and brutal criticism against a person or a group, generally this criticism has come about for deeper reasons that lie within the critic. The criticism is usually conceived once a person has violated a code--a contract that exists between the person and another person or an organization. The complaints are used as an attempt to justify the person's own behavior.

The Catholic Church is against abortion and also homosexuality. This is part of a moral code that the church perceives as important to the survival of the group: The church wants its members to have more children, who will also be Catholic. These new Catholics will give money to Catholic groups and charities and will further the survival of the group. From the standpoint of self-preservation, it is no surprise that Catholics are against abortion. However, we have seen how this stance against abortion plays out. Those religious leaders who are against abortion are subject to brutal attacks from outside of their group.

All sorts of people--mostly other Catholics--attack the church for its beliefs. Priests are singled out and discredited as being homosexuals and pedophiles. This is made to appear to be the rule rather than the exception. Other efforts are made to discredit the church. While it seems that there are plenty of priests out there who are indeed pedophiles, I would bet that the incidence of this is not much different from that of the general population. Priests are people too, and are therefore likely to suffer from similar predilections. However, in an attempt to lessen the guilt people may have for violating the rules of the group (via homosexuality, abortions, and so forth), they attack the priests and the religious establishment: i.e., *if all Catholic priests are homosexuals who sexually violate young boys, then how bad can getting an abortion be?*

One of the interesting aspects of the story of Jesus' execution is that Jesus had been very critical of merchants and others selling things inside the temple area because he believed this area should be a place of worship, not commerce. One wonders if the extremely critical nature of the rabbis and others toward Jesus was motivated out of their anger at his reaction to them profiting off of trade at the temple. To justify their actions perhaps they felt the need to discredit Jesus, and this discrediting ultimately led to his being crucified.

As unfortunate as it is, I have had to fire numerous people in the past for violating company policy. Many of these rules relate to doing work a certain way and at a certain level of quality. The people who have violated these rules generally try to justify their behavior or to retaliate by criticizing me on blogs, to other employees, and so forth. If we lessen the authority of the person or group whose rules we have violated, this will often make us feel justified for what we have done.

One of the most interesting things that I have seen is when people suddenly leave a job or a relationship. People will often sabotage or leave a group or relationship when they have done something wrong, something that is contrary to the moral code that exists between two individuals, or a group and an individual. The classic *walking out* on a relationship often occurs when one person in the relationship cheats on the other. I have seen this pattern repeat itself in relationships time and time again. A person cheats on his or her significant other and, after doing so, simply breaks off the relationship, citing explanations such as these:

- "You are too messy."
- "You do not love me and never will."
- "You are not considerate enough."
- "We are different people."
- "I like you but I do not love you."
- "We would be better off as just friends."

All of these explanations are never the real reason. The person is being broken up with and generally invalidated because the partner violated the *moral code* of fidelity that had existed between the two people. Instead of walking out, the cheating party may choose to create problems and all sorts of conflicts in order to force the other person to walk out on the relationship. This is how these moral laws often play out in our lives. *If we have violated a group norm, we either (1) break it off with the group, or (2) criticize the group or person so much that they break off the relationship with us.*

One of my favorite things to do is watch true-life police and detective shows such as *Forensic Files* or *Power Privilege and Justice*. What is so interesting about these detective stories is that the people who commit the crimes are always caught and they are usually caught for stupid reasons. Many of the stories are about murders. Whenever I watch these stories, I am amazed that most criminals, even the most intelligent ones, make so many mistakes. It is almost as if every criminal wants, on some level, to be caught. The criminal shoots someone and then fails to get rid of the gun. The criminal kills someone and leaves the body where it is likely to be found. It is as if these criminals set themselves up to be caught, and to call attention to their noncompliance with acceptable social norms.

Whenever you see someone leave a group, job, or relationship without notice, it is likely that the person has done something wrong to the employer, the group, or the other person. It is as if the person is protecting the other individual or group from his or her negative actions. Several times in the past I have had employees whom I had treated very well, suddenly walk off the job for seemingly no reason. Later I would learn that the person was working for a competitor on the side while employed by

us, or had stolen from the company, or worse.

There is a story I once heard about a man who stole a great deal from a king. The man was brought to the castle and he expected to be executed; instead, the man was given a job working for the king. At the end of the year, the man was called before the king and was told that he was doing a good job. He was then promoted. For many years the same process repeated itself. Each year that the man was promoted he felt worse, knowing he had stolen from the king.

As he gained more respect and authority, the man eventually became the king's chief advisor. He could no longer take the guilt, and he told the king: "This is not fair. I have stolen from you, and do not deserve everything you have given me."

The king looked at the man and said: "Yes, you do deserve this. Every day you have suffered as I have treated you better and better. Had I executed you, your suffering would have been momentary. Had I imprisoned you, you would have adapted and learned not to suffer. Therefore this was the harshest punishment I could have given you."

The idea of this story is that when we violate what a group or relationship stands for, we suffer and this suffering makes us want to leave. We are not worthy.

In your career and life you need to follow the rules of your group. If you do not want to follow the rules of the group, then you can choose not be part of the group. Most of the anger that you experience in your life is most likely due to your violating the rules of various groups that you have associated with. Choose groups and jobs with rules that you can follow. You will suffer less and will cause others the least amount of harm when you accept the rules of the group.

THE LESSON

Groups formulate rules because they bond the members, and ensure the group's survival over time. The groups establish agreements as to acceptable and unacceptable behavior; this also holds true for companies and organizations. Most of the anger and frustration in your life stems from violating the rules of the various groups of which you are a part, so you must choose groups with rules that you can follow. When you join a group with whose rules you agree and are compatible, you will suffer less and cause less harm to others.

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