Sometimes, you gotta bend the rules

Rules is rules. That’s what we’re told. In fact, your organization probably has a book full of them telling employees what they can’t wear (T-shirts, especially camouflage ones), what they must do if they aren’t coming in (call—not email!—someone intimidatingly high on the org chart), and to get way off the property (the next county preferably) to puff on a cigarette.

Your book of regulations is likely not all-encompassing, vague in spots and open to interpretation in others. It’s just a guide, for crying out loud.

Which brings us to the fine art of fudging, bending or otherwise looking the other way in some circumstances. Done deftly, rule-bending can build a more engaged workforce.

The trick is to know when and why. All rule-bending carries with it some risk of escalating into outright anarchy, so just be careful.

Here are some guidelines to help a manager decide when it’s time to let it slide.

1. **When you need to motivate in lieu of pay raises.** The troops are restless. Their salaries are stagnant and bonuses are as scarce as a camouflage T-shirt at a staff meeting. Your job is to maintain morale and productivity in those trying financial times. If Jen is 15 minutes late because of traffic (as long as it’s not a pattern), let it go. Don’t glance at the clock when she passes by and don’t suggest an alternative route to work. A strictly enforced rule doesn’t mix well with a raise-starved worker.

2. **When a good worker makes an honest mistake.** Keep the penalty flag in your pocket when your hard workers unwittingly break a workplace law. Here’s where you can depart from treating everyone exactly the same. A dedicated, nose-to-the-mission employee needs an extra perk. Did hardworking Daryl forget to shut off
his smartphone during the staff meeting in violation of your personal devices rule? Let it go. A little bending here is warranted, lest you utterly and irreversibly demoralize a top producer.

3. Maybe you actually have to let some of those stodgy and sometimes outdated rules slide around the holidays, too. Your Grinchiness is magnified when you smack down a staffer with a handbook regulation in otherwise upbeat and festive times. The same goes for a staffer when she’s about to go on vacation.

4. Remember the Golden Rule. Consider the infraction and picture yourself getting hammered for it by someone above you. Hurts, doesn’t it?

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Cal Butera is the editor of Business Management Daily’s Office Manager Today, Manager’s Legal Bulletin, Managing People at Work and Communication Briefings newsletters. He has been with Business Management Daily since 2007 and worked 22 years for midsize daily newspapers as sports writer, news reporter, layout and design editor, copy editor and city editor.