

When it's wise to bend the rules

You know the rules and you try to obey them. But company policies and procedures can sometimes suffocate your team.

While we're not suggesting that you blithely ignore your organization's rules, it's sometimes best to be bold. If you play the enforcer too aggressively, you risk turning workers into angry, rebellious subversives.

Here are three tests that indicate when it's OK to bend the rules:

1. You want to motivate without money. If you can't pay the bonuses or raises you'd like, then small gestures can bring a team closer. Example: A VP at a chemical company tells us that after his employees worked late to meet a deadline, he snuck them into the executive suite to enjoy snacks and soda.

"I made sure the place was clean when we left," he says. "Truth be told, I've joked with the CEO that when I want to throw a party for my staff, I always bring them to his suite when he's not around."

2. You're willing to get caught. Bending a rule to motivate your team is probably fine if you can imagine successfully defending your decision to your bosses. While they may not approve, you should have a clear business reason for your actions.

Say your company has a weekly "casual day" but its dress code forbids jeans and certain jewelry. Assuming your staff does not need to greet customers or visiting dignitaries, you shield them from the fashion police. You figure that giving them more freedom outweighs the risk of violating the dress code.

3. You're managing a crisis. It's easier to justify bending a rule when your team faces unusually stressful circumstances, such as a sudden surge in business, a rash of computer breakdowns or a disruptive office relocation. To unleash your staff's frustrations, let them violate policies you would normally enforce, such as allowing them to take extra-long breaks.

Warning: Don't habitually break personnel policies or you'll invite a lawsuit. Bend the rules on occasion to rally the troops; don't overdo it.