UNWRITTEN RULES:

Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough

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About Catalyst

Founded in 1962, Catalyst is the leading nonprofit membership organization working globally with businesses and the professions to build inclusive workplaces and expand opportunities for women and business. With offices in the United States, Canada, and Europe, and the support of more than 370 member organizations, Catalyst is the premier resource for research, information, and trusted advice about women at work. Catalyst annually honors exemplary organizational initiatives that promote women's advancement with the Catalyst Award.

UNWRITTEN RULES:

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ABOUT
THIS SERIES

This is the second report in our series on "unwritten rules" in the workplace.

Advancing in today's business world is often as much about learning and playing by the rules as it is about talent and results. Some rules are explicitly stated in organizational handbooks, performance review procedures, or by senior leadership. But other rules are left implicit—unwritten—for employees to decipher on their own. Those who do not have the tools or access to this maze of unwritten rules and the important knowledge they provide remain left out, no matter how competent they are.

For the first report in this series, *Unwritten Rules: What You Don't Know Can Hurt Your Career*, we interviewed 65 women and men from a variety of industries, locations, and roles about how they had used unwritten rules to develop and advance their careers. We learned that when it comes to career advancement, "just" doing a good job wasn't enough. We uncovered a set of strategies, or unwritten rules, that individuals deemed critical to their advancement. But the question remained whether those strategies work effectively for all groups of women and men.

Catalyst knows from prior research that some individuals, especially women and people of color, are often excluded from important informal networks in companies.[1] Without access to influential "inner circles" these individuals miss out on opportunities for development and the chance to piece together information about what it really takes to get ahead. The upshot: both individuals and corporations lose out. Women and people of color don't advance as far, as fast. Corporations don't effectively use all the talent that is available to them.[2]

In this second report, we provide findings from an online survey taken by nearly 700[3] respondents working in a variety of industries and workplaces, mostly across Canada, Europe and the United States. The majority held managerial positions and had more than five years of work experience. We asked them:
1. What unwritten rules for getting ahead were important at their current organization?
2. Which of the rules had they personally followed? Which rules did they wish they had known about from the very beginning of their career?
3. How did they learn about these unwritten rules?

The large and varied sample allowed us to delve into how individuals used unwritten rules and how they perceived them as important to advancing their career. We also were able to compare differences in the perception and use of unwritten rules among men and women of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.

The results shed insight on:
- What unwritten rules participants rated as most effective for career advancement, and how their perception might have changed throughout their career.
- What strategies participants used to learn unwritten rules, and how their experience may differ from what they would recommend to others.
- How company leaders can improve communication within their organization to create more-inclusive work environments for all.

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1. Catalyst, *Women and Men in U.S. Corporate Leadership: Same Workplace, Different Realities?* (2004); Catalyst, *Connections that Count: The Informal Networks of Women of Color in the United States* (2006).
2. Jeanette W. Gilsdorf, "Organizational Rules on Communicating: How Employees Are—and Are Not—Learning the Ropes," *Journal of Business Communication*, vol. 35, no. 2 (April 1998): p. 173-201; Lorelle B. Jabs, "Communicative Rules and Organizational Decision Making" *Journal of Business Communication*, vol. 42, no. 3 (July 2005): p. 265-288; Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson, Jeylan T. Mortimer, Jennifer C. Lee, and Michael J. Stern, "Judgments About Work: Dimensionality Revisited," *Work and Occupations*, vol. 34, no. 3 (August 2007): p. 290-317; Laura Sabattini, *Unwritten Rules: What you Don't Know Can Hurt your Career* (Catalyst, 2008).
3. See Appendix 1 for more details about respondents' profile. Out of 686 respondents, there were 339 women and 248 men. Respondents who did not report their gender but completed the questionnaire were still included in many of the analyses.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS REPORT?

LEADERS AND DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (D&I) PROFESSIONALS

To create an inclusive work environment, leaders must understand the unwritten rules for advancement and how those rules are communicated and learned. Many powerful messages about unwritten rules come from an organization's leadership, both implicitly and explicitly. Leaders and managers are often viewed as role models of success. Their actions communicate subtle signals about what they expect, and also about which behaviors are valued and important for advancement within the organization.[4] Findings from this study can also help leaders and D&I professionals better understand their own organizations' cultures of unwritten rules and to seek out ways to increase transparency in communicating requirements for career advancement.

INDIVIDUALS INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT WHAT IT TAKES TO SUCCEED IN THE WORKPLACE

This report can help individual employees understand advancement strategies and recognize opportunities to make informed decisions about their career options in their current organizations. Individual employees can also benefit from this knowledge by sharing this information and helping to create a more-inclusive work environment in their own organizations.

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

- In general, regardless of gender or race/ethnicity, respondents agreed that unwritten rules play a major role in career advancement. Respondents rated activities involving communication and feedback, performance and results, career planning, increasing visibility, and relationship building as particularly important.

- In terms of the strategies they had used in the past, participants were more likely to have focused on time-related strategies (e.g., working long hours) and on performance-related strategies (e.g., exceeding expectations) than on visibility and relationship building. The inconsistencies between what participants rated as important for advancement and what they had used in the past provide a learning opportunity for both individuals and organizations.

- Women were more likely than men and, among women, women of color were more likely than white women, to rate *Seeking Visibility* as more important than men or white women, respectively. Compared to white women, women of color were also more likely to report having used other strategies that emphasize visibility and showcase job commitment, including explicitly *Communicating Their Willingness to Work Long Hours* and *Face Time.*

- When it comes to learning about advancement strategies in the workplace, participants rated observation, seeking out mentors, and soliciting feedback the most used. These approaches also emerged as the most effective ways to learn about unwritten rules for advancement.

- Although a majority of respondents had learned unwritten rules through "trial and error," this approach was not rated as particularly useful.

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4. Anika K. Warren, *Cascading Gender Biases, Compounding Effects: An Assessment Of Talent Management Systems* (Catalyst, 2009).

WHAT ARE UNWRITTEN RULES?

In this series, we use the term "unwritten rules" to describe generally informal, implicitly communicated workplace norms and behaviors that are necessary to succeed within an organization. These norms often include behaviors that are taken for granted as "what people do around here."

In general, when thinking about unwritten rules, it is important to consider the following:

- Unwritten rules are rooted in the organization's history, values, and norms. They are not necessarily distinct from an organization's written and official rules.
- Unwritten rules are not communicated as consistently or explicitly as formalized work competencies are.
- A majority of unwritten rules do—or did at one point—help predict success. As organizations change, however, old unwritten rules may hinder new organizational strategies and objectives. Behaviors that made sense in the past may not work as effectively in today's ever-changing, global workplace.

Unwritten rules may create barriers for some employees whose ability to figure out implicit expectations is compromised in some way. For instance, when rules are communicated through informal networks, individuals without access to these networks may miss out on developmental opportunities. At the same time, organizations might overlook some of their best talent by inadvertently providing opportunities only to those who belong to the most influential networks.[5]

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5. Sabattini.

WHAT UNWRITTEN RULES DO EMPLOYEES SEE AS MOST IMPORTANT...

AND WHICH DID THEY USE IN THE PAST?

In some people's minds it's all about what have I done, what have I done, what have I done. It's not—and when you get into management... how do I get things done through my people?... It took a long time to figure out that [the real question is] how do I advocate my projects appropriately?

—White woman

Perceptions [are] a very complex thing. It depends on what kind of signal you send out and how people will perceive [you]. It's a very complex process to get it right for both....[In] my experience it's very important [that] you demonstrate to the management your passion for the business. Your job, for the organization, for working with this specific group of people. How to interpret that, how to present that through your communications, through your action [varies for different individuals.]

—Asian woman

In our first report, *Unwritten Rules: What You Don't Know Can Hurt Your Career*, we identified eight categories of unwritten rules, each comprising a number of related behaviors[6] that are prevalent in organizations. These were:[7]

- **Building Relationships**—Striving to become a member of a formal or informal professional network and leveraging mentoring relationships.

- **Communication and Feedback**—Discussing unwritten rules with colleagues/peers, supervisors, and/or managers; communicating openly about unwritten rules in the organization, and seeking out performance- and job-related information, both to improve skills and to develop a better understanding of workplace norms and expectations.

- **Career Planning and Training**—Developing a long-term career plan, participating in career-related training, and proactively seeking a variety of assignments to increase both knowledge and skills.

- **Increased Visibility**—Proactively maneuvering to become more visible within the organization. This may involve seeking credit for the work done, being outspoken about career goals and desired assignments, and asking to be considered for promotion.

- **Performance and Results**—Understanding and exceeding performance expectations.

- **Working Long Hours**—Consistently working long hours (i.e., beyond the "regular" 40-hour week).

- **Putting in "Face Time"**—Spending time physically in the office.

- **Expressing the Willingness to Work Long Hours**—Clearly articulating one's availability to work long hours and/or overtime in order to advance.[8]

We asked the nearly 700 respondents in this study how important they thought unwritten rules were to their career advancement and to what extent they had used each of these strategies in the past. While we discovered considerable agreement on what topped their list, the results suggest a gap between strategies considered most effective and those actually used. In addition, women perceived some strategies as more important than men did.[9]

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6. In this report, we consider how unwritten rules translate into and lead individuals to develop *strategies* for career success. Hence, in the course of the report, we use the terms "unwritten rules" and "career strategies" interchangeably.

7. See Appendix 2, Table 1B for specific survey items and construct reliability. The analyses also included four single-survey items that did not statistically fall in any of the constructs and were thus analyzed as separate strategies: *Putting in Face Time* at the office, *Working Long Hours, Expressing Willingness to Work Long Hours,* and *Working With a Career Coach/Counselor.*

8. The questionnaire included two distinct items to rate the number of hours worked and participants' perception that it is important to clearly articulate their availability to work long hours and/or weekends in order to advance and be considered for high-visibility assignments. Respondents rated each item on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 4.

9. Paired-sample t-tests were run to examine differences between respondents' mean importance ratings and the extent to which they had employed each strategy in the past. Differences between importance ratings and usage emerged for all constructs. Respondents were more likely to have rated the following strategies important (than to have used it in the past): *Building Relationships, Effective Communication, Career Planning,* and *Increasing Visibility*. Respondents were more likely to report having actually used the following strategies (compared to their rating of how important these strategies are): *Focus on Performance and Results, Working Extra Hours*, *Clearly Communicate Willingness to Work Long Hours*, and *Face Time*.

TABLE 1
Unwritten Rules Most Important and Most Used for Career Advancement (Women and Men)[10]

Unwritten Rules, Strategies to Advancement	Rated As Important N=587		Used in the Past N=587	
Communication and Feedback	97%		96%	
Performance and Results	97%		99%	
Career Planning	94%		89%	
Seeking Visibility	92%	👤	77%	
Building Relationships	91%	👤	75%	👤
Increasing Face Time (item)	76%		80%	👤
Working Long Hours (item)	53%		83%	
Clearly Communicating Willingness to Work Many Hours	41%	👤	51%	👤

👤 Women scored higher, significant differences for p<.05

The data in Table 1 show that men and women agreed on which strategies they saw as most important for advancing in their jobs: communicating effectively and asking for feedback, delivering high-performance results, and planning their career in advance. They also agreed that building relationships was critical, although women rated this strategy more important than men did.

Some interesting trends emerge regarding the strategies considered less important than the top three. *Seeking Visibility* and *Building Relationships* were perceived as important, yet they were employed less frequently than strategies perceived to be less important. Greater percentages of respondents used *Increasing Face Time, Working Long Hours,* or *Clearly Communicating Willingness to Work Many Hours* than found them to be important for advancement. In general, people appear to be working against themselves. This finding suggests it may be more difficult to communicate and learn

the relevance of the most effective strategies, particularly when compared with strategies that are easier to display (e.g., working long hours). Strategies requiring regular interactions with senior-level individuals and supervisors require access to influential networks and mentors, which could hinder their use by individuals or groups.

Where women's perceptions differed from men's, they placed increased importance on *Seeking Visibility*, *Building Relationships* and *Clearly Communicating Their Willingness to Work Long Hours.* These findings suggest that women place additional emphasis on strategies that not only can help increase their visibility and showcase their competencies, but also demonstrate their job commitment (as suggested by communicating their willingness to put in more hours). Women were also more attuned to the importance of building the right network to showcase their competence and commitment.

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10. The questionnaire read: In your opinion, "How IMPORTANT/helpful are the following behaviors to career advancement and success in your CURRENT organization (regardless of whether you have engaged in these behaviors or not)?" and "To what extent have YOU PERSONALLY ENGAGED IN the following behaviors to gain advancement opportunities? Please answer this question thinking of what you HAVE DONE IN THE PAST, not what you would like to do ideally or in the future."

Unwritten Rules Most Important and Most Used for Career Advancement among Women and Women of Color

Prior research shows that women and women of color often have limited access to the most-influential informal networks and mentors in companies.[11] We spotlighted the experiences of women of color and white women in the sample to see what effect this unequal access had on respondents' perception of career-advancement strategies.

TABLE 2
Unwritten Rules Most Important and Most Used for Career Advancement
(Women of Color and White Women)

Unwritten Rules, Strategies to Advancement	Rated As Important Women Overall N=329	Used in the Past Women Overall N=329
Communication and Feedback	97% 🧍	95%
Performance/Results	97%	99%
Career Planning	93% 🧍	89% 🧍
Seeking Visibility	94% 🧍	79%
Building Relationships	91% 🧍	78% 🧍
Face Time	77% 🧍	81%
Working Long Hours	56%	82%
Clearly Communicating Willingness to Work Long Hours	46% 🧍	53%

🧍 Women of color scored higher, significant differences for $p<.05$

Other than *Working Long Hours* and *Performance and Results*, women of color rated most career strategies as more important than white women did. These findings suggest that women of color had a greater awareness about the relevance of unwritten rules—or a greater need to employ different strategies in order to advance. Women of color were also more likely than white women to have used career planning and networking as advancement strategies in the past.

Notwithstanding differences in the degree of importance assigned to various strategies, gaps between respondents' perceptions and their activities persisted across all groups. While both white women and women of color reported having used time-related strategies (especially face time and working long hours) to a larger extent than relationship- and visibility-building strategies, both groups rated the latter as more important for advancement. Understanding these persistent gaps provides an opportunity for organizations to develop communication strategies and tools (e.g., career-development programs) that clearly outline what is important for career progression.

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11. Catalyst, *Women and Men in U.S. Corporate Leadership: Same Workplace, Different Realities?* (2004); Catalyst, *Connections that Count: The Informal Networks of Women of Color in the United States* (2006).

Regardless of gender or race/ethnicity, respondents agreed that effective communication and increasing visibility are as essential for career progression as producing results. When asked about what they had used in the past, however, participants showed a tendency to focus on time- (e.g., working long hours) and performance-related strategies (e.g., exceeding expectations). Although women were more likely than men to have rated building relationships as especially important and to say they had used this strategy in the past, there was still a gap between their rating of the strategy and their past use of it.[12] These findings suggest that companies have work to do across the board in order to encourage effective career-advancement strategies, and that the need for such programs is even more acute among women and women of color.

In order to improve communication about unwritten rules in an organization, it helps to understand how implicit career advancement strategies are learned in the first place.

I WISH I HAD KNOWN

To better identify which unwritten rules *stood out the most* as important to know for career success, we also asked survey respondents to select *up to three specific strategies* that, in hindsight, they wish they had known about from the very beginning of their careers.[13]

Consistent with other findings in this research, when asked to choose which unwritten rules they wish they had known in retrospect, participants reported that they wish that they
    (1) had sought out one or more mentors;
    (2) spent more time developing professional networks;
    (3) had been more proactive in showcasing and seeking credit for the work done.

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12. Paired-sample t-tests were run to examine differences between women respondents' mean importance ratings and the extent to which they had employed each strategy in the past.
13. The questionnaire item read, "Which of the following strategies do you MOST wish you had known about at the very beginning of your career?" Note that these analyses are based on individual behaviors, not constructs. See Appendix 2, Table 3B for a complete list of the items.

HOW DID RESPONDENTS LEARN ABOUT UNWRITTEN RULES TO ADVANCEMENT?
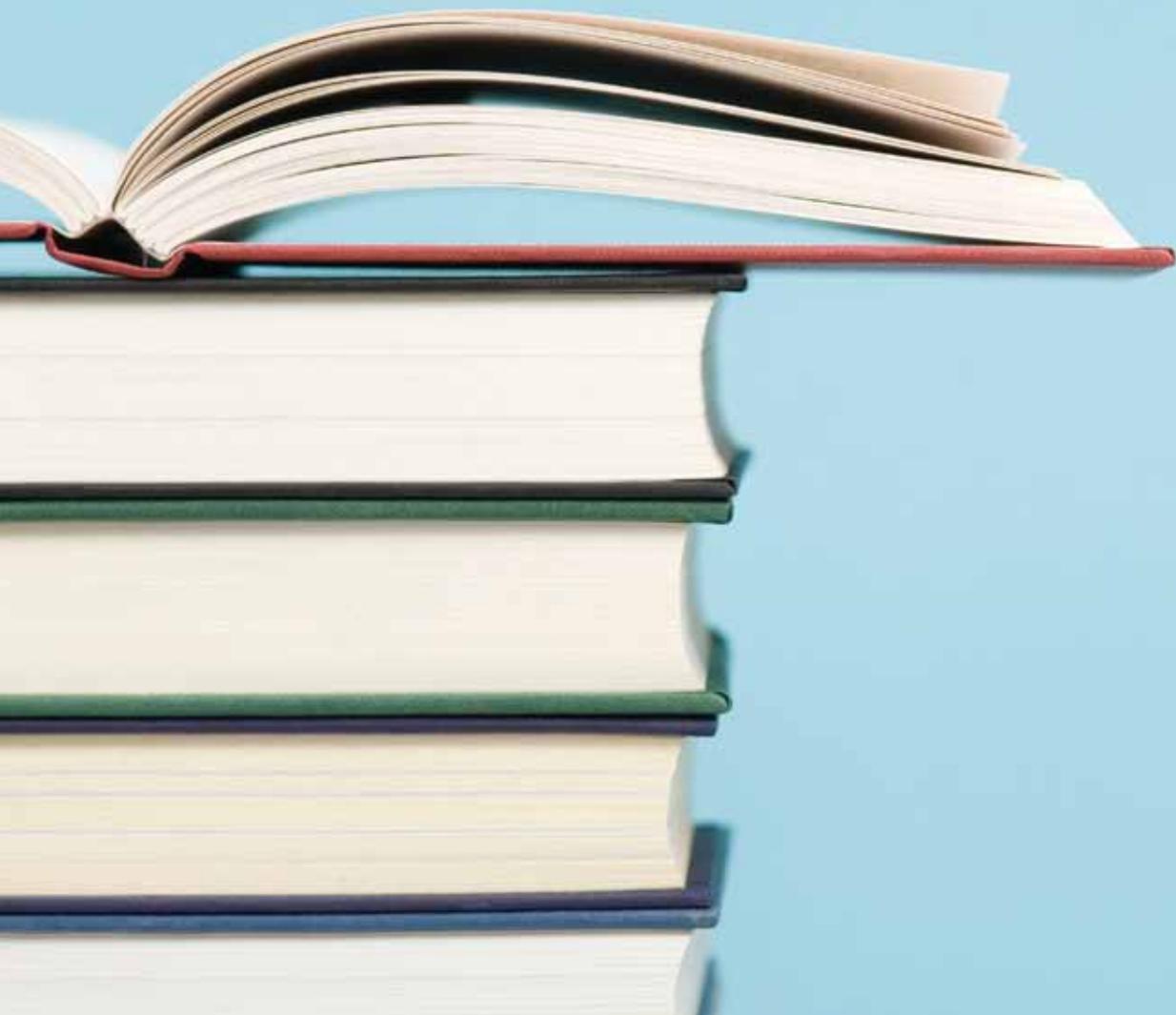
[Unwritten rules] certainly aren't in a book, and people don't readily tell you. I've learned through observation of those who advance—especially, those who look like me—and (by) trying to figure out how they got there...as well as [of] good people who don't look like you, and how they got there. You need to kind of sit on a curb and watch what goes by. Bad lessons are good too, to tell you what not to do.

—African-American woman

Previous Catalyst research suggests that identifying and negotiating promotional opportunities often involves *proactively* seeking information by discussing career progression with colleagues and mentors, as well as taking notice of who is getting ahead and "how things get done" in the organization.[14]

In this study, we asked respondents to evaluate the ways in which they had learned the unwritten rules for advancement in their own career. Based on participants' ratings, we identified six learning approaches:[15]

- **Mentoring and Feedback**—Learning by asking supervisor/s and mentor/s about what it is needed to succeed; learning by seeking out feedback about one's own behavior and performance, and using the feedback to understand what is important and valued in the organization.
- **Formal Coaching and Training**—Learning by tapping into the knowledge and insights gained through professional training and development and/or a professional coach.

- **Observation**—Learning by observing successful employees' behaviors (e.g., who is being promoted?) and taking time to ascertain "how things work" in the organization.
- **Previous Work Experience**—Tapping into the knowledge and insights gained in other organizations and jobs.
- **Communication with Members of Professional Networks**—Communicating with people in professional (formal and informal) networks.
- **Trial and Error**—Figuring out what works and what does not work as one goes along.

Tables 3 and 4 summarize the most frequently used approaches to learning unwritten rules by gender, and among white women and women of color. The tables also display whether respondents marked each approach as especially useful.[16]

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14. Sabattini.
15. See Appendix 2, Table 2B for construct reliability. Based on participants' responses, we created three constructs, each describing a particular way of figuring out unwritten rules for advancement. The analyses also included three single-survey items that did not statistically fall into any of the constructs and were thus analyzed as separate learning approaches: *Learning through Communication with Members of Professional Networks, Learning through Previous Work Experience,* and *Learning through Trial and Error.*
16. The questionnaire asked two questions, *Throughout your career, how did you personally learn about the unwritten rules to advancement?* and *What are the top three strategies you consider the most useful in navigating your company's unwritten rules?* Survey respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they had used each strategy on a 4-point scale, from "*Not at all*" to "*A great extent.*" The learning strategies participants rated were based on the themes that had emerged in the first report of this series (*Unwritten Rules: What You Don't Know Can Hurt Your Career*) as well as on current research literature on organizational learning and socialization.

TABLE 3
Learning About Unwritten Rules: How Did You Learn and What Approaches Did You Find Most Useful? (Women and Men)[17]

Learning About Unwritten Rules	Used as a Learning Strategy (Overall Sample) N=686		Most Useful Learning Approaches to Figure Out Unwritten Rules (Top 3) (Overall Sample)[18]
Learning through Observation	88%	♂	49% (N=334)
Learning through Trial and Error	78%	♀	18% (N=125)
Learning through Mentoring and Feedback	77%		32% (N=221)[19]
Learning through previous work experience	58%		13% (N= 87)
Learning through Communication with Members of Professional Networks	49%	♀	16% (N= 108)
Learning through Formal Coaching and Training	42%		6% (N=39)[20]

♀ Women scored higher, significant differences for p<.05.

Almost 90 percent of overall respondents said they had learned through *Observation*. A large proportion (almost 80 percent) said they had learned about unwritten rules through *Mentoring and Feedback.* Participants cited both of these approaches as ones they would recommend to others.

Fewer than 20 percent of respondents said they would recommend *Trial and Error*, *Communication with Members of Professional Networks*, or *Previous Work Experience* as the best ways to learn about the unwritten rules, and fewer than 10 percent chose *Formal Coaching and Training* as approaches that worked and would be advisable for others. Nonetheless, significant percentages of respondents reported using these strategies. Most strikingly, although 78 percent of respondents learned unwritten rules through *Trial and Error*, only 18 percent found this approach helpful.

17. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test mean differences by gender (responses on a 4-point scale, from "Not at all" to "A great extent"). Women were more likely than men to have learned through *Communication* (M=2.52 vs. M=2.35, p < .05), *Trial and Error* (M=3.21 vs. M=3.01, p < .01), and *Observation* (M=3.17 vs. M=3.02, p < .01).
18. In this question, because respondents were directed to choose their top three strategies (and hence did not mark every item in this question), percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents who picked each item as one of their top three choices. Only strategies that were chosen by at least 15% of respondents are reported in the table. See Appendix 2, Table 3B for a complete list of variables. No gender differences emerged in terms of the top three recommended approaches.
19. Averaged from the following individual items: *Asking Supervisors* (N=219, 32%), *Asking Mentor* (N=201; 29%), *Asking for feedback* (N= 243, 35%).
20. Averaged from the following individual items: *Training* (N=53; 8%) and *Coaching* (N=25; 4%).

TABLE 4

Learning About Unwritten Rules: How Did You Learn and What Approaches Did You Find Most Useful? (Women of Color and White Women)[21]

Learning About Unwritten Rules	Used as a Learning Strategy (Women Only) N=339	Most Useful Learning Approaches to Figure out Unwritten Rules (Top 3) (Women Only)[22]
Learning through Observation	88%	59% (N=201)
Learning through Trial and Error	80%	22% (N=74)
Learning through Mentoring and Feedback	73%	35% (N=117)[23]
Learning through previous work experience	59% 🧍	15% (N= 50)
Learning through Communication with Members of Professional Networks	54% 🧍	18% (N= 62)
Learning through Formal Coaching and Training	35% 🧍	7% (N=23)[24]

🧍 Women of color scored higher, significant differences for p<.05.

Breaking the results down by gender and race/ethnicity reveals additional trends. Women were more likely than men to report learning through communication with members of their professional networks, through trial and error, and by observing others and how things work within the organization. Women of color were more likely than white women to say they had learned through previous work experience, communication with members of professional networks, and through formal coaching and training.

It is important to note that less-recommended learning approaches, particularly trial and error, may vary in effectiveness based on employees having access to other, more-effective methods to learn about unwritten rules. Employees who have more access to information shared through informal networks, for example, may really be "trying out" activities or behaviors observed or discussed within those networks, and hence at an advantage compared to employees who are using trial and error with no reference point. Among employees who typically have less access to informal networks, such as women and people of color, less-focused trial and error may actually delay career progression and limit opportunities for success.[25]

The combination of uneven access to informal networks and the implied nature of unwritten rules may make it difficult for employees with better access to realize that the same opportunities afforded them may not exist across the organization.

21. A one-way ANOVA was used to test mean differences between women and women of color. Women of color were more likely than white women to have learned the unwritten rules through *Communication* (M=2.70 vs. M=2.35 respectively, p < .001), *Previous Work Experience* (M=2.78 vs. M=2.49, p < .01), and through *Training and Coaching* (M=2.11 vs. M=1.92, p < .05).

22. In this question, because respondents were directed to choose their top three strategies (and hence did not mark every item in this question), percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents who picked each item as one of their top three choices. Only strategies that were picked by at least 15% of respondents are reported in the table. See Appendix 2, Table 3B for a complete list of variables. No gender differences emerged in terms of the top three recommended approaches.

23. Averaged from the following individual items: *Asking Supervisors* (N=107, 32%), *Asking Mentor* (N=111; 33%), *Asking for feedback* (N= 134, 40%).

24. Averaged from the following individual items: *Training* (N=31; 9 %) and *Coaching* (N=14; 4%)

25. Catalyst, *Connections that Count: The Informal Networks of Women of Color in the United States* (2006); Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Law Firms* (Catalyst 2009).

WHICH APPROACHES ARE MOST EFFECTIVE TO LEARN THE UNWRITTEN RULES?

In this research, survey respondents regarded relationship-based strategies (i.e., strategies that require employees to proactively reach out to others) as particularly important for career advancement. Compared to time- and results-oriented strategies, the unwritten rules surrounding relationship building and visibility in the workplace are even more subtle and, hence, more difficult for leaders and organizations to communicate consistently.

To learn which approaches are most effective, we examined the relationship between *how* respondents learned the unwritten rules and the top (most important) four relationship-based strategies that emerged in this study: *Communication and Feedback*, *Career Planning*, *Seeking Visibility,* and *Building Relationships*.

Specifically, we focused on the extent to which respondents had used these career strategies and learning approaches in the past (Table 5).

TABLE 5
Most Effective Ways to Learn about Relationship-Based Unwritten Rules

UNWRITTEN RULES TO ADVANCEMENT (USED IN THE PAST)[26]				
Learning Approaches	**Communication and Feedback**	**Career Planning**	**Seek Visibility**	**Build Relationships**
Learned through Observation	*	*	*	*
Learned through Trial and Error	*		*	
Learned through Mentoring and Feedback	*	*	*	*
Learned through Previous Work Experience				
Learned through Communication with Members of Professional Networks	*			*
Learned through Training and Coaching	*	*		*

* indicates significant positive relationships at p<.05

Consistent with previous Catalyst research, leveraging mentors and asking them for feedback (*Learning through Mentoring and Feedback*) and observation emerged as the most effective approaches for learning about relationship-based career strategies. Simply relying on the knowledge gained through previous work experience was the least effective strategy. This is of note considering that women of color were especially likely to have used previous work experience as the basis for learning about the unwritten rules in their current organization. This finding also indicates that the relevance and effectiveness of unwritten rules varies in different work contexts, further illustrating the importance of clear communication of employee expectations.

26. Simultaneous multiple regressions were conducted to examine what learning approaches predicted the extent to which participants had used each relationship-based career strategy in the past. The analyses controlled for gender, race/ethnicity, education, job level, job experience, and years worked in current organization. No significant gender interactions emerged. See Appendix 2, Table 4B.

In terms of each specific strategy for advancement, *Communication and Feedback* was related to the largest variety of learning approaches, namely observing others and how things work in the organization, asking mentors, as well as leveraging social networks as a source of information. Participants also learned about *Communication and Feedback* through formal coaching and training. Thus, there are a variety of effective ways figure out this set of unwritten rules.

Observation, Mentoring and Feedback, and *Training and Coaching* emerged as the three sources of information to learn about *Career Planning*.

Observation and asking *Mentors* were also positively linked to learning about *Increasing Visibility* for career progression, as was *Trial and Error*. These strategies are particularly relevant for women and women of color. As noted above, however, learning predominantly through trial and error can be more or less effective depending on the availability of other information.[27]

Finally, not surprisingly, respondents who had leveraged *Building Relationships* as a strategy for career progression had learned to do so through other relationships, namely mentors, networks, and through professional coaching and training, as well as through observation of what goes on in the workplace.

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27. Catalyst, *Connections that Count: The Informal Networks of Women of Color in the United States* (2006); Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Law Firm*s (Catalyst, 2009).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into career-development strategies that are helpful to both diversity and inclusion (D&I) professionals and leaders, as well as to individual employees seeking to advance in their organization and field of work. Understanding how unwritten rules are learned and communicated facilitates career advancement as well as talent development. This knowledge is helpful to create more-inclusive and transparent workplaces.

While many believe that most strategies for advancement are "common sense," our findings illustrate the degree to which access to unwritten rules plays an important role in career success.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO CAREER SUCCESS

This study shows that, regardless of gender and race/ethnicity, respondents agreed that understanding the unwritten rules and developing strategies to play by those rules were important for career advancement. Communicating effectively and proactively asking for feedback, exceeding performance expectations, career planning, and seeking visibility were rated as especially relevant.

Despite agreement about what it takes to succeed, the findings of this study suggest a subtle disconnect between what individuals rated as important—including what they wished they had known at the beginning of their career—and the strategies they had actually used in their careers to date.

In the end, time- and performance-related strategies were the ones used most often, but relationship- and career-building strategies were seen as being equally, if not more, important en route to career advancement. It is possible that lack of time or experience might have made it difficult to apply some of these strategies, or that workplace communication around the importance of relationship-building and visibility had not been as explicit as the messaging surrounding the need to put in long hours and achieve results in the organization.

Consistent with previous Catalyst work, our findings suggest that communication within professional networks and the use of mentor relationships provide an effective means by which to learn and use career advancement strategies.

SAME UNWRITTEN RULES, DIFFERENT LEARNINGS

While this research confirms that both performance- and relationship-based behaviors are important to advancement, it also suggests that individuals and organizations can benefit from employing a variety of approaches to communicate and learn about rules for career progression.

The ways in which employees figure out the unwritten rules vary based on their access to a variety of sources of information about career advancement. Hence, for employees who typically have less access to these sources—such as women and people of color—clear and transparent expectations, and communication about career opportunities are particularly important.

This study showcases the importance of providing career progression information in a variety of ways and clearly communicating expectations. Both individual employees and employers can benefit from taking a close look at how unwritten rules play out in the workplace and which strategies may be especially beneficial in practice when creating more-inclusive workplaces.

ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

Given what we've learned about the challenges of communicating unwritten rules in the workplace and making them accessible for different groups of employees, it is clear that employers must strive to increase transparency in their communications about career advancement and to ensure consistent access to both formal and informal guidelines for promotion. Specific questions leaders can ask include the following:

- Do unwritten rules exist within our organization? If so, what are they?
- Does everyone in our organization have equal access to these unwritten rules?
- Are these unwritten rules consistent with our organization's values?
- Do some unwritten rules in our organization need to change?

By improving their processes, employers can better ensure that they identify and leverage the talent available across their organizations.

In this chapter, we showcase programs and practices that can help employers ensure increased access to important information for employees across the organization. These organizational practices illustrate how companies and firms can support career development and process execution, improve transparency and communication, and provide mentoring and networking opportunities for employees.

WHAT CAN ORGANIZATIONS DO?

1. SUPPORT CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVE PROCESS EXECUTION

Gaps in knowledge when it comes to talent management and career development processes can lead to ambiguity and unequal advancement opportunities. Indeed, "career planning" emerged as one of the most highly rated strategies for advancement, and strengthening career development can become a crucial tool for helping organizations to promote high-performing and diverse talent. Even when organizations have solid talent management practices in place, a failure to execute consistently can do more harm than good. PepsiCo demonstrates their support of career development and their commitment to steadfast execution through their **PepsiCo People Processes**.

Diversity and Inclusion Practice: PepsiCo, Inc.—*PepsiCo People Processes*

PepsiCo expects that career growth and performance management are true partnerships between employees, managers and PepsiCo. Each stakeholder shares in responsibility for success and is required to do her/his part. Examples of employee involvement in the process include ownership of career development plans and responsibility to clarify aspirations and develop potential successors. Managers are responsible for providing developmental coaching and actionable feedback, supporting and understanding employees' career aspirations, and sharing expectations about career growth. The organization communicates their responsibilities as well, including providing experiences, challenges, and developmental opportunities to grow in line with employees' capabilities and contributions and offering formal training to supplement these experiences and enhance skill sets. The company employs a diversity lens when considering slates for succession planning and pays special attention to the developmental opportunities of women and people of color—HR regularly analyzes outcomes of performance systems to ensure parity.

2. INCREASE TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNICATION TO BUILD A MORE OPEN AND INCLUSIVE CULTURE

Transparent communication about what it takes to advance is essential for talent management practices. Figuring out how to learn the unwritten rules takes time and effort that employees could be devoting to work. Perhaps more troubling, what employees are learning informally may not actually reflect the organization's current values and norms. When communication about career development and advancement opportunities is inconsistent, companies may fail to recognize employees' talent, or they may fail to give all talented employees opportunities for advancement. Corning Incorporated is building a more transparent and inclusive culture by working to uncover and clearly communicate what it takes to be successful through their *Street Smarts* program.

> **Diversity and Inclusion Practice: Corning Incorporated—*Street Smarts***
>
> Corning's *Street Smarts* series is a collection of programs aimed at equipping women employees with the skills and awareness necessary to work most effectively at their level of responsibility. Corning's Women's Quality Improvement Team (WQIT) developed this series to help junior women in research, development, and engineering navigate the ins and outs of the company more effectively. The presentations they created teach many of the skills necessary to become a successful Corning employee. For example, in Unwritten Rules, internal Corning instructors present company Dos and Don'ts on a range of topics, including communication, performance, building a support network, and managing interpersonal relations. The WQIT handles the day-to-day operations of the *Street Smarts* initiative and coordinates with senior women advisors.

Additionally, Catalyst 2009 Award–winner CH2M HILL demonstrates how inclusivity and transparency of communication can support a positive culture in which employees who were traditionally underrepresented rise to leadership positions.

> **Diversity and Inclusion Practice: CH2M HILL—*Constructing Pathways for Women Through Inclusion***
>
> CH2M HILL's U.S.-based initiative, *Constructing Pathways for Women Through Inclusion,* utilizes the company's long-standing inclusive workplace culture to accelerate women's advancement. To gain support, senior women worked with the Board of Directors' Workforce and Diversity Committee, which is responsible for examining workforce policies and diversity. All employees receive *The Little Yellow Book*, a guide to the organization's values, including diversity, openness, and innovation. Expectations for employee behavior are explicit and defined as "work approaches" in the company's performance management system.

3. PROVIDE MENTORING AND NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

Communication and feedback with colleagues, peers, and supervisors plays a considerable role in how people learn unwritten rules so it should come as no surprise that mentoring and networking are essential for gathering information. Smart organizations know that mentoring and networking programs improve communication, facilitate knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer, and foster strong working relationships and inclusive cultures, thereby adding to business success. Strong mentoring and networking programs are exemplified by 3M and ING.

> **Diversity and Inclusion Practice: 3M—*Connecting Leaders and Employees through Executive Diversity Mentoring at 3M***
>
> 3M's Executive Diversity Mentoring program began in 2002. All U.S.-based executives, including Executive Vice Presidents, Vice Presidents, and General Managers, must mentor one women and one person of color. 3M's diversity office provides the criteria for the mentees, and organizes the matching process, based on executive profiles and interviews with the mentees. The diversity office also provides initial training and ongoing support for the pairs. Each of the executive mentors has an initial one-hour orientation, and mentees participate in an initial three and one-half hour training that allows them to share expectations and concerns. In addition, the diversity office works with them through role playing and strategy sessions so they can best utilize their time with the executive leaders.
>
> Mentoring pairs meet for at least one hour per month, for a year. In many cases, mentees will shadow their mentors at key meetings or reviews to better understand high-level operations at 3M.

> **Diversity and Inclusion Practice: ING—*Beyond Diversity: Building One ING Culture***
>
> ING U.S. Financial Services' initiative, *Beyond Diversity: Building One ING Culture*, consists of multiple components that overlap and leverage one another, including an employee value proposition and branding effort; an in-depth investigation into the employee experience; and integrated recruiting, retention and development efforts. Business-aligned employee networks offer a sense of community, camaraderie, and connection to ING USFS. The networks often work together to sponsor Lunch & Learn sessions, diversity fairs, financial literacy seminars, networking events, and professional development sessions that are open to all employees regardless of network membership. The Diversity Symposium network event is held annually so members can exchange ideas, showcase best practices, address challenges and concerns, and identify opportunities for collaboration.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUAL LEADERS AND EMPLOYEES DO?

Though organizations can do much to stem inequities that arise from unequal access to the rules, individuals can also improve their chances to get ahead and help create more-inclusive work cultures. By viewing advancement as a partnership and taking responsibility for actions such as seeking out and participating in programs—including training workshops, mentoring, and networking—employees can increase their access to and understanding of unwritten rules. Additionally, individual employees can support the creation of a more-inclusive work environment by proactively creating opportunities to share information about career advancement with others.

Making unwritten rules more transparent can appear to be a daunting task, but there are several ways that organizations—and individuals—can mitigate the differential access to them or eliminate the "silent rulebook" all together. Most often, these strategies for informing employees and leveling the playing field have multiple positive effects such as capitalizing on the full range of talent, creating more transparency, developing and strengthening a positive organizational culture and, ultimately, employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

APPENDIX 1

SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

SURVEY PROCEDURE

The data for this research were collected through a confidential online questionnaire covering the following themes and questions:

- Questions about current work situation (e.g., years of experience, hours worked per week).
- Behaviors and strategies that are helpful to advance in the workplace, where respondents were asked to rate the importance of each behavior, the extent to which they had used it in the past, and which behaviors they wish they had known from the very beginning of their career.
- Individual skills and characteristics that can help employees advance in their organization or field of work.
- Strategies participants use to learn about unwritten rules to advancement, both throughout their career and in their current organization.
- Questions about current organization and job position.
- Questions about demographic background.

RESPONDENT PROFILES

Survey participants were recruited from a variety of settings, including Catalyst member organizations and other professional networks. Snowball sampling (i.e., referrals from initial respondents and participating companies) was employed to recruit additional respondents.

We only included data from respondents who completed at least 50 percent of the questions, which correspond to 686 respondents. Of those who provided gender information (N=587), 58 percent were women (N=339) and 42 percent were men (N=248). Among those who reported their race/ethnicity (N=569), half identified as white (N=285), almost one-fifth identified as Black/African-American (N=109) or Asian-American (N=98), while 4 percent (N=25) identified as Latina/o (see Table 1A). Respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 63, with an average age of 41 years.

TABLE 1A
Respondents' Demographic Profile

Gender	N=587	Race/Ethnicity	N=569	Education Level	N=575
	Count (%)		Count (%)		Count (%)
Women	339 (58%)	White	285 (50%)	Doctoral/Professional Degree	82 (14%)
Men	248 (42%)	Black/African-American	109 (19%)	Masters	236 (41%)
		Asian American	98 (17%)	Some Graduate Work	34 (6%)
		Latino/Latina	25 (4%)	College Degree	171 (30%)
		Pacific/Hawaiian	7 (1%)	Associate Degree	8 (1%)
		Multi-racial	15 (3%)	Some College Work	35 (6%)
		Other	30 (5%)	High School Degree	9 (2%)

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Respondents worked on average 48 hours per week. A majority reported more than 10 years of work experience (74 percent; N=503), and held managerial positions or above within their organization (77 percent; N=461). About one-third of participants (37 percent; N=221) had been with their current employer for less than five years or more than 10 years. See Table 2A for details.

TABLE 2A
Respondents' Years of Experience and Job Level

Years of Work Experience N=684		Years With Current Employer N=594		Current Job Level and Characteristics N=597	
	Count (%)		Count (%)		Count (%)
<5	67 (10%)	<6 mos-1	41 (7%)	CEO, Managing Partner	15 (3%)
5-10	114 (17%)	1-3	105 (18%)	Senior Executive	51 (9%)
11-20	250 (37%)	3-5	75 (13%)	Senior Director, Partner	114 (19%)
20+	253 (37%)	5-7	64 (11%)	Middle Manager	158 (26%)
		7-10	98 (16%)	First-Level Manager	123 (21%)
		10+	211 (36%)	Entry-Level or Non-Manager	136 (23%)

FUNCTIONAL AREA AND STAFF/LINE ROLES

Of those who provided information about their functional area (N=581),[1] most worked in Accounting/Finance (17 percent; N=97), Human Resources (14 percent; N=79), Research and Development (12 percent; N=69), Management (12 percent; N=68), Sales and Marketing (11 percent; N=64), and Operations/Production (11 percent; N=62). Other functions included Administration, Customer Service, Information Services, Legal, and Public Affairs/Public Relations.

Out of 597 respondents who answered, 43 percent (N=255) indicated they are currently working in line roles, 40 percent (N=237) in staff roles and 18 percent (N=105) in roles that had both responsibilities.

LOCATION AND REGION

Geographically (N=567), 44 percent (N=250) work in the US, 35 percent work in Europe (of that, 20 percent reported working in the continental EU, N=115, while 15 percent reported the UK, N=86), and 10 percent (N=58) reported that they work in Canada. Less than one percent (N=4) work in Australia while 10 percent (N=54) identified their region as other.

RESPONDENTS' ORGANIZATIONS PROFILE

Respondents were employed in a variety of industries, including manufacturing, professional and financial services, insurance, and information technology. Other industries included construction, educational services, healthcare, oil and gas, retail, and transportation.

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1. Due to the large range of responses, we sorted the data about functional area into a number of categories. The Sales and Marketing category consists of 33 respondents who reported they work in Marketing, 22 who reported they work in Sales, and nine who reported they work in Sales and Marketing.

Table 3A summarizes respondents' organizational profile in terms of Company Size and Market Scope.

Respondents' Organization

Company Size N=589		Market Scope N=590	
Number of Employees	**Count (%)**	**Scope**	**Count (%)**
0-99	42 (7%)	Local	10 (2%)
100-999	68 (12%)	Regional	32 (5%)
1,000-9,999	117 (20%)	National	86 (15%)
10,000-99,999	246 (42%)	Global	354 (60%)
100,000-999,999	107 (18%)	Global, US Headquarters	108 (18%)
More than 1,000,000	9 (2%)		

APPENDIX 2

Unwritten Rules Scale Reliabilities (by Category)[2]

Building Relationships (alpha 1=.65; alpha 2=.68)	Communication and Feedback (alpha 1=.74; alpha 2=.72)	Career Planning and Training (alpha 1=.71; alpha 2=.69)
Become a member of a **formal** professional networking program	Discuss organization's unwritten rules with your peers and colleagues	Develop a long-term plan for your career
Develop **informal** networks *within* your organization	Discuss organization's unwritten rules with supervisors/managers	Plan your career path from an early stage
Build mentoring relationships with higher-level managers	Invite feedback about your job performance (even outside formal processes)	Take on a variety of work assignments aimed at increasing your knowledge/skills
Develop **informal** networks *outside* the organization	Use feedback to improve job performance	Learn new job competencies through training
	Make an effort to communicate more effectively with your colleagues and co-workers	

Increased Visibility (alpha 1=.74; alpha 2=.75)	Performance and Results (alpha 1=.76; alpha 2=.74)	Individual Items
Make sure you get credit for work performed	Perform well, produce results	Put in "face time" at work (i.e., number of hours spent at the office)
Make your accomplishments known to others in the organization who are more senior	Work to exceed performance expectations	Working long hours
Be outspoken about your career goals and about desired assignments		Expressing the willingness to work long hours
Ask to be considered for promotion		Work with an executive coach/ career counselor

2. Alpha 1 refers to participants' ratings of the importance of each construct; alpha 2 refers to the extent to which participants had used these strategies in the past.

Approaches to Learning about Unwritten Rules Scale Reliabilities (by Category)

Learning through Mentoring and Feedback (alpha .63)	Learning through Formal Coaching and Training (alpha .69)	Learning through Observation (alpha .61)	Categories Based on Individual Items (questionnaire items in parenthesis)
Asking your immediate supervisor about what you need to do to succeed.	Tapping into the knowledge and insights gained through professional coaching services.	Observing successful employees' behaviors (e.g., who is being promoted?).	Learning through Previous Work Experience. (Tapping into the knowledge and insights you've gained in other organizations and jobs)
Asking your mentor(s) about what you need to do to succeed.	Tapping into the knowledge and insights gained through professional training and development.	Taking time to observe how things "really work" in the organization (e.g., what is the level of formality of employees' interactions? What time do people get to work?).	Learning through Communication with Members of Professional Networks. (Communicating with people in your professional networks)
Seeking out feedback about your job performance on a regular basis, and from a variety of sources, to make sure you are on the right track.			Learning through Trial and Error. (Figuring out what works and does not work as you go along, through trial and error).

TABLE 3B
In Hindsight, I Wish I Had Known... (Top 3 Choices)[3]

In Hindsight, I wish I had…	Count (%)
Sought out mentoring relationships with higher-level managers	185 (25%)
Participated in informal network(s) *within* my organization	158 (21%)
Made sure I got credit for work I do	135 (18%)
Participated in coaching	131 (17%)
Made a long-term career plan	122 (16%)
Discussed unwritten rules with supervisor	118 (16%)
Made my accomplishments known to others more senior	115 (15%)
Planned a career path early	97 (13%)
Been more outspoken about my career goals	96 (13%)
Participated in informal network(s) *outside* my organization	83 (11%)
Gained more experience in different roles	79 (11%)
Participated in formal network(s)	73 (10%)
Sought out feedback about my performance	92 (12%)
Asked about unwritten rules directly	63 (8%)

3. In this table, because respondents were directed to choose their top three strategies (and hence did not mark every item in this question), percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents who picked each item as one of their top three choices.

Regression Analyses

Table 4B summarizes the results of a regression analysis assessing the impact of respondents' learning approaches on the likelihood that they used four relationship-based strategies for advancement in the past. The analyses controlled for demographic and job-related variables including gender, race/ethnicity, work experience, education, and years in current organization.

In the table, a negative sign indicates increased use of learning approach, decreased use of career strategy; a positive sign indicates increased use of learning approach, increased use of career strategy.

Most Effective Ways to Learn About Relationship-Based Unwritten Rules*

UNWRITTEN RULES TO ADVANCEMENT (used in the past)				
Learning Approaches	Communication and Feedback	Career Planning	Seek Visibility	Build Relationships
Learned through Observation	+	+	+	+
Learned through Trial and Error	+		+	
Learned through Mentoring and Feedback	+	+	+	+
Learned through Previous Work Experience				
Learned through Communication with Members of Professional Networks	+			+
Learned through Training and Coaching	+	+		+
CONTROL VARIABLES				
Gender: Women				
Race/Ethnicity: White		−		
Education				
Job Level	+			+
Years of Experience				
Years in Current Organization				

* The table only highlights the variables that are statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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