

Your wicked customers are trying to break your rules!

 By [Douglas Kruger](#)

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What if you helped them?

Ever heard of a 'false metric'? It's the very human act of viewing a relatively unimportant part of a system as though it were a critical indicator of success. For instance, a manager might track the productivity of his staff by ensuring that they all 'clock in on time.' But arriving early is no guarantee of productivity, and measuring it is not the same thing as ensuring the result you're after. *Et voila:* False metric.



Breaking rules takes you from underdog to industry-threat

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When you run a business – or head up a department – there are opportunities galore for falling into the trap of measuring false metrics. Here's one: The innate desire of a manager to ensure that his customers 'behave properly.'

'My four-year-old rolls his eyes at you'

My stepsister, Chantelle, tells a story about her son, Joshua, who started attending nursery school for the first time. Joshua was told he had to follow 10 steps in a cutting-out exercise, but Joshua spotted a way to do it quicker. The teacher told him he had to follow all 10 steps, otherwise he was 'not doing it properly'.

His mom fondly recalls the teacher's irritation when she reported that the recalcitrant little four-year-old actually rolled his eyes at her. Apparently he argued, quite passionately, that the extra steps were stupid.

Joshua got into trouble for doing the wrong thing. But one might argue, as Joshua did, that there are two ways of looking at that...

Are you listening to your Joshuas?

Inarguably, life is smoother and easier when customers behave. When they obey our internal rules and processes, managerial headaches dissolve into a warm cream of comforting efficiency. The trouble, though, is twofold:

1. They are under absolutely no moral obligation to do so. It's *we* who want *their* patronage, and not they who are obliged to please or obey us; and
2. Sometimes our own internal rules are simply wrong. Or at least, inefficient. When the customer tries to short-circuit them, he or she is trying to teach you to run your business, and to serve them, just a little better.

What if...?

When customers bypass your process, short-circuit your systems or break your rules, they are often seeking expedience and convenience. What if you innovated around your own processes and gave it to them?

While some rules may be sacrosanct (legal compliance by way of an example), many are not. They are merely our own procedures, and we love them inordinately. The good news is that they are our rules, and we can break them. Our customers are showing us where our internal barriers lie and how we are making it difficult for them to give us their money, provided we are willing to listen.

To minimise ridiculous rules, try these three exercises:

1. Ask which rules are stupid

Ask your staff which rules customers think are stupid. They're in the front line and they will generally be delighted to tell you how life could be made easier for everyone. Certainly, you can't always give them every concession that they, or the customers, may want. But in many cases, you could if you tried. Allow this feedback to guide you into all new industry innovations, which may ultimately becoming unique selling points.

2. Burn down the building

Gather your leadership team and set the following rule for your strat. session: 'The traditional way of doing it has been outlawed. How else might we serve the same need?'



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Or alternatively: 'We are now our competitors. We have half the budget, but our hearts and souls are invested in one purpose: to topple the original company! We can't do it the way they do it. So how could we go about it?' Or even: 'The company has burnt to the ground. We've lost everything. We need to keep serving our customers but we need a new, cheap, fast way to do it right now that doesn't rely on any equipment or rules or systems that we used previously. What have you got?'

3. Take the Enterprise test

Studies increasingly show that disruptive innovation tends to come from outside of an industry. That's because those within it can't see issues in simple ways. They see through the lens of their own mountains of rules and norms. Enter: The Starship Enterprise Test.

Consider: If you want a meal of steak and vegetables, you have to drive to a restaurant, find parking, wait for a table, order the meal, then wait for it. On the Enterprise, however, you would say: 'Computer. Food. Prime rib-eye steak and vegetables.' Poof! Your food appears. One single step to accomplish the goal.

This thought exercise – asking how it would work on the Starship Enterprise - can lead to the founding moments of entirely new product categories. It is a recipe for radical innovation and total disruption. It helps you not to think like a rule-bound industry-insider, and helps you to 'see around' the complex ways your organisations solves problems today, because there is always a simpler, quicker way.

The merit of these approaches lies in their capacity to extricate your thinking from 'the way it has always been done.' They invite you to find creative ways to deliver 'the ultimate version of the end result'.

Rules help. Except when they don't. The good news is, they're your rules. When their abolition leads to better business, you can and should break them.

ABOUT DOUGLAS KRUGER

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