3

Rules are rules

I applied to Securecops on the off-chance. I attended an interview in their fortress-like headquarters on the Thames Embankment. It lasted all of five minutes. I would get my first job the following week. What I had to remember, at all times, was SECURITY, they said. I would be given a secret password, which would be changed each night. All communications with HQ, and with any caller to the place I was guarding, had to use the password.

I left HQ with my free kit under my arm: an ill-fitting blue uniform, a cap with a peak, a whistle, a torch and a truncheon.

A week later I turned up to my first job. It was a US Navy stores depot in an isolated spot in North London. As far as I could tell it contained things like Coca-Cola, soap and paper towels. I could not figure out why the US Navy should have such a place in London. I felt self-conscious – a bit of a nerd in my new uniform. A Securecops supervisor met me to show me around. The rules the supervisor told me were these:

- Keep everything locked.
- Patrol the building and the perimeter wire once an hour.
- Ring in and report to HQ after each patrol. They'll chase you if you don't call.
- Get the password from HQ at the start of each shift, and use it in all calls.
- *Don't* smoke on patrol.
- *Don't* let anyone in unless they give the password.
- *Don't* fall asleep on the job, or you will be sacked.

The supervisor left. The guard I was replacing packed up his stuff. As he was leaving he winked at me and said: 'Listen. Skip a patrol or two and get all the sleep you can.' I was puzzled.

I got through the first night, exhausted. It was really scary going around the dark buildings. The very thought of *using* my truncheon on a human being filled me with horror. I decided the best thing to do was to run it against the wire fence and along doors as I patrolled. It made a hell of a racket but that should deter an intruder – I hoped.

Night two. I realised that I could easily skip a few patrols – as long as I rang HQ on time. Also, I found myself plotting other ways of bucking the system. Surely,

you could do a deal with another guard, elsewhere, to ring HQ on your behalf? You'd then get more sleep some nights, and he could sleep while you were doing it for him. I later learned that such a dodge was well known, but no one had prevented it.

I found myself falling asleep between patrols, so I kept an alarm clock to wake me on time to report to HQ. In the middle of such a slumber, at about four in the morning, I was jolted awake by the loud, persistent hooting of a car horn. I scrambled for my uniform jacket, and grabbed my truncheon. I dashed outside, my heart racing.

I was facing the headlights of a van, shining through the wire mesh of the locked main gate. In front of the lights was the silhouette of a tall man. 'Christ, where the hell have you been? Let me in!'

I got a bit closer and saw the guy was wearing a Securecops uniform. I plucked up courage and shone my torch in his face. I recognized the supervisor. What a relief! I fumbled for my keys – and then hesitated. Hell, this could be a trick, I thought. To test me out. I'd better watch it. 'Oh hi', I said. 'Could you tell me the password please?'

The man looked confused. Then he shouted at me: 'Like hell I can! Open these bloody doors and let me in. Just stop fooling around!'

I fingered the keys nervously. What on earth should I do? I was sure he was OK, but I was breaking a cardinal rule if I let him in. And he still might be tricking me. I tried very hard to sound authoritative: 'I can't let you in unless you tell me the password. *Rules are rules.*'

'I don't know the bloody password for tonight', he retorted, getting more and more wound up.

Fearing for my physical safety, I eventually phoned HQ, who were not in the slightest bit interested in the man's identification. I should let him in. He marched past me, saying not a word. He left the same way – after a very cursory check.

RULES IN ORGANIZATIONS

Mike did not last long in this job. But the incident raises important issues. Entering the organization is entering a world of formal **rules** and procedures. They govern every aspect of work, and seem to leave little room for discussion. 'No smoking' means precisely 'No smoking', no matter who you are, how badly you wish to smoke or what it is that you would choose to smoke. Yet, after a few days at Securecops, Mike **learned** that rules were sometimes disregarded, broken or bent, occasionally with the consent of **management.**

Train drivers found out long ago that if every rule and every procedure of starting their locomotives were followed, the trains would never leave the stations or reach their destinations on time. 'Work to rule', sticking to every small rule and regulation in the book, was recognized as a very effective way of paralysing organizational performance. Sometimes it takes a major accident

before it is realized that official procedures have been flouted for so long.

Organizational rules can be usefully distinguished from social **norms**. Norms are the 'unwritten rules'. Employees of many companies, for example, go to work wearing casual clothes on Fridays, even though this is not enshrined in any formal rule. Nor is it a rule of the road that truck drivers should flash their headlights to indicate to an overtaking truck that it is safe to pull back, or for the overtaking truck to flash their indicator as a sign of appreciation. Social norms guide many of our **actions**, both inside and outside organizations. Some of the other chapters highlight their importance and implications. This chapter focuses instead on the formal, written rules and regulations which seem to set modern organizations apart from other types of human **group**, like families or truck drivers on highways.

Rules and Factory Despotism

Formal rules and regulations are not a new phenomenon. Medieval monasteries had rules banning different types of behaviour and specified detailed penalties for different offences. For instance, a monk guilty of sexual intercourse with an unmarried person was required to fast for one year on bread and water; a nun guilty of the same offence between three and seven years (depending on the circumstances), a bishop for twelve years (see Morgan, 1986: 208). However, the proliferation of rules at the workplace coincides with the rise of the factory system and especially of large **bureaucratic organizations**. Consider the following extracts from the rules of a 19th-century mill in Lancashire.

RULES
TO BE OBSERVED AND KEPT BY THE PEOPLE
EMPLOYED IN THIS FACTORY

1   Each person employed in this factory engages to serve THOMAS AINSWORTH AND SONS, and to give one month's notice, in writing, previous to leaving his or her employment, such notice to be given in on a Saturday, and on no other day. But the Masters have full power to discharge any person employed therein without any previous notice whatsoever.

2   The hours of attendance are from Six o'clock in the morning until half-past Seven at Night, excepting Saturday when work shall cease at half-past Four….

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5   Each spinner shall keep his or her wheels and wheelhouse clean swept and fluked, or in default thereof, shall forfeit One Shilling....

10 Any person smoking tobacco, or having a pipe for that purpose, in any part of the Factory, shall forfeit Five Shillings.

12 Any person introducing a Stranger into the Factory without leave of one of the Proprietors, shall forfeit Two Shillings and Sixpence....

17 Any Workman coming into the Factory, or any other part of these Premises, drunk, shall pay Five Shillings.

18 Any Person employed in this Factory, engages not to be a member of, or directly or indirectly a subscriber to, or a supporter of, any Trades Union, or other Association whatsoever.

19 Any Person destroying or damaging this Paper, shall pay Five Shillings.

Such rules may shock us as unfair and one-sided. Imposed unilaterally by the employer, they make no secret of whose interest they seek to protect. Their aim was **control**. Like political dictators, Messrs Ainsworth and Sons and other early capitalists sought to bolster their **power**. They made little pretence that the rules served anyone's welfare other than their own.

Rules and Modern Organizations

There are still organizations in some countries with rules not unlike those above. Most Western organizations today, however, shy away from such brutal rules, especially when they emphasize the potential for **conflict** between employers and employees. Nevertheless, when we join an organization, we usually undertake, through a written contract, to obey its rules and procedures. These are *impersonal*, they apply to all, and are laid down in company manuals and ordinances, dictating, sometimes in minuscule detail, what we can and what we cannot do, our rights and our obligations. Not all organizational rules are written down; each organization has many tacit rules, rules which are part of a psychological contract between itself and its members. Such tacit rules may include working after hours or refraining from talking to reporters about matters that may embarrass the organization. In exchange, organizations are perceived by individuals to offer reciprocal favours and rewards to their members, such as promotion and training opportunities.

What has changed since the days of Messrs Ainsworth and Sons is not the nature of the rules but our perception of their rationale. Instead of 'Do A, B and C because I say so', rules in modern organizations proclaim 'Do A, B and C because it is sensible to do so'. Unlike the exploitative rules of the illustration, the rules of modern organizations appear **rational**. In this sense, they resemble the rules of the road. Most of us will stop at a red traffic light, not because we are afraid of the policeman or because of our sense of moral duty, but because we recognize that stopping at red lights is a rational means of regulating traffic. At times a red light will cause us great frustration, especially if we are in a great hurry, it is late at night and there is no other traffic on the road. Nevertheless, this does not make us argue that stopping at red lights is silly, senseless or unfair.

In a similar way, we recognize most of the organizational rules we obey as rational. To appreciate the exact sense of 'rational' consider a rational rule next to a patently irrational one. Most colleges and universities have formal rules requesting students to write essays when asked by lecturers. They have no rules requiring students to wash their lecturers' motorcars, much as some lecturers might appreciate it. Is this accidental? Hardly. What formal *educational* or *organizational* purpose could possibly be served by rules authorizing superiors to order their subordinates to carry out personal favours? Such rules would not merely be immoral, but also irrational. Of course, the fact that there is no car-washing rule does not imply that no personal favours are ever requested. Favours, bribes, backhanders can all be part and parcel of doing business, embedded in the norms of some organizations. But they are not in any of the rulebooks (see Chapter 4, 'Dealing and Double-Dealing' and Chapter 5, 'Morals').

Organizational rules are rational inasmuch as they are seen to be means of enhancing the achievement of organizational ends. This type of rationality is often referred to as instrumental or means–end rationality. Information regarding alternatives and technical **knowledge** are indispensable ingredients of this type of rationality. Ideally, rational rules would be the result of a methodical comparison and analysis of alternatives and the choice of those alternatives which are best suited to the organization's **goals**. In practice, this is not always the case. While most members of an organization may agree that the organization has goals, there is often disagreement about the nature of these goals or the order of priority in which they are placed. For instance, a doctor, a hospital porter, a secretary, a personnel manager, a nurse and a patient may have very different

notions of what a hospital's goals are. Is the hospital's goal to cure patients, to relieve pain, to improve the health standards of people, to carry out large numbers of operations, to offer a very high quality of medical care, to carry out world-class research, to make patients feel happy, or to make profit?

Formal technical rules, therefore, underpin the single-minded pursuit of efficiency that characterizes many organizations. The frying and serving of potatoes becomes the object of extensive 'scientific' study for a fast food organization. This determines specific types of potatoes, fats and fryers, the design of a new wide-mouthed scoop and other hardware and the drafting of 26 different rules on 'how to fry chips'. All this is aimed to ensure that even a person who has never cooked at home can produce, after a minimum of training, a standardized 'market-winning product', without accidents or waste.

BUREAUCRACY

Formal rules affect not only employees of an organization. Next time that you visit a park, have a look at the 'by-laws' stating what you are and what you are not allowed to do. Or consider the regulations governing behaviour in a swimming pool:

No eating	No drinking	No running	No smoking
No bombing	No kissing	No shouting	No spitting
No swearing	No singing	No ducking	No jewellery
No verrucas	No pushing	No diving	No petting

During a conference in Copenhagen, someone brought to the attention of the delegates a set of regulations issued by the Fire Brigade:

In the event of a fire:

1 Stay calm.
2 Locate the fire.
3 Call the Fire Brigade.
4 Close windows and doors.
5 When the Fire Brigade arrives, introduce yourself.
6 If possible, put out the fire.

We all had a good laugh at these regulations. Fortunately no fire disrupted the proceedings. Had there been one, however, it is unlikely that anyone would have remembered the regulations or acted according to them, as people would hurry to the nearest fire escapes.

Seen through the eyes of delegates, rules like those above are the products of bureaucrats, who have little sense of the chaos and confusion that a fire would cause (see Chapter 1, 'Introduction: Organization and Organizing'). They treat an event like a fire as something which can be controlled, or at least contained, through neat and orderly procedures. Their concern for organizing, order and plan blinds them to the forces of disorder that a fire would unleash. Seen through the eyes of those who devised them, both the fire regulations and the swimming pool regulations are not daft at all. They are quite rational, seeking to minimize damage, injuries, insurance liabilities and to contain the disorder. They also help satisfy certain political requirements – such as reassuring Head Office and the safety committee that 'there is a policy in place'.

Managers and administrators spend a lot of time fine-tuning rules and procedures; they are always on the lookout for new rules which will do what old rules did, only better. They believe that this is very important. What they sometimes fail to do is to question the objectives served by these rules and procedures. Are the objectives themselves appropriate? Have they become outdated? Are all the different objectives in harmony? Are there any other objectives which should be served? Whose interests do these objectives serve? Is it realistic to expect people to follow rules like those above?

Organizations vary in their emphasis on rules. Some offer a considerable margin of freedom to their members, allowing them to use their judgement and discretion in making **decisions**. Here is 'the rulebook' of Nordstrom, a North American retailing company.

WELCOME TO
NORDSTROM

We are glad to have you with our company.

Our number one goal is to provide *outstanding customer service*.

Set both personal and professional goals high. We have great confidence in your ability to achieve them.

Nordstrom Rules:

Rule 1: *Use your good judgement in all situations*.

There will be no additional rules.

Please feel free to ask your department manager any question at any time.

Other organizations, like Securecops in our opening example, appear to be strict and regimented, but insiders soon realize that their bark is worse than their bite. Most of their rules are routinely side-stepped. Yet other organizations seek to control everything through precise prescriptions and procedures. Employees are expected to 'do everything by the book', without asking questions. In such organizations, the rules become ends in themselves, rather than means of achieving organizational objectives. In a French hospital, a rule stipulated that receptionists in the Accident and Emergency Unit were to admit only patients arriving by ambulance. The aim of the rule was to ensure that only genuine emergencies were given priority. Once, a seriously ill patient brought to the Unit by taxi was refused admission and sent to the Outpatients' Department; he died while waiting to be admitted.

Organizations in which rules are inflexibly applied, with no regard for the particulars of each individual case, are frequently referred to as bureaucracies. Such organizations remind us of machines. Order, predictability, reliability are the qualities towards which they strive. Judgement, improvisation and fun are dismissed as the enemies of order. Standardization, **hierarchy** and **structure** are of the essence. By contrast, the term 'adhocracy' is sometimes applied to organizations which treat each case on its individual merits, and have few general rules and procedures to guide behaviour. Such organizations must rely on training, trust and strong shared **values** to ensure co-ordination and control. Adhocracies are never particularly orderly or predictable. But they appeal to individuals with artistic or anarchic temperaments.

How Rational are Bureaucratic Rules?

What is important is that you should *understand* why your work has to be done in a certain way and that you do it properly, to the best of your ability. *Not because you have to, but because you want to. In the end this is the BEST WAY.* (Handbook of fast food company)

But is 'the book's way' always the best way? Most of the time, we assume that if a rule is there, it is there for a reason. The rules governing behaviour in the swimming pool may displease us, but most of us would not really question whether they are rational or not. We take on trust that 'experts', who have studied the situation, have developed these rules for everybody's benefit. We assume, for

example, 'no running' is there to stop people from slipping and injuring themselves, 'no bombing' to stop people intimidating or injuring others, etc. We take the rationality of many organizational rules and procedures for granted and do not question their legitimacy. We rarely complain about them and tend to disregard the inconvenience in which they result. Some of these rules eventually are observed mechanically, they become part of ourselves. Life without them becomes inconceivable.

Yet, no rule can anticipate all contingencies. If *every* situation involved an appropriate set of rules, the odds are that paralysis would follow; there would be so many rules that few employees would be able to remember them all or be able to apply them appropriately. The risk of rule overload is one that administrators often overlook. Adding ever-increasing numbers of rules can be as counter-productive as failing to have a suitable rule when an unusual situation arises. The ambulance rule at the hospital was rational *until* the arrival of the fated patient; until then it had served what most would regard as a useful purpose. However, one would have to suffer from bureaucratic blindness to argue that when it led to loss of life, it was still rational. Whether a rule is rational or not depends largely on circumstances. No rule can be rational at all times. There comes a time, usually under exceptional or unforeseen circumstances, when it is rational *not* to apply a particular rule. Some organizations recognize the constitutional inability of rules to be rational at all times. They also trust their employees. They allow them to use their discretion.

This, however, may lead to different kinds of difficulties. Imagine if the hospital allowed receptionists to exercise 'discretion' as to whom to admit directly and whom to refer to the Outpatients' Department. This is likely to put great pressure on the receptionists; how can they judge after all who is an 'emergency' and who is not? Besides, patients may complain that they are not treated fairly; why should a drunkard with a broken jawbone be admitted and the child with a fever referred?

Dependence on Rules and Impersonality

Officials become dependent on rules to guide and justify their actions. They sometimes feel that any rule, *even a non-rational one*, is better than no rule. Rules save one the trouble of having to make awkward decisions and then having to explain and defend them. **Impersonality** means that each decision is unaffected by the

specific circumstances of individuals. No amount of begging, pleading or arguing will alter the decision. Some of the decisions people make in organizations are very unpleasant. Sacking an employee, putting a patient on a long waiting list, failing a student, are not easy or agreeable decisions. Impersonality cushions us from the suffering and misery of others. 'It was nothing personal, Mrs Jameson, but rules are rules!' But impersonality can also have advantages for those affected by decisions. If everyone is treated according to the rule, if everyone is treated the same, there is no cause for complaints.

Rules can become the opium of bureaucratic officials. Without the rules, they are lost, paralysed. With the support of the rules, they are persons with **authority**. Without rules, chaos. With rules, order and organization. Unlike the authority of the father or the mother in a family or of the founder of a movement, the officials' authority is legal: it rests on the rules which define their rights and responsibilities. Their authority lies not in who they are but in the hats they wear, that is, in the positions they occupy.

Impersonality underwritten by rules seeks to ensure that a task will be performed in a uniform way, no matter who is performing it. Officials will discharge their duties unaffected by erratic factors like their mood, their passions and their idiosyncrasies. Finally, it means that staff in organizations are replaceable, since they are appointed not for who they are but for what they can do.

Impersonality, its Costs and 'Personal Service'

As the size and power of organizations has increased, impersonality has become a dominant feature of Western societies. Constrained by countless rules, stripped of initiative and discretion, increasingly the players of **roles**, we frequently relate to others not as full human beings but as names on forms, numbers on computer terminals, voices at the end of telephone lines or distorted faces behind counters. Many of us feel that we know the characters of television soap operas better than we do our co-workers. Our decisions frequently affect people we scarcely know: a mastectomy may be a life-shattering ordeal for a woman and her family, but for the hospital administrator it is an extra demand on hospital beds; for the medical secretary a mere tick in box 6B.

We are all aware of the frustrations that impersonality causes. Generally we do not like being treated as numbers and many organizations will try hard to create the impression of a personal

service. The air stewardess will address business-class passengers with their names and the waiter in certain restaurants may introduce himself saying, 'Hello, I am Pierre, your host for the evening'. Some of us feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about such personal touches, which smack of premeditation and artifice. We may also suspect that they will increase the figure at the end of our bill. A fast food employee said:

> It's all artificial. Pretending to offer personal service with a smile when in reality no one means it. We know this, management know this, even the customers know this, but we keep pretending. All they want to do is take the customer's money as soon as possible. This is what it's all designed to achieve.

The irony, of course, lies in the fact that the 'personal service' is itself often the result of carefully planned rules. As if offering an efficient service were not enough, the rulebooks of some organizations seek to control our **emotions** and our thoughts. Thus, in addition to the physical and intellectual work that they do, many employees find themselves performing *emotional labour* – having to display a caring and friendly attitude, always ready to smile or to exchange some personal words with the customer (see Chapter 12, 'Feelings').

Faced with mock personal service, many prefer the no-nonsense anonymity of the machine. When cash dispensing machines were first introduced by banks, it was thought that people would prefer the personal touch of the bank teller over the fully impersonal transaction with the machine. It did not take long to find that most people given a choice prefer the latter. Anonymity and impersonality have advantages not only for the organization but also for the customer. For one thing, they remove the need to reciprocate false smiles and other unfelt pleasantries.

BENDING THE RULES

We have seen that the rigidity with which organizations enforce their rules varies. The more bureaucratic organizations are fastidious in the application of rules while others take a more relaxed attitude and allow their members a measure of discretion. We sometimes laugh at bureaucracies and their ridiculous regulations, like those of the Danish Fire Brigade. Rules which seem to serve no useful purpose are derided as 'red tape'. Bending such rules appears more rational than enforcing them.

But bending rules has its own difficulties. For one, it undermines one of the most important functions of rules: their guarantee of equal and consistent treatment. Some may fear that once a rule has been bent or violated once, a *precedent* is created for future bigger violations. The rule may then lose all credibility. In most British universities, students must get 40 per cent in order to pass a particular course. Student A has obtained 39.5 per cent. Should he/she pass or not? Common sense and tolerant judgement may argue for lenience. What should then happen to Student B on 39 per cent? Or Student C on 38.5 per cent? Bureaucratic rationality would suggest that a line has already been drawn at 40 per cent and should be observed.

Bureaucratic rationality often rules in organizations. The student on 39.5 per cent may be failed. But then, he/she may not. If every organizational rule was rigidly applied, life could grind to a halt. The fear of creating a precedent, frequently referred to in emotive terms like 'opening the floodgates' or 'the thin end of the wedge', is often based on imaginary dangers; most precedents are quickly forgotten or brushed aside with suitable excuses. Other 'precedents' may be entirely fictitious – having no foundation in an organization's history, yet being regularly invoked to stop change. What seems to happen in the majority of organizations is the establishment of a range of permissible deviations from rules. To new recruits all rules and procedures may seem unbreakable. Nevertheless, as our opening example illustrated, individuals quickly realize that not all rules and regulations are equally sacrosanct. Some of them (like stopping at red lights) are fairly inflexible, but most of them contain loopholes or can be dodged in different ways. Many rules are highly circumstantial, applying only in specific situations, for instance during visits by inspectors. Others have fallen into total neglect. Yet others are the topic of constant conflict and negotiation, a continuous give and take between different organizational members.

Even in fast food restaurants, rules are routinely bent. At peak times, more than four pieces of fish may be fried simultaneously, or chips may be kept for more than seven minutes. Such practices are against the regulations but essential in meeting the demand. What is more, managers themselves are seen bending the rules or turning a blind eye when others violate them. Side-stepping a rule is often essential to meet the demands of a job, but equally individual workers may earn exemptions in the form of privileges. A particularly hard-working employee who turns up to work on a busy day

wearing an ear-ring ('not allowed') or having forgotten to wear his deodorant (an 'essential' requirement) is unlikely to be disciplined or turned away.

It is important, then, to emphasize that rules are not things, blindly controlling our behaviour in organizations. They permit different interpretations and their enforcement becomes tied in with the **culture** as well as the power relations of organizations. The same rule may have very different **meanings** in different organizations or even to different individuals within the same organization. Contesting the meaning, the interpretations and the implications of rules is one of the central activities contributing to the instability, unpredictability and richness of organizational life.

CONCLUSION: CHANGING FASHIONS IN THINKING ABOUT RULES

In general, where there are rules, people will look for ways of getting more elbow room. Even in the strictest organizations they are likely to get some, with or without the collusion of their superiors. A study of the behaviour of people in organizations, therefore, must examine both the rules that guide behaviour and the ways in which the rules are interpreted and challenged. It would be short-sighted then to reduce all behaviour in organizations to a passive following of rules; yet it would also be short-sighted to disregard the profound and far-reaching implications of rules in our lives.

Management thinking about rules and procedures is changing. At one time the fine-tuning of rules and procedures was regarded as the secret of organizational success. Flexibility and initiative, embodied in the Nordstrom rules illustrated earlier, are the current fashion. In the past, the frictionless machine represented the managerial ideal of an organization. The lean, highly responsive organism lies more close to current thinking. It is increasingly argued that rules and procedures, however carefully designed, cannot cope with a highly complex and changing organizational **environment** or with massive **technological changes** (see Chapter 9, 'Machines and Mechanizing').

In the past, some bureaucratic organizations prospered because of their predictability and order. Inflexibility and sluggishness were no problem in a stable, friendly environment. After all, dinosaurs ruled the earth for over 200 million years, inflexible and sluggish though many of them were. No one knows for sure why dinosaurs died away, but we all assume that it had something to do

with their inability to adapt to new environmental conditions, whether these were brought about by a colliding asteroid or some other cause. The same, argue modern management theorists, is the fate of rigid bureaucratic structures. They stifle innovation, discourage new ideas, fail to capitalize on advantages conferred by modern technologies and are generally too slow and cumbersome to meet **competition**. It is for these reasons that they are already giving way to quicker, smaller, more adaptable, more enterprising organizations.

Such organizations seek to unleash human potential and creativity rather than constrain it through rules and regulations. **'Empowerment'** has replaced control as a management buzz word. This does not mean that control has faded away or that organizational rules and discipline have been replaced by trust and autonomy. It does mean, however, that many organizations seek to complement bureaucratic regulations with subtler forms of organizational control. Selection procedures aimed at ensuring highly committed staff, organizational values, reward structures and corporate culture are currently much-favoured mechanisms of control; their importance will become clearer in some of the other chapters in this book.

- Most organizations have formal, impersonal and highly specific rules.
- Rules can be seen as 'rational' if they are carefully chosen to serve generally agreed organizational goals.
- Rules are an important means of achieving control over individuals' behaviour in organizations.
- Organizations differ in their reliance on rules and on the rigidity with which they apply them.
- At times it becomes more rational to bend or disregard a rule than to enforce it.
- Bending rules may lead to ever-increasing violations and eventual anarchy; but in most organizations, a degree of rule-bending is accepted as normal and necessary.
- Officials often become dependent on rules to justify their actions and decisions and to bolster their authority.
- Rules give organizations an impersonal quality; they reduce the influence of emotions on the way people do their job, and control the way emotions are displayed.
- People in organizations frequently contest the meaning of rules and try to interpret them or change them to their advantage.

THESAURUS ENTRIES

action	**impersonality**
authority	**knowing**
bureaucracy	**learning**
change	**management**
competition	**meaning**
conflict	**norm**
control	**organization**
culture	**power**
decision making	**rationality**
emotion	**role**
empowerment	**rules**
environment	**structure**
goals	**technology**
group	**values**
hierarchy	

READING ON

Bureaucracy is one of the most popular subjects in the study of organizations. Many theorists have engaged with Weber's theory of bureaucracy (1958) which envisaged an ideal type of bureaucracy as the most efficient form of administration. Gouldner (1954), for example, sought to distinguish between rational rules, punitive rules and mock rules, whereas theorists like Jaques (1976) and Drucker (1989) have elaborated and refined arguments of how organizational efficiency can be enhanced through planning, procedures, rules and control.

Peters and Waterman (1982) and numerous other writers, on the other hand, have attacked bureaucracy as the cause of virtually every organizational ill and have advocated more loosely structured organizations, coupled with strong organizational values and a heavy reliance on individual initiative as the recipe for success. Numerous writings by successful business people have attacked bureaucracy along similar lines, notably Carlzon (1989), Morita (1987) and Roddick (1991). Charles Handy (1976) has argued that bureaucracy is itself a feature of the culture of certain organizations, which he terms 'role cultures', whereas other cultures (including power cultures, task cultures and support cultures) lay far less emphasis on standardized procedures and regulations.

The material presented in this chapter also addresses issues of power and control in organizations. Rules in organizations, like the laws of wider society, are not merely means for the achievement of agreed-upon goals, but are also mechanisms of control, safeguarding the interests of those in positions of power. Robert Michels (1949), arguing against Weber's view of rational bureaucracy, envisaged bureaucracy as a smokescreen behind which a ruthless power game goes on, a game through which the few rule the many. This is what he described as the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy'. Two chapters in Morgan's *Images of Organization* (1986) discuss organizations as political systems and as instruments of domination; both are of considerable use to the reader who wishes to explore further the political dimension of the stories introduced in this chapter.

In a series of pioneering studies focusing on the mental asylum, the prison, the clinic, the army and the school, Michel Foucault (1965, 1971, 1977) has argued that these institutions signal the arrival of a new type of control over the masses, a form of control pervasive enough to be absorbed into each and every individual's subjectivity. Rules and bureaucratic procedures of observation, classification and punishment are, according to this view, powerful instruments of control not because of their tangible, visible effects, but because they create a pliant, self-controlled, disciplined population who are unable to envisage themselves outside of these procedures. Our society becomes patrolled by ever-vigilant watchdogs.

A number of neo-Marxist theorists have developed theories of resistance, sometimes drawing on Foucault's work: according to these, organizational subordinates can find more or less indirect ways of contesting, undermining or evading control mechanisms, such as those embodied in rules and regulations (see Jermier et al., 1994; Knights and Willmott, 1990). According to these arguments, there are instances when organizational red tape (such as that encountered in this chapter) is neither a dysfunction of bureaucracy nor a smokescreen for management control but rather an attempt by subordinates to reclaim some control by excessive or ritualistic adherence to rules and procedures.