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# Unwritten Rules

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A modern office interior featuring a large, open-plan space. A prominent feature is a wide, dark-colored staircase with a glass railing, where a person is walking. Below the stairs is a lounge area with several blue and white patterned armchairs arranged around a low wooden coffee table. The room has large windows offering a view of a cityscape, and the ceiling is high with recessed lighting. The overall atmosphere is bright and professional.

**What are unwritten rules?**

Whoever complains the most, gets the most resources

Yes, you should take all of your paid time off...  
but if you do, you're not serious about your job

You should really answer emails on the weekend

Of course you should kiss up to your boss...  
just don't let your coworkers see you do it


A modern, bright office interior with a long wooden table, high chairs, and large windows. A woman is walking in the background.

**But the really important  
rules are written rules, right?**





How did this happen?



How do unwritten rules  
work?



“Brain scan studies suggest that our brains react to peer exclusion much as they respond to threats to physical health or food supply.”





Do all companies have  
unwritten rules?

Restaurant kitchen: The right answer to every question is “Yes, Chef,” even if you don’t understand the question.

Fire station: You better keep our secrets. If we can’t trust you, we can’t go into a fire with you.

Ad agency: Don’t show up in a suit unless you’re going to a funeral or an awards show.



What about groups that aren't companies?

Mountain climbing: No matter what falls—a phone or a piece of equipment or whatever—yell “rock!”

Poker table: Don't make fun of bad players making stupid bets. Remember, we want them to.

Burning Man: Take the experience seriously. Don't be a sparkle pony. We're not here for your bucket list or your Instagram feed.



How do I find unwritten rules?



**How are unwritten rules a tool for  
successful workplace designs/strategies?**

# Role #1

Unwritten rules = Organizational Culture

## Role #2

Unwritten rules tell us what is in the way of behavioral change





*Management says...*

Effective results  
are more important  
than in-office hours  
clocked



*Management says...*

Effective results  
are more important  
than in-office hours  
clocked

*The unwritten rules signal...*

Workers who  
regularly come to  
the office  
are more valuable



*Management says...*

Employee wellness  
is a top priority for  
our organization

A modern office hallway with a bicycle rack on the left and cubicles on the right. The hallway is brightly lit with recessed ceiling lights. The floor is covered in a grey and white checkered tile pattern. On the left, a bicycle rack holds several bicycles, including a yellow and black one and a blue one. On the right, there are cubicles with desks, computers, and office chairs. A person is visible in the distance, walking down the hallway.

*Management says...*

Employee wellness  
is a top priority for  
our organization

*The unwritten rules signal...*

Practicing self-care  
during work hours  
is indulgent



*Management says...*

Social connection  
and knowledge  
sharing are key to  
our success



*Management says...*

Social connection  
and knowledge  
sharing are key to  
our success


*The unwritten rules signal...*

Casual  
conversations  
aren't as important  
as "real" work

*Management says...*

Workers are free  
to move about  
the office





*Management says...*

Workers are free  
to move about  
the office

*The unwritten rules signal...*

If you're not at  
your desk, you're  
slacking off



## Role #3

Unwritten rules tell us the relative strength of social cohesion



*Management says...*

Effective results  
are more important  
than in-office hours  
clocked

*The unwritten rules signal...*

Workers who  
regularly come to  
the office  
are more valuable

a fairness/equity issue



*Management says...*

Employee wellness  
is a top priority for  
our organization

*The unwritten rules signal...*

Practicing self-care  
during work hours  
is indulgent

an authenticity issue



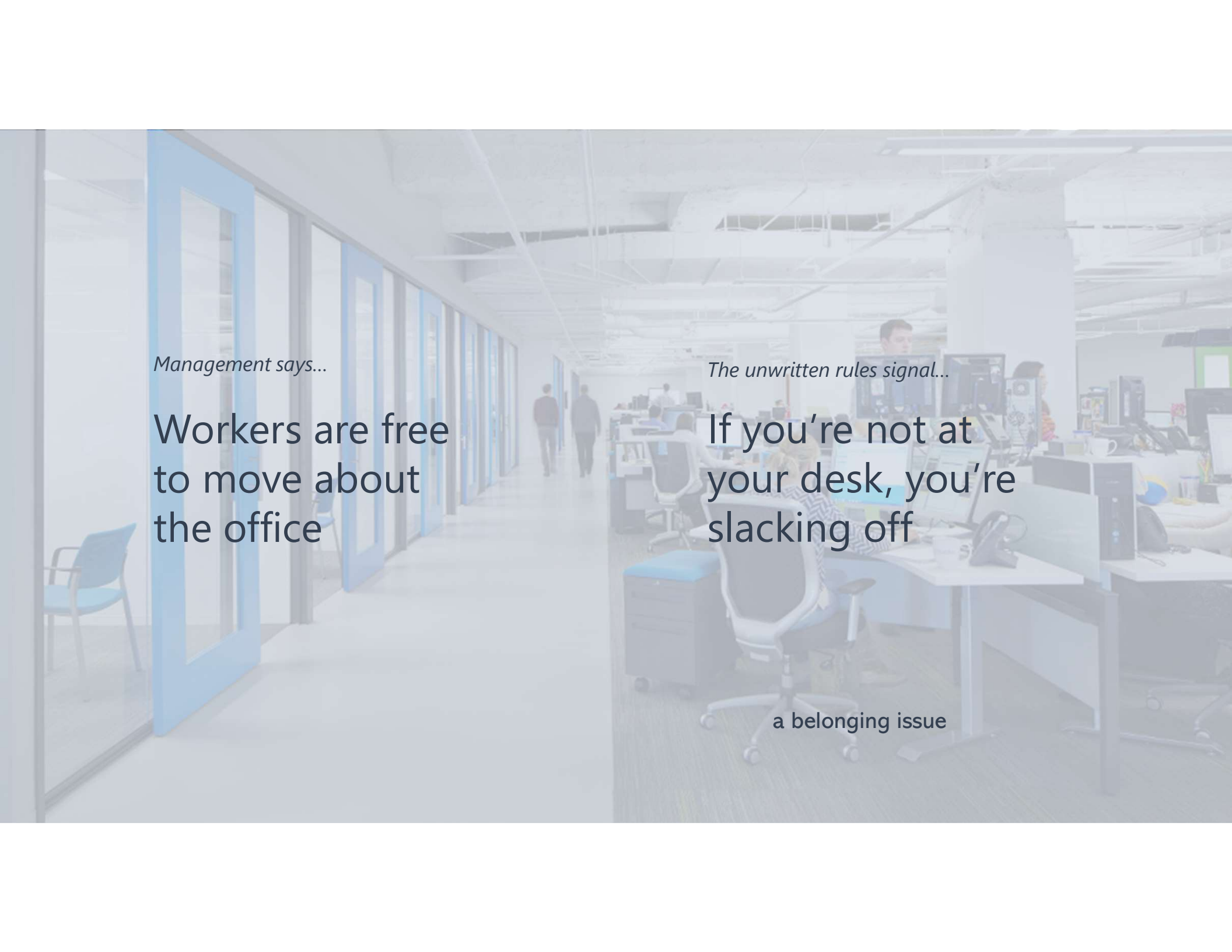
*Management says...*

Social connection  
and knowledge  
sharing are key to  
our success.

*The unwritten rules signal...*

Casual  
conversations  
aren't as important  
as "real" work

an interdependence issue



*Management says...*

Workers are free  
to move about  
the office

*The unwritten rules signal...*

If you're not at  
your desk, you're  
slacking off

a belonging issue

A modern, minimalist office lounge area. In the foreground, there is a blue sofa with a patterned pillow, a white armchair, and a pink armchair. A round white coffee table with a metal base is in the center. To the right, there is a dark wood shelving unit with various items on it. The background shows a glass-walled office space with a desk and a chair. The text "What do unwritten rules have to do with change?" is overlaid in the center of the image.

**What do unwritten rules have to do  
with change?**



**Harvard  
Business  
Review**

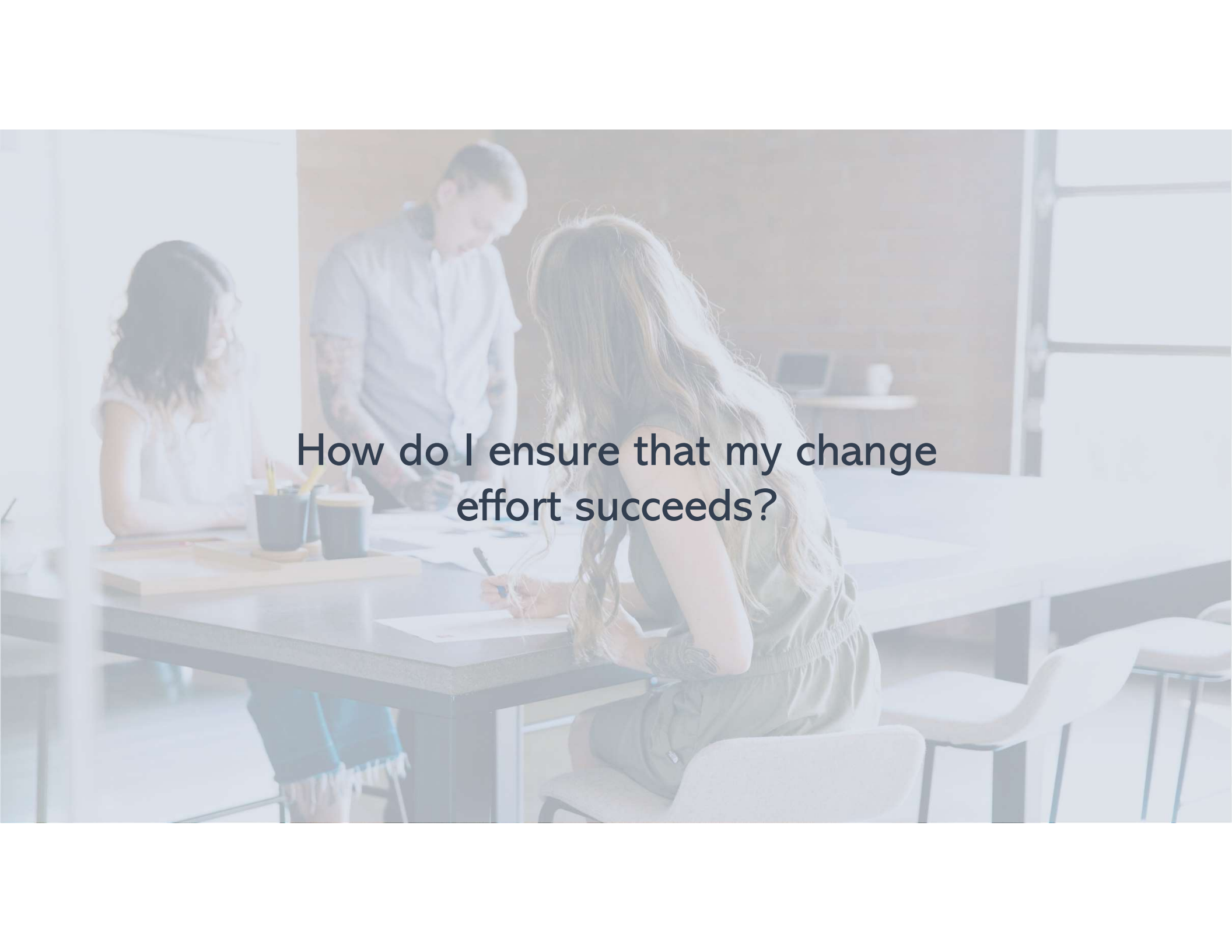
CHANGE MANAGEMENT

# Cracking the Code of Change

by Nitin Nohria and Michael Beer

FROM THE MAY-JUNE 2000 ISSUE

“The brutal fact is that  
70% of all change  
initiatives fail.”

A photograph of three people in a meeting room. A man stands in the background, looking at a document. Two women are seated at a table; one is writing on a document. The scene is dimly lit, with a focus on the people and their interaction. The text 'How do I ensure that my change effort succeeds?' is overlaid on the image.

**How do I ensure that my change effort succeeds?**



“...study after study  
puts the  
failure rate of mergers  
and acquisitions  
somewhere between  
70-90%.”

Harvard  
Business  
Review

MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

# The Big Idea: The New M&A Playbook

by Clayton M. Christensen, Richard Alton, Curtis Rising, and Andrew Waldeck

FROM THE MARCH 2011 ISSUE

A top-down, high-angle photograph of a meeting in progress. Ten people are seated around a large, light-colored wooden conference table. Several laptops are open on the table, and some individuals are looking at their screens or documents. The room has a grey carpet and a white wall in the background. The overall scene is dimly lit, with a soft, diffused light source. The text "Again, how do I find the unwritten rules?" is overlaid in the center of the image in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

**Again, how do I find the  
unwritten rules?**

Q&A

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