Monkey BUSINESS?

Scientists put a group of five monkeys in a cage. At the top of a ladder, they hung a banana. As soon as a monkey climbed the ladder, he was showered with cold water; the group soon gave up trying to reach the banana.

Next, the scientists disconnected the cold water and replaced one of the five monkeys. When the new monkey tried to climb the ladder, the others immediately pulled him down and gave him a good beating. The new monkey learned quickly, and enthusiastically joined in beating the next new recruit. One by one, the five original monkeys were replaced. Although none of the new group knew why, no monkey was ever allowed to climb the ladder.

Like the monkeys in the experiment, every culture and organization has its unwritten rules. These rules are probably the single most influential factor on the work environment and employee happiness. Though many work cultures embrace positive values, such as loyalty, solidarity, efficiency, quality, personal development and customer service, all too often they reinforce negative attitudes.

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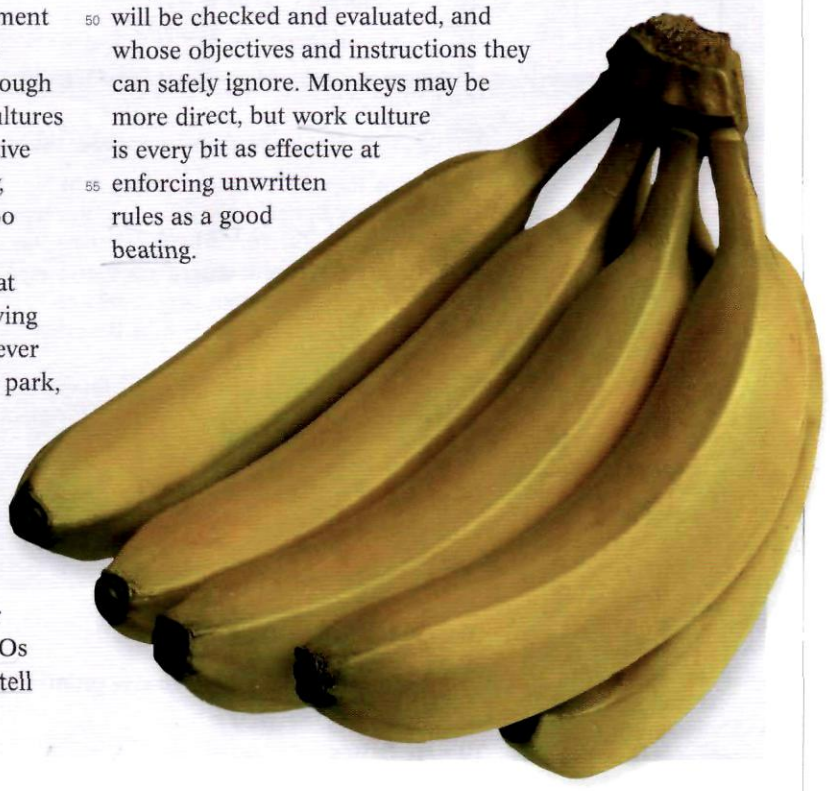
In many businesses, an unwritten rule states that working long hours is more important than achieving results. In one medium-sized company, the boss never leaves the office until it is dark. Outside in the car park, he checks to see who is still working and whose office windows are dark. Staff who risk leaving earlier now leave their office lights on all night.

Other common unwritten rules state that the boss is always right, even when he's wrong; if you're not at your desk, you're not working; nobody complains, because nothing ever changes; women, ethnic minorities and the over 50s are not promoted; the customer is king, but don't tell anyone, because management are more interested in profitability.

Often nobody really knows where these unwritten rules came from, but like the new monkeys, new recruits pick them up very quickly, despite the best intentions of induction and orientation programmes. The way staff speak to management, to customers and to each other gives subtle but strategic clues to an organization's culture, as do the differences between what is said, decided or promised, and what actually gets done. New staff quickly learn when their ideas and opinions are listened to and valued, and when it's better to keep them to themselves. They learn which assignments and aspects of their performance will be checked and evaluated, and whose objectives and instructions they can safely ignore. Monkeys may be more direct, but work culture is every bit as effective at enforcing unwritten rules as a good beating.