



THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The Rules of Engagement

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Each of us has our own unique set of rules that govern how we engage with people, situations and life in general. A great majority of the time we are fully and completely oblivious to the influence they have on our every choice. These rules set the parameters of our behaviour. They determine the extent we will take risk or not take risk. They define for us what is acceptable and what is unacceptable; what we are willing to do or not willing to do; and what we deem to be pleasurable or to be painful.

The rules we have learned to live by are both helpful and harmful. Those which are helpful drive us to grow, to learn and to develop. They are rules that allow us to act with tenacity and fortitude. They enable us to face changes with an objective and reflective state of mind.

DYSFUNCTIONAL RULES

Ep3: MINDtalk - Rules of Engagement

The flip side of helpful rules are harmful rules. These rules function based on the same mechanism as helpful rules, but there is an insidious depth to these set of rules. The harmful rules that we harbour restrict and retard our growth. They can make us experience irrational fears in situations where there shouldn't be any. They can make us behave and act in foolish and detrimental ways. Where an event requires a calm and collected mind to get out of a sticky situation, our harmful rules promote decision making based on a reactive and racing mind. We fall into the dark abyss of our subjective world like a parachutist tumbling out of control, head over heels, disoriented between the sky, the horizon and the Earth.

Ironically, these harmful rules started out originally as helpful rules. Any and all rules that we have established are based on some level of repeated experience. All of our experiences are lessons in disguise. Our brains learn and adapt. They map the event as a memory in order to create predictability and certainty for similar future events. Every rule that guides our lives starts out as a healthy rule safe guarding us from potential harm.

Although somewhere along the line some of our rules grow beyond their original constraints and begin to encompass more and more. Our brains begin to lose the distinction between what local event brought us harm to creating a more global response to everything associated with that event.

DOGGED BY DOGS

For instance, I remember quite vividly when I was 10 years old my parents took my brother and I to a farmers market. The summer day was hot and humid. As we wandered through the market I saw a German Shepherd next to one of the stalls. I reached out to pet it and the next thing I felt was its canines sinking into the soft flesh of my hand. I cried out in pain and pulled my hand back in fright. At that moment my brain set up a rule: 'Do not pet strange dogs on a hot day when in a crowded market!'

As time passed and I grew older the event at the farmers market faded into the background of my mind and I eventually forgot about it. Or at least I believed I forgot about it. In reality the rule was still running in the background of my mind even though I was completely oblivious to it.

By my late 20's I had developed an uneasiness even around the most timid of dogs. When you think of a Labrador with big brown eyes sitting on his haunches with something akin to a curious smile on its face, this is the farthest thing from threatening or scary. But my mind had set up a rule that stated dogs were something to be feared. Over the years the simple rule established at the farmers market evolved into something that encompassed all dogs in all situations.

Of course, I logically knew not every dog I encountered saw my hand as a tasty morsel ready to be devoured. But on an emotional level I believed it to be the truth. In my negative emotional stupor around dogs all logic and orientation to reality was vaporised. I became the parachutist spinning out of control losing all context between the on-coming ground and the spinning sky. Instead of being reflective my irrational emotions pushed me to be reactive.

At the time I did not understand why I had such an irrational response and reaction to dogs. It was something that I just experienced based on no fathomable reason. We can completely forget about our rules and the reasons why they were first established, but they are still working behind the curtains 24/7. This is what I mean by the insidious nature of harmful rules. They creep up on you and automatically influence your thoughts, emotions and behaviour in detrimental ways that often exacerbate the situation.

HOW TO REDEFINE THE RULES

Thankfully I exposed the rules for what they were and changed them so I no longer suffer from an irrational uneasiness around dogs. It is this same methodology I teach to my clients on a weekly basis to help them expose their own rules of engagement. It could be anything: speaking in front of large crowds; having a difficult conversation with a colleague; dealing with transition and change; learning to be assertive or any number of other challenges both professionally and privately.

The general idea is to get my clients to articulate their rules to a specific situation. In addition to this, I give them homework and ask them to further elaborate their rules and capture them on paper for our next meeting. Through this process we expose the unconscious rules and lay them bare for introspection.

For many people the simple fact of seeing their rules written down in front of them is very cathartic. There is a release of tension as people realize that they are not psychologically warped, but that they were simply following a set of dysfunctional rules they had establish, perhaps, decades ago.

Clients learn to redefine their rules of engagement. They rewrite the rules so they are functional and healthy instead of dysfunctional and unhealthy.

TAKE NOTE

One important caveat to note is that we can never erase a rule from our brains. Just like you can't unlearn to ride a bicycle or forget how to speak your native language (not barring major traumatic head injury). By consistently applying a new set of rules they eventually become the dominant default pathway of how we constructively deal with a situation.

By changing the rules of the game we change the rules of how we engage with life. We can set up the Rules of Engagement so we come out on the winning end.

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