Know the Code

Following Rules of Conduct

Objectives:

A   Explain rules of conduct.

B   Demonstrate how to follow rules of conduct.

MBA *Research* & Curriculum Center

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Katelyn is a photographer for the school paper. She wants to use the school's camera to take family photos, but before she does, she checks with her advisor and purchases a separate memory card for her personal use.

Isaiah is the victim of a flagrant foul from a player on the opposing basketball team. It makes him angry, but he doesn't retaliate or shout profanities at the other player.

Jessica isn't feeling well enough to go to work today. She makes sure she calls her supervisor before 9:00 a.m. to let her know that she won't be in.

Katelyn, Isaiah, and Jessica are all acting in accordance with rules of conduct. Most organizations—schools, sports teams, clubs, businesses—create these rules to protect themselves and their stakeholders and to ensure that things run smoothly. Learn more about rules of conduct, their benefits, and the best ways you can follow them.

Rules to Live By

You may not always like following them, but **rules** are an important part of life. Without rules, our world wouldn't run very smoothly. Imagine, for example, that traffic rules did not exist. What would happen if we did not have laws requiring cars to drive on the right side of the road, to stop at red lights, and to follow the speed limit? Driving would be so dangerous that no one would ever want to get behind the wheel! Rules keep our world orderly and safe.

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▲ *How do you think these rules could help an organization achieve its goals?*

Most organizations have a set of rules that help them to run smoothly, too. These rules are often expressed formally as a **code of conduct**. A code of conduct is a set of rules and standards that govern the expected practices, decisions, procedures, and systems within an organization such as a school, business, team, club, or online community. Codes of conduct are important for all kinds of organizations. For example, if you've ever played a sport, you know that the rules require you to wear a uniform during games and to have a certain number of teammates participating at the same time. Your school probably has a set of rules that prohibit behaviors like chewing gum or missing too many days of school. These are examples of rules of conduct that must be followed.

Generally, codes of conduct are based on the organization's principles and values, as well as any laws or government regulations that apply to the organization. The purpose of rules of conduct is to maintain a standard that allows an organization to obtain success. Think about it: If your school did not have a rule that limited the number of absences a student is allowed to have, students might not attend school frequently enough to learn effectively and obtain a quality education. Codes of conduct encourage people and organizations to achieve their goals.

Codes of conduct can vary significantly among institutions but are generally aligned with ethical behavior. Organizations might also have a code of ethics and/or a code of practice that combines with the code of conduct to create a comprehensive guide to principles and expectations.

What's in a Code?

What type of information is included in an organization's rules of conduct? A code of conduct usually begins with a brief explanation of the organization's **mission statement** and values. This can help to give context for the specific guidelines that follow, demonstrating how each rule contributes to the achievement of these values.

The bulk of the code of conduct is usually composed of the expected and prohibited behaviors that should be honored by members of the organization. Some of these may relate to topics such as:

Conflicts of interest. A conflict of interest is a situation in which it's impossible to be truly impartial. For example, Jeremy is a manager for a company that is looking to purchase new office equipment. Jeremy's wife works for an office equipment company. Jeremy cannot make an impartial decision when looking for an equipment supplier because even if he tries to be unbiased, his relationship with his wife could affect his decision. An organization's code of conduct might provide guidelines for how to handle these conflicts of interest in the most ethical and effective way.
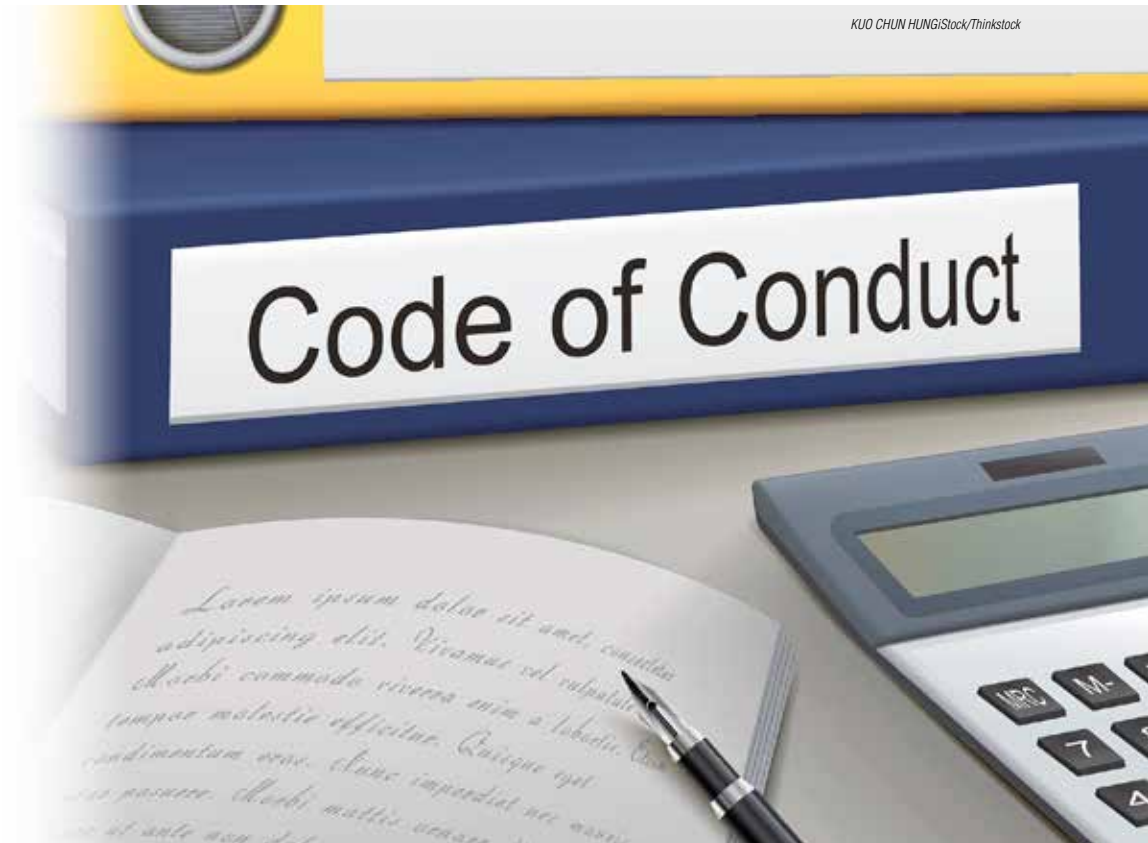
▲ *The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is one of the most famous and important examples of legislation against discrimination.*

Harassment and discrimination. Discriminatory behavior and harassment are unfortunate realities that organizations must face. **Discrimination** is unfair treatment of a person or a group based on the person's or group's characteristics, e.g., race, religion, or gender identity. Organizations generally prohibit all forms of discrimination. In the business world, for example, many laws have been established to prevent discrimination in the workplace, such as the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Pay Act, and the Americans With Disabilities Act. **Harassment** is any kind of unwelcome behavior that is carried out for the purpose of annoying or intimidating another person. Bullying is one form of harassment that you may have seen among your peers. Most workplaces, schools, teams, groups, and websites also have strict policies against harassment. Both harassment and discrimination can lead to legal consequences when they occur in the workplace, so it is important that businesses take a strong position and strictly enforce policies against them.

Use of property. Organizations spend a large amount of money and time acquiring the supplies, equipment, and services that they need to operate effectively. They usually require that their members respect their property in various ways. This can mean using equipment for its intended purpose, not causing damage to property, and not taking advantage of available supplies. For instance, a workplace code of conduct might prohibit employees from visiting video streaming sites on their work computers or ask that they only print a certain number of pages per month using the company printer.

Confidentiality, security, and privacy. Confidentiality is the practice of keeping information secret or private. Certain information must be kept confidential so the organization can remain competitive, respect stakeholders, and protect individuals' personal privacy. In the workplace, confidentiality is usually applied to business decisions that involve customer data or marketing information, or that are not public knowledge. Organizations also have security policies, which could address physical security (of employees and property) or digital security.

Health and safety. Keeping employees healthy and safe is one of the most important tasks that an organization must do. In the business world, work-related illnesses or injuries are not only harmful to employees, but can also cause legal trouble for the company. Codes of conduct generally include rules that aim to protect people from anything that could endanger them or cause health issues. For example, your school probably has a designated procedure that everyone must follow in the event of a fire or weather incident. This policy is in place to protect the students and staff.

► *Construction workers are required to wear safety gear to protect themselves from injury.*

Dennis Wise/DigitalVision/Thinkstock

Financial reporting and accounting. Keeping track of financial information isn't just important for big corporations. Many organizations have incoming and outgoing money that must be diligently tracked and monitored. Even small clubs or groups need to have set policies in place to manage money responsibly. A student government, for instance, might require all members to submit receipts if they spend their own money on supplies for the school dance. These policies should be specified ahead of time so that financial reporting is consistent and accurate.

THE GRAY ZONE

Nico's employer has a rule against discrimination in the hiring process. However, when his boss is interviewing candidates for a new position, Nico overhears him say "She seemed talented and qualified, but she's young and recently married. She's probably going to leave to have children soon, and then we'll have to do this all over again. We should hire a man who would be less likely to leave." Nico thinks that his boss is violating the company's code of conduct by being discriminatory against women, but he doesn't want to get his boss in trouble and risk his own future at the company. What should Nico do?

Other topics that might be covered by a code of conduct include hours and attendance, dress code, use of profane language, and **insubordination**.

A code of conduct will usually explain the organization's specific expectations regarding these and any other important subjects, along with procedures for reporting violations and the consequences of violations.

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One of the most common places where codes of conduct are used is in schools. They are especially important when the school is having discipline issues. However, not everyone agrees on the specifics of what the code of conduct can or should do. When the Oklahoma City Public School District rolled out its new code of conduct, controversy ensued. Check out the article and video about the rule changes here: http://kfor.com/2015/11/23/oklahoma-city-schools-adopt-new-code-of-conduct/. What do you think? Can new rules of conduct help solve some of the district's issues? Does your school's code of conduct help encourage appropriate behavior?

Know the Consequences

Around 41 million people in the United States are given a citation for speeding each year. That's over 20% of all drivers! The speed limit is just one example of a commonly broken rule, and that hefty ticket is the punishment for breaking it. Most rules come with some sort of consequence that is meant to deter people from breaking them. What can happen if you fail to follow the code of conduct in your school, workplace, or other organization?

Verbal warning. A verbal warning is a common consequence for a first-time or minor offense. If you accidentally violated the school dress code, for example, your teacher might tell you what you did wrong and warn you not to wear the same outfit again.

Written warning. A written warning is often used when an infraction is slightly more severe, or if a verbal warning has already been given. It could include details about your infraction and information about any future consequences that you could receive if the offense is repeated.

Interested in learning what a written warning looks like? Check out this sample from Leadership Skills for Life that deals with employee tardiness: http://www.leadership-skills-for-life.com/sample-written-warning-letter-for-tardiness.html.
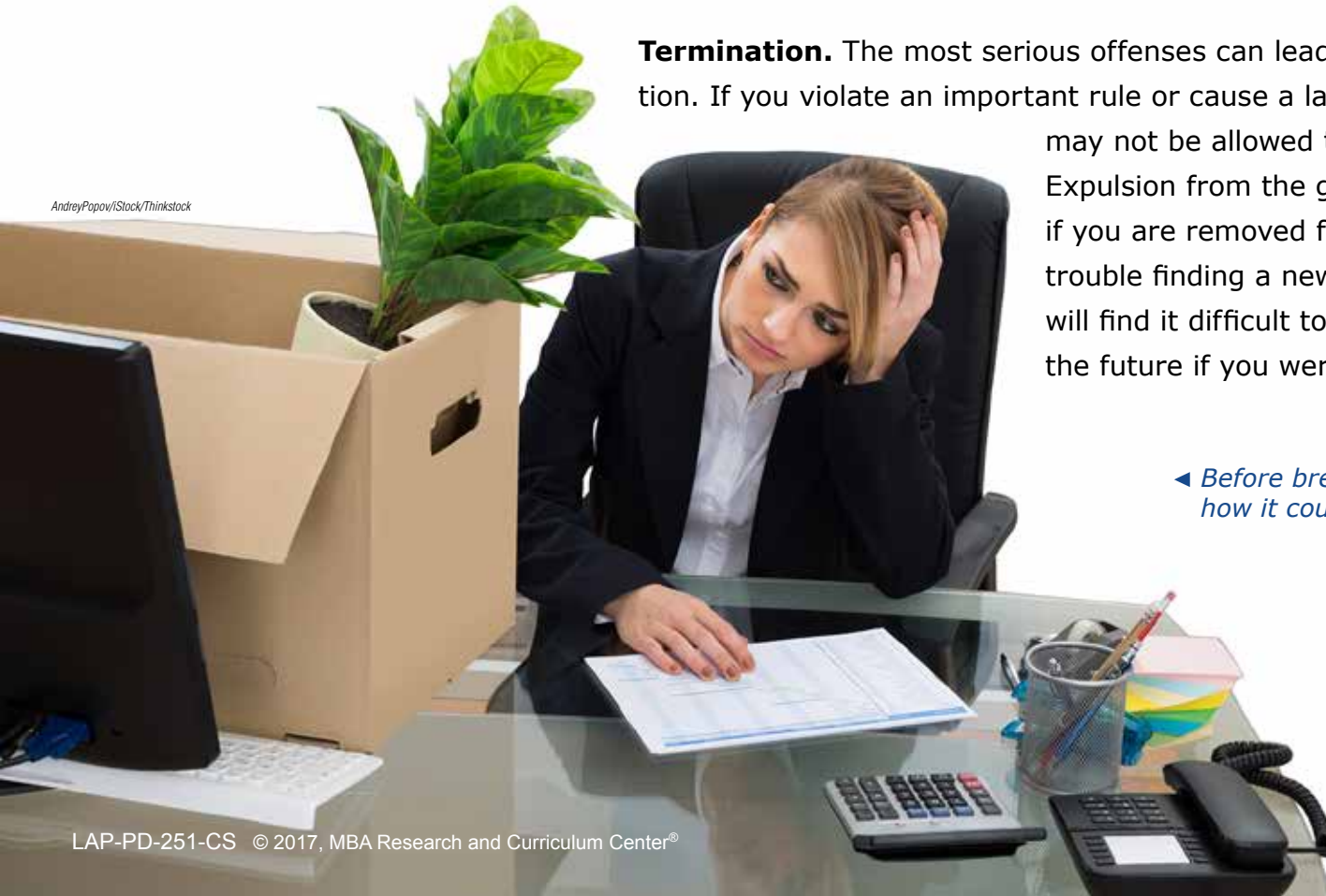
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CountDuckula/iStock/Thinkstock

▲ *A written warning should be taken seriously. If actions are not corrected, more serious consequences may follow.*

Reduced responsibilities and/or privileges. When you were little, your parents might have punished you for breaking the rules by taking away your dessert or television-watching privileges for the night. A similar consequence can happen if you violate a rule of conduct in your workplace, school, or other organization. For example, if Olivia, the captain of her dance team, misses several required practices, she might be removed from the position of captain or asked to sit out during an upcoming competition. In the workplace, these reduced privileges can be expanded to include pay reductions or demotions.

Suspension. If an infraction is serious, or if you have breached conduct multiple times without attempting to fix your behavior, you might be suspended from school, work, or other organizations for a certain period of time. Being suspended not only reduces the organization's productivity but can also hurt your own personal development. For example, if you are suspended from school, you will miss learning crucial information and might have trouble catching up.

Termination. The most serious offenses can lead to expulsion or termination of your position. If you violate an important rule or cause a large problem for your organization, you may not be allowed to be a member or employee anymore. Expulsion from the group is usually irreversible. Furthermore, if you are removed from a job or organization, you may have trouble finding a new position elsewhere. A new organization will find it difficult to trust that you will abide by their rules in the future if you were terminated for failing to do so before.

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◄ *Before breaking a rule, try to think about how it could affect you in the long run.*

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Criminal charges. In extreme, rare cases, employees or group members, or even entire organizations, may face criminal charges for their infractions. Examples of such offenses might include committing financial fraud or putting employees in danger. Criminal charges could result in steep fines or even prison time.

These consequences may seem daunting, but as long as you do your best to follow the rules and think about possible consequences before acting, you will prevent yourself from facing them.

This fun video "Following the Rules" by EpicnessToGo illustrates possible consequences of breaking the rules in your everyday life: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUGRlfX_ayI.

What's the Point?

People sometimes struggle or do not have the motivation to follow rules. Often, this is because they do not understand why the rules are necessary. However, following rules of conduct brings many benefits to both individuals and organizations that go beyond simply avoiding negative consequences.

Studies have shown that organizations with strong codes of conduct experience less misconduct, which has a positive impact on the organization's performance as a whole. If the code of conduct is linked to its overall objectives, then following the rules will help the organization obtain success.

Also, a code of conduct clearly designates what is acceptable and unacceptable so everyone knows exactly how and how not to behave. It is a strong foundation for all actions and decisions carried out by the organization and its employees. The code of conduct is also a point of reference that makes it easy to identify breaches in conduct and resolve conflicts consistently. The clarity brought about by the code of conduct improves organizational communication and culture. Organizations in which everyone follows a clear set of rules are more likely to attract and retain the best members than those with unstructured or unclear standards of behavior.

Following rules also has a positive impact on an individual level. If you follow the rules laid out by your organization, you will meet expectations and be protected from consequences. You can also use the rules as a guide for handling difficult ethical situations, ensuring that you are always acting with **integrity**. Having a set of established rules helps the organization to be more organized and fair, which makes it a more pleasant experience and allows you to be treated fairly.

Integrity

▶ *Playing games with family and friends is much more enjoyable when everyone follows the rules! The same is true in a school, workplace, or other organization.*

monkeybusinessimages/iStock/Thinkstock

The Ethical Connection

Rules of conduct are not just pulled out of thin air; they are usually based on the organization's ethical values. **Ethics** are the basic principles of right and wrong that govern behavior. However, what is allowed by the rules is not always ethical, and what is ethical is not always included in the rules. Consider an employee who regularly spreads gossip about his coworkers. Gossip isn't illegal, and it might not be against an organization's rules, but it creates a negative work environment and should be discouraged.

While rules of conduct prevent illegal activity and rule-breaking, organizations might also have a code of ethics that encourages people to embrace the organization's morals and values. Codes of ethics tend to be more general and focused on an organization's principles rather than specific behaviors that are required or banned. A code of ethics might encourage **cooperation** among coworkers, whereas a code of conduct might specifically prohibit using disrespectful language toward coworkers. Overall,both the code of ethics and code of conduct should work together to promote respectful, value-based behavior.

Respect

Summary

Organizations establish rules so that they can run smoothly and operate effectively. These rules often take the form of a code of conduct. The code of conduct usually includes the organization's mission statement, values, and specific behaviors that are expected or prohibited. When these rules are not followed, many possible consequences can arise, so it is important to follow them to the best of your ability. When members of an organization follow the rules, the organization as well as individuals receive many benefits. Rules of conduct are usually based on ethics and respect, but both a code of conduct and a code of ethics are necessary to have a complete set of expectations and guidelines.

TOTAL RECALL

1. What is a code of conduct?

2. What is the purpose of having rules of conduct?

3. Give three examples of topics that might be included in a code of conduct.

4. Verbal warnings, written warnings, reduced responsibilities, and suspension are examples of _____.

5. How do codes of conduct benefit organizations?

6. How do codes of conduct benefit individuals?

7. How do rules of conduct relate to ethics and respect?

Be a Rule Follower

Abiding by rules of conduct will help you to be successful and become a valuable member of your school, workplace, or organization. You can use many techniques to ensure that you are following rules of conduct.

Learn them! The first step of following rules of conduct is to make sure you have a thorough knowledge of what the rules are. Generally, rules of conduct are introduced when you first become a part of an organization. For example, as an employee, you will probably go over the code of conduct during your job training or orientation. The rules will usually be written and given to you in an employee handbook or made available on the organization's intranet. Take the initiative and learn the rules, even if you aren't required to do so. Familiarize yourself with the rules, processes, and consequences of violations. Finally, you should make sure to learn about any unspoken or understood rules that are not a formal part of an organization's code of conduct but are still expected. For example, your workplace may not have a rule against playing loud, inappropriate music at your desk, but if you did so, you would probably be a nuisance to your coworkers and might receive a reprimand from your supervisor.
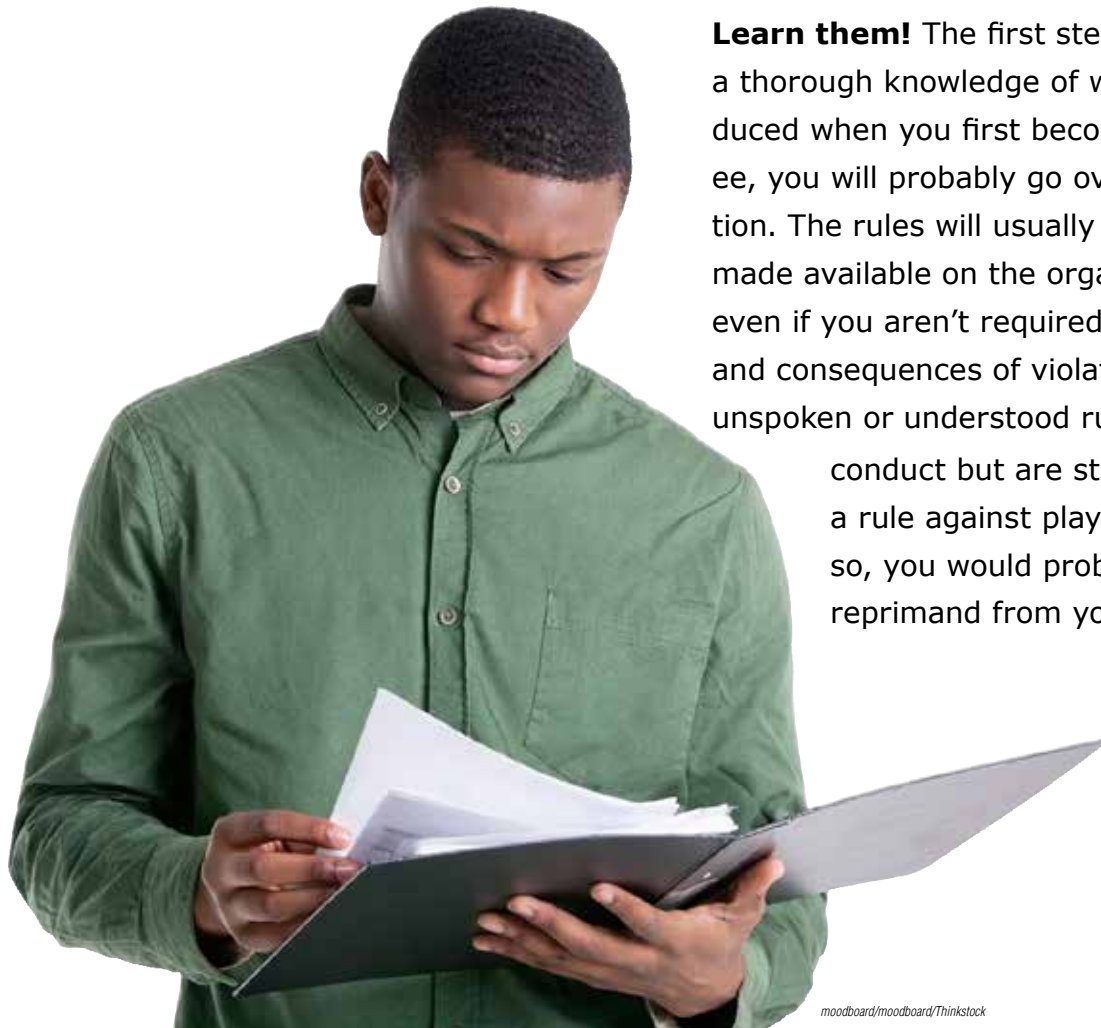
◄ *Carefully reading the rules takes time, but it will help you to be successful in the long run.*

moodboard/moodboard/Thinkstock

Understand them! It's not enough to just know what the rules are—you should also understand the *why* behind them. Knowing the purpose of rules will make you more likely to remember and follow them. To understand the code of conduct, think about the organization's values, stakeholders, and objectives. Most of the rules of conduct probably relate to them! For example, if you are a member of the marching band, you may be required to pass memorization tests before you can participate in competitions. You may not understand the purpose of this rule at first. However, when you realize that one of the band's objectives is to perform well at competitions, and you know that memorizing the music helps bands score better, you may begin to see the need to follow the rule so the band can be successful.

If you don't understand all of the rules, be sure to ask questions and gain clarity—especially if anything seems unusual or unethical. Don't be afraid to respectfully question the established procedures. Sometimes new input can help an organization clarify or redefine its rules and make them better!

▲ *It might be difficult to talk about rules with a parent, teacher, or other authority figure, but it will help you both understand each other better.*

Commit to them! The easy part is learning the rules. The hard part is following them and sticking to it! At times, you might be tempted to break rules, even if you have good intentions. For example, Charlotte works at a coffee shop that prohibits employees from eating the shop's pastries and sandwiches without paying for them. Charlotte has always followed this rule, but one morning, she is very hungry and doesn't have any money with her. She may be tempted to snack on a muffin, just one time. But if Charlotte is truly committed to following the rules, she must obey them at all times, even when it is difficult.

Depending on the organization, your commitment to the rules may be formalized in a written agreement that you are required to sign. Sometimes these agreements are legally binding. Even if there is not a written agreement, following the rules is still crucial to maintaining your employment, enrollment, or membership. Think about how hard you worked to get where you are and the consequences that you might face if you break the rules. Reminding yourself of the significance of the rules is a good way to ensure that you stay committed to following them.

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Refer back to them! You should review your organization's rules of conduct on a regular basis. These rules could change over time, so it is important to stay up to date. Even if the rules don't change, everyone could use a refresher now and then. If the code of conduct is lengthy and detailed, or if it has been a while since you reviewed it, you may forget some of the specifics. Also, if you are ever in a situation that makes you uncertain, you should consult the rules of conduct to make sure that your actions and decisions align with them.

To truly understand how to follow rules of conduct, you may want to see an example for yourself! Check out "Code of Conduct: The Canada Diabetes Association" from the HR Council and see if you can apply these techniques: http://hrcouncil.ca/docs/POL_Code_of_Conduct.pdf.

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Summary

While following the rules might seem simple at first, you may experience some challenges along the way. The first step of successfully following rules of conduct is to learn them. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the rules, even if it is not a requirement. You should also become aware of any informal or unspoken rules that are still important for you to follow. After learning the rules, take the next step and thoroughly understand them. Understanding the purpose behind the rules will make following them easier. Committing to the rules means following them at all times, even when it is difficult. Your organization may require you to sign an agreement, but even without making a written commitment to them, you can consistently follow the rules by reminding yourself of their importance. Finally, refer back to the rules on a regular basis so that you are aware of any changes and always have the rules fresh in your mind.

TOTAL RECALL

1. What are four techniques you can use to successfully follow rules of conduct?