

unwritten rules

Unwritten rules can quietly (and sometimes noticeably) shape how multidisciplinary teams work — and these unwritten rules are often the reason new starters feel like they've missed the memo. If you've ever caught yourself thinking, "Did I miss something?" or "Why are they doing it that way?", this article is for you.

article



The Importance of Unwritten Rules

Do you remember starting a new job and thinking, "Did I miss something?" You're not alone. You probably remember working through the onboarding checklist: policies read, procedures noted, systems logged into, and you've figured out where the good biscuits get hidden.

But here's the thing – the written rules are only half the story (or maybe less).

Every team operates with a mix of formal structure and unwritten rules. These are the informal habits, expectations, and workarounds that have developed over time. They're rarely included in induction (no one hands you a "how things really work" handbook), but they shape how things happen – and they can affect your confidence, your workflow, and even your relationships if they're not made visible. This article unpacks what those unwritten rules can look like in Multidisciplinary teams (MDTs), why they matter, and what you can do as a new staff member to navigate them with confidence and clarity.



Unwritten Rules Are Real – and They Matter

Whether you're joining a hospital team, an NDIS provider, or a community-based service, every workplace has informal norms. These might be around how handovers are done, how decisions are made, or who updates the shared board. Some might be helpful. Others might be confusing.

In a study on palliative care settings, Sandgren (2012) described how patients, relatives and nurses all had to constantly "decipher unwritten rules" – not just what to do, but how to behave, how to communicate, and when to speak up (p. 2). Even experienced staff were adjusting to subtle shifts in expectations.

Similarly, in a workplace study of 560 real-world incidents, Gilsdorf (1998) found that around 80 per cent of communication breakdowns weren't caused by poor systems – they came from cultural mismatches, unclear expectations, or informal practices no one explained (p. 176). For new employees, not knowing these expectations can feel frustrating – like everyone's working from an invisible playbook, and you're trying to guess the rules.



Why It Matters for a New Team Member

If you've ever thought:

- "I'm not sure who I'm meant to check with before doing this..."
- "I followed the process, but it didn't land well..."
- "Everyone else just seems to know how things work..."

You're not alone.

Understanding unwritten rules helps reduce that uncertainty. They give you clearer footing in team meetings, decision-making, and day-to-day collaboration. These rules might not be in any official manual – just like no one tells you where to find the mess hall or what the different colours on the whiteboard really mean – but they shape how a team functions. And while you don't need to know everything on day one, learning how to spot and ask about these expectations makes your start smoother – and helps build stronger, safer teams.

What You Can Do

Start with curiosity, not caution. Ask questions early and often. Simple questions like "How is this usually done here?" or "What's the usual process for this in our team?" can open the door to valuable insights – not just for you, but for the whole team.

Approaching these conversations as opportunities for improvement (not interrogation) is a small but powerful form of quality improvement. It means looking at what works, where there's variation, and where clarity could help everyone – especially when those improvements are based on information, not guesswork. Find the right people to ask. Buddy systems, shadowing, or informal check-ins with experienced team members are great ways to understand how things are really done – and whether there's room to improve how it's shared.

Reflect, then clarify. If you're unsure after an interaction or task, follow up. A quick "Just checking – was that how we usually do things here?" not only shows you're engaged, but can highlight areas where assumptions are being made. Ask for examples. If someone refers to how "we usually do it", ask if there's a preferred example or format. This is especially helpful when writing notes, planning care, or using shared systems – and can prompt small improvements with a big impact.



What Teams Can Do

Research shows that organisations with stronger cultures don't always have clearer communication (Gilsdorf, 1998). A strong culture can be inclusive – or exclusive – depending on how well it's explained.

Effective teams do the following:

- Name the unwritten norms. Even just acknowledging that they exist can improve team trust.
- Include practical context in onboarding. Beyond policies and procedures, include how things actually work.
- Encourage open discussion. Creating space for team members to ask questions – especially during handover or debrief – helps everyone.
- Check in during early weeks. Rather than assuming new employees will “pick it up”, check what's clear and what's still uncertain.

Bringing the Unwritten into the Light



Talk about the unwritten rules

Make time to talk about how things are usually done – not just what's written in policies. Ask questions like “What's something you wish you'd known when you started here?”



Include examples in onboarding

Don't just give new staff a list of rules – show them how things actually work in your team.



Work together to agree on how the team works

Ask your team, “Are we all on the same page about this?” and make team agreements you can all refer to.



Follow up after a few weeks

Check in with new starters to see what's clear and what still feels confusing – and update your process if needed.



Talk about how different roles see things differently

People from different jobs (like nurses, physios, doctors, or support workers) often have their own way of doing things, and their own ideas about who does what. Instead of assuming, have a conversation about it.



Something to Think About

Starting in a new team takes more than learning the policies. It takes time to learn the rhythm — the shared habits and patterns that don't show up in training modules but shape how your team actually works.

One of the most helpful things a team can do is give permission to talk about the unwritten rules. If those conversations feel off-limits, people tend to guess — or stay quiet. That can lead to missteps, misunderstandings, or missed opportunities for collaboration.

It's not just about making those norms visible — it's about agreement. Teams work best when expectations are shared and negotiated together, not just passed on informally. When there's room to clarify, question, and agree on "how we do things here," it builds trust, clarity, and confidence for everyone — especially those new to the team.

The good news? You don't need to guess. With awareness, curiosity, and a supportive team culture, those unwritten rules can become part of shared understanding — and the foundation for strong, connected, collaborative practice.

References

Apter, N. (2019). The unspoken in teamwork: Applying action methods for the benefit of organizations and their teams. In A. Blatner (Ed.), *Action explorations: Using psychodramatic methods in non-therapeutic settings* (pp. 115–128). Parallax Productions.

Gilisdorf, J. W. (1998). Organizational rules on communicating: How employees are—and are not—learning the ropes. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 11(2), 173–208.

Liberati, E. G., Gorli, M., & Scaratti, G. (2016). Invisible walls within multidisciplinary teams: Disciplinary boundaries and their effects on integrated care. *Social Science & Medicine*, 150, 31–39.

Roberts, J. P., Fisher, T. R., Trowbridge, M. J., & Bent, C. (2016). A design thinking framework for healthcare management and innovation. *Healthcare*, 4(1), 11–14.

Sandgren, A. (2012). Deciphering unwritten rules. *The Grounded Theory Review*, 11(2), 1–15.



Since 1986, Able Recruitment has built a strong reputation in connecting businesses with qualified professionals who are open to seeking new opportunities that match their culture.

Businesses trust us to connect them with industry-qualified professionals who are open to their next opportunity. With access to our extensive industry database and industry-leading technologies, we efficiently match the right candidates to meet your specific needs.

Our goal is simple, to provide tailored recruitment services that are affordable while finding you the right person. We strive to establish an authentic connection with both our clients and candidates, and we are committed to supporting growth by continuously improving our systems, processes, and people.

contact info

EMAIL

hello@ablerecruitment.com.au

QUEENSLAND +61 7 3229 5055

NEW SOUTH WALES +61 2 4954 5080

