



BetterBalance Coaching Archived Monthly Tips

Breaking the Rules



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Breaking the Rules

Rules are part of life, from an early age onwards our lives are shaped by rules at home, at nursery, at school and eventually at work. There are rules in our society, rules of the road, social etiquette and so on. Importantly there is also another kind of rule that effects our lives and these are the ones we create ourselves which can therefore be considered as self-imposed. These rules are often connected to our values although that connection can get lost over time as circumstances change. They often start as repeated behaviours that then become habits and eventually become rules we live by. Some of these self imposed rules serve us well but some don't and can get in the way of our progress. They may also present barriers not just to individual change but also to change in teams or indeed whole organisations.

Let me give you two examples from my own life. I have a very physical side to my 'nature' and this forms one of my core values. Because of this I do three forms of vigorous exercise each week (swimming, gym or canoeing for example). This has become a habit and so much so that now it is one of my 'unwritten rules' for how I choose to spend part of my time. Even when I'm busy and even if I am not keeping up with work I still follow this self imposed rule! On balance though I would say that this rule generally serves me well even though there is the odd time when it doesn't! In contrast however I have another self imposed rule that is about meal times. The way our 'home' life works I do the school runs and also cook most evening meals. As a family we generally aim to eat early at 5pm because it fits with bed times etc. For me this meal time started as a habit and now it has become a rule (a deadline!) that may not always serve me (or others) well. The fact is that it doesn't really matter whether meal time is 5 o'clock or quarter past or on occasions even half past, however if it was later than 5pm it would be breaking my rule! Because of this I will often rush to get home to start preparing dinner, I prepare meals at a speed that would put a commercial chef to shame and I perhaps miss out on doing other more spontaneous things before getting down to preparing dinner. While this habit started off serving values of mine I think it has now lost its way and probably at times means I neglect some core values. As you read this you may be becoming aware of some 'self imposed rules' that govern your life. Do they still serve you well or not? What might you gain if you chose to stop following a rule that no longer serves you?

If you are noticing any 'rules' that don't serve you then you may decide right now to 'break them'. Doing this is a simple matter of having permission. Think of other rules in your life when on occasion you may ask someone for permission to break them, for example because of special circumstances you may ask to be excused from a rule about starting time at work or about wearing uniforms etc. In this way your self imposed rules are no different except that rather than asking someone else for permission you have to ask yourself to gain your own permission to break them – it's that simple. Think of all the aspects of life where self imposed rules could be relevant. For example leaving work late because we have to get everything done before we can go home, or being last out of the office to set an example, or always having Sunday lunch with the in laws, going on holiday with friends or family, always going away/ staying home for Xmas, cleaning the car every Saturday morning, watching the same TV programmes, drinking too much at parties, wearing certain clothes, behaving in certain ways etc etc.



It is perhaps interesting to note how many self imposed rules link to days, fish on Fridays, weekly shop on Saturdays, coffee first thing in the morning, roast dinner on Sunday and even sex on Saturday night! (I'm joking). These rules can serve a purpose of creating order or helping to plan our lives but they can also become stifling. Too many rules applied too rigidly can make us stiff and inflexible. We may even hear people acknowledge these rules in their language when they make statements like "As a rule I don't eat meat" or "As a rule of thumb I open the post and have a coffee before seeing anyone". In coaching I sometimes notice people talking about how routine or mundane their lives have become. On closer examination they quickly discover how much of this 'routine' is self imposed and how things can easily become fresh, spontaneous and more exciting by simply giving themselves permission to break some rules.

At work we can apply self imposed rules to 'how we do something' which on occasions can hinder more than help, particularly when others want to do something for us or when we want to delegate. Perhaps a colleague does a job for us out of kindness but doesn't do it the same way we would. "Thanks very much but I would have done it this way" or "I know you are trying to help but that's not how I do it" or "just leave it to me I'll do it my way". When self-imposed rules get in the way like this they can effect relationships and can make delegation difficult. "I'll do it myself because it's quicker and I know it will get done the way I want it". The self imposed rules we live by can sometimes reach a point of perfectionism where our rules dictate often arbitrary and incredibly high standards for doing something that means we may take ages to finish it or even never complete it at all! This can result in having a back log of many unfinished projects either at work or at home or both! (and heaven help anyone who tries to help). All we need do is give ourselves permission to lower our 'perfect' standards slightly (who will notice anyway?). What would you have done by now if you didn't have to do it perfectly? Sometimes self-created rules for either individuals or teams can stand in the way of change or creativity, how often have you heard people say "But, we've always done it that way!"

Some procedures at work can be handed down over time (the person who created the 'procedure' is now long gone but their rule lives on!) Sometimes the procedures don't get questioned or if someone does question them there is resistance. I came across a great example of this in a legal firm. Way back in time before word processors and in the days of type writers the office manager had set extra large margins for letters to allow sufficient spaces because of a quirk in the carriage return of her type writer. Incredibly thirty years on the margin size had stayed the same because the unwritten rule (In spite of it wasting paper!) had been passed on without question.

Breaking rules is perhaps something that seems alien to many of us which is probably how it needs to be to live in a safe and stable environment. However our self-imposed rules are altogether a different matter and breaking these rules can be the key to a more spontaneous, exciting and fulfilling life.

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Best wishes

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