

# ROAD RAGE

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The BRIGHTON GROUP

 Partners Inc.

The Brighton Group/OI Partners Inc. is a locally owned and managed consulting firm specializing in career and organizational transition services. In-depth, one-on-one consulting is the core of our distinctive approach.

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## *“Road Rage” in the Workplace!*

Commuters faced with the need to merge lanes usually respond by alternating cars, one from each lane, to form one lane. There’s no formal agreement to do this, no law, no written requirement. But people expect it, and it works well when everyone cooperates. However, when someone doesn’t follow the expectation and goes out of turn, other drivers become upset, sometimes even to the point of road rage. Why? Because informal expectations—the unwritten contracts we have with each other—have been breached.

Company culture has been defined as “the way we do things here”. The way things are done is often rooted in the unwritten, informal expectations that employees have about how everyone is supposed to behave. These expectations form unwritten, but nonetheless binding, contracts.

Think how it feels when someone breeches or changes a contract unilaterally. It’s clear that breach of a formal contract (say a mortgage company unilaterally raises an interest rate from 5% APR to 10%) will cause serious repercussions, maybe even landing people in court. But as illustrated with the traffic example, people can also have similar feelings with informal contracts. This could lead to resistance to change, or maybe in egregious cases, to court, or even the equivalent of “road rage” in the workplace! Maybe a new term can be coined for a negative reaction to changes in the way we do things around here: “office-rage.”

Lawyers don’t want employers to do anything that would suggest an employment contract with their employees, because of the legal implications. This has led to the use of policy disclaimers and terms such as “employment at will.”

This may be good legal strategy, but it can also lead to denial of a fundamental aspect of culture and organizational behavior. As a practical matter, employment contracts—however informal—do exist in the minds of people. Leaders need to acknowledge and understand this to effectively form and change their organizational culture, and handle employee relations issues. In fact, almost all employee relations problems can be traced back to some kind of breach of contract, whether the contract was formal or informal.



Understanding the role of informal contracts in “the way things are done around here” is the key to understanding how to be able to change and improve “the way things are done around here” in a non office-rage inducing manner. In the next newsletter, we’ll explore a couple of insights as to how this can be done. Stay tuned!

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