THE RULES TO BREAK

RICHARD TEMPLAR

The author of the international best-seller The Rules of Work



RULE TO BREAK

Friends Are for Life

Apparently we can all manage to maintain a relationship with around 150 friends. It's called Dunbar's Number, after the scientist who identified it. Actually, it's not an exact number, and could lie anywhere between 100 and 230, but that doesn't matter. The point is that it's finite. We're talking here about proper friends, people you can have a meaningful relationship with, who you can interact with. We're not talking about the number of people who might be following you on Twitter or Facebook, or who you'd nod at if you passed them in the street.

As you go through life, you meet new people. Some of them you like more than others. A few of them become friends. After the next job or holiday or social event you might add someone else, and someone else. Pretty soon, you're going to find you've already got 150 friends. So what happens when you add more?

I'll tell you what happens. People drop off the bottom of the list. It's not a conscious thing. You don't come home from a party thinking, "I really liked that man I met. We swapped numbers and I'd like to keep in touch. Hmmm—who shall I drop from my friends list to make room?" No, you don't even notice it happening. But every so often you find yourself thinking that you haven't seen someone for a while, or that you really must make the effort to call so-and-so.

This is natural, and the way things are. You don't have to feel guilty about it. Yes, if you haven't phoned your best friend who's going through a dreadful time you probably should hurry up and call them. But if you haven't been in touch with some friend you used to work with who moved away, well, they haven't been in touch with you either, and maybe your time together has come and gone. And that's OK.

People move in and out of each other's lives, and that's the way it is. The more everyone moves around, the more fluid friendship groups can become. In traditional communities, 150 people might be your village, and you might never move away. But in the modern world this is less and less the case, and you will lose touch with some friends. You'll make sure you keep in contact with the ones who matter most to you, and sometimes people magically and wonderfully come back into your life after years apart. Sometimes you lose all trace of someone, or you keep track of them through someone else but the real friendship fades.

This sounds sad, but the reason for it is that new people are becoming important to you, and giving you the support, fun and company that you need. And the same thing is happening for the people dropping quietly off the bottom of your list. So it's OK. In fact it's a good thing. There are always new friends waiting up ahead. So work to keep the friends that you really want to hang on to, but don't feel bad when others drift away.

RULE 22 FRIENDS COME AND GO

RULE TO BREAK

Mistakes Are a Bad Thing

Back in the 1920s, lots of medical people were studying influenza. My great-grandfather was one of them. He, like many others, was frustrated that the culture dishes he was using kept getting contaminated with a mold that destroyed the bacteria around it. Annoyed that he couldn't get the cultures to develop properly, he threw the dishes away and started again. This happened frequently, and like many other doctors he kept having to throw away these faulty cultures. One scientist, however, Alexander Fleming, realized that a mold that destroyed bacteria wasn't actually a frustrating mistake, but a valuable discovery. He abandoned his original study, and started developing the mold instead. He called it penicillin.

And that explains why you'll find Fleming in history books the world over, but my great-grandfather doesn't get a mention. Fleming's attitude to mistakes was that you could learn something from them, while my great-grandfather was too busy berating himself for messing up to see what was under his nose.

There are plenty more modest examples of this same principle. Right at the other end of the scale, I never truly appreciated the rationale behind filling up the car with gasoline regularly until the time I ran out at 3 a.m. on a cold, wet night. That may sound like a flippant example, but it shows that we make mistakes at every level, and that's how we learn. If you watch a toddler trying to stick two Lego bricks together, you'll see that they can't do it properly until they've got it wrong a few times.

Want another example? My second marriage is strong partly because I learned from the mistakes I made first time around. I have a friend who messed up all through school and came out with no qualifications. It was his inability to get the kind of jobs he wanted, and knew he could do, that drove him to go back to college and work doubly hard to get great results. He'd never have done so well if he'd worked at school and then gone onto

college without such drive and motivation. Some people might, but for him the mistakes he made early on became his motivation. Sometimes mistakes are the only way we can learn—and so long as we recognize where we've gone wrong, mistakes can lead us to great places we'd never have found otherwise.

The important thing about mistakes isn't to avoid them but to make sure you learn from them. Avoiding them studiously is a bad idea, because you can only succeed if you never take any risks. As Einstein said, "A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new." The more mistakes you make—so long as you're learning from them—the more interesting a life you're living. And that's got to be good.

RULE 23
MISTAKES CAN
BF GOOD

RULE TO BREAK

Be a Friend to Everybody

We're good, decent people, you and me. We're Rules players, aren't we? So surely we should treat everybody well—like everyone we meet. Actually, yes...and no. Treat everybody well, certainly, but we don't have to like everyone.

If we're playing by the Rules, we probably will like most people. We'll be open and amicable, we'll do our best to be understanding, we'll be helpful and charming and kind and cooperative and considerate. That brings out the best in people, so we'll see the most likeable side of almost everyone we encounter.

But there are always exceptions. I know someone who claims to dislike only three people. As far as I can tell, that's genuinely true. She's a Rules player, and I should think that's more people than dislike her. However, some people have traits that really rub you up the wrong way, or you meet them under unfortunate circumstances. You're dating their ex, or you have started a new job to find someone working under you who applied for it unsuccessfully and resents you. I imagine they won't show you their best side. And sometimes they'll behave in ways that make it impossible for you to like them.

Personally I find there are very few people I actively dislike, but there have been a handful in my life. Not to mention several I wouldn't go so far as to say I dislike, but I don't actively like them. Whether or not you like someone is a feeling, and you can't help how you feel. So as long as you've given someone your best shot, don't feel obliged to like them.

Ah, but how you treat them—that's a different matter. As a Rules player, you should make it your mission to conceal your dislike. Always be civil, mannerly and considerate regardless of your personal feelings. After all, you'll only make things worse if you don't, and a Rules player occupies the moral high ground at all times. Make sure they have nothing to reproach you with.

There will just once in a while be times when you feel you have to express a strong opposing view out of principle. Maybe you're standing up to someone who is victimizing another person. On these—hopefully rare—occasions you are free to say exactly how you feel about their behavior, but don't tell them you dislike them. How will that help? Not only is it unnecessary, but it makes your attack seem personal, which undermines its authority. Keep it objective.

These occasions should be few and far between, however. The rest of the time just act as if you like everyone. Apart from being the most civilized way to behave, you'll also find people much more likeable, and you'll enjoy them more.

RULE 24 YOU DON'T HAVE TO LIKE EVERYONE