By Joe Byerly

Have you ever picked up your IPhone and noticed that the battery was almost dead even though you charged it all night? The most likely culprits for draining the life out of your phone are the applications operating in the background. In addition to zapping your phone of energy, these apps can also make your smartphone a little bit dumber by slowing down its performance.

Organizations have the same problem. There are "apps" operating in the background that those within the organization don't see, but they affect everything from people's energy levels to performance evaluations. More importantly, they can negatively influence the positive culture leaders within the organization wish to establish.

Who the hell installed these Apps? Ghost Rules and Tripwire Expectations

There are two types of organizational apps that operate in the background. The first type is what Todd Henry, author of *Herding Tigers*, calls Ghost Rules. These are invisible limitations or expectations that people or teams place upon themselves for no reason.

The second type, Tripwire Expectations, are unseen rules or expectations that people don't know exist until they trip over one. And sometimes the people in charge don't even know they have them until someone violates one.

So how do Ghost Rules and Tripwire Expectations play out in real life?

Here's an example of one of the most notorious Ghost Rules: Working late equals dedication and productivity. In the Army, the duty day may end at 1700 but members of the team will stay well into the evening because they believe it's a requirement and they will be judged for leaving "early." This Ghost Rule is widespread across organizations and can have many negative consequences. For instance, staff officers and NCOs can become less efficient with their time because their workday ends around 1900 regardless of their output during the day. Morale can also take a hit because staff members and leaders are always tired from working sixteen-hour days.

If Ghost Rules are subconscious, Tripwire Expectations are conscious. These unseen expectations can affect relationships and performance evaluations. A few years ago, a former Army battalion commander penned a list of [thirty-one things a senior rater expects but will never communicate](). It's clear that this list, which included his taste for a particular type of rank insignia on dress uniforms, was one of the factors in which he judged and rated subordinates. However, I'm not sure he communicated these expectations and many of those he evaluated probably violated them without knowing it –until it was time for their evaluation.

I've spent my entire career observing these two apps operating in the background of organizations, and below are some of my observations and recommendations for how to deal with them, saving the battery life of our units and improving our performance across the board.

Ghost Rules

In the absence of facts, people will create Ghost Rules.

We have a tendency to fill in information gaps with assumptions whenever we lack the truth. Without this skill, we would struggle to make basic life decisions because assumptions allow us to continue moving forward without all the facts. However, when it comes to making assumptions at work, they can take on a life of their own and start driving negative behaviors. Examples of this include working late because we think it's expected, coming in early because we think we have to, or answering emails around the clock because we think the boss expects us to.

These Ghost Rules can become a measuring stick for performance.

It's funny how sometimes we measure the things that don't matter, and these rules can become one of those things. I've seen people evaluate each other and themselves on their

ability to follow these unwritten rules. How late is his car in the parking lot at work? Does she immediately respond to my 10pm emails? If I come in at 5am, will they be there too? All of a sudden we start making performance judgments based off of something that was never discussed or expected in the first place.

Organizations will focus on following the Ghost Rules over efficiency and effectiveness.

Unfortunately, these rules affect efficiency and effectiveness. For example, when people think they are expected to work late, they are disincentivized to look for ways to gain efficiencies in their work or they fail to learn to prioritize tasks and resources appropriately. These rules lead to a great deal of unnecessary work and other obstacles that negatively influence an organization's culture.

Tripwire Expectations

Many leaders fail to communicate clearly, leaving a field of Tripwire Expectations for the organization to fall into.

We say that we want to communicate expectations, however many of us don't do a great job of saying what is really on our minds. We create our own mental roadblocks that often prevent us from being clear and transparent with those who work for us. We feel like people should know better, should be able to read our minds, or should have a similar set of experiences that would lead them to draw the same conclusions as us. In reality, this is rarely the case. Therefore, we fill our organizations with Tripwire Expectations that set us off when people violate them and leave those who find themselves in their wake confused.

Many leaders don't know they have Tripwire Expectations until someone violates one.

Even when we think we are communicating a great deal of our expectations, there are likely some expectations that even we are unaware of until they are violated. Dr. Brene Brown, author of *Daring Greatly*, calls these stealth expectations and says they don't even come up on our radar until someone violates one.

Most people don't intentionally violate Tripwire Expectations but they pay for it when they do.

Because people are unable to read minds, have differing sets of experiences, and are

unable to meet expectations if they are unaware of them, eventually they will violate these unwritten rules without even knowing they're doing it.

Only Leaders can adjust the settings and close out the apps in the background.

While subordinates can take initiative and ask their leaders for clarity on rules and expectations, ultimately, those in charge are the only ones who can ensure these two apps don't drain the energy of the organization.

By talking about rules and expectations, leaders can bring some of these unwritten rules to light. Watch for teams doing things that don't make sense and ask why they are doing it. If you hear they are doing it because they think you expect them to (but you don't), then you have found a ghost rule.

Setting the example is another tool leaders have for combating these apps. By modeling behaviors (and letting them know you are modeling a behavior) leaders can ensure that everyone on the team knows what is expected of them. This can include leaving work at the end of the duty day, not sending emails late into the evening, or leaving the work phone in a separate room in the house so there is no expectation that every call or email will be immediately answered

Even though I know that apps operate in the background on my phone affecting its performance, I still forget to close them out regularly. So, it's a constant battle to keep my smartphone smart. As leaders, we need to apply the same level of vigilance in our organizations. Ghost Rules and Tripwire Expectations will keep popping up. All we can do is continually check the settings and make sure we are playing our part in keeping these apps from slowing us down and draining the great culture we all set out to create.

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