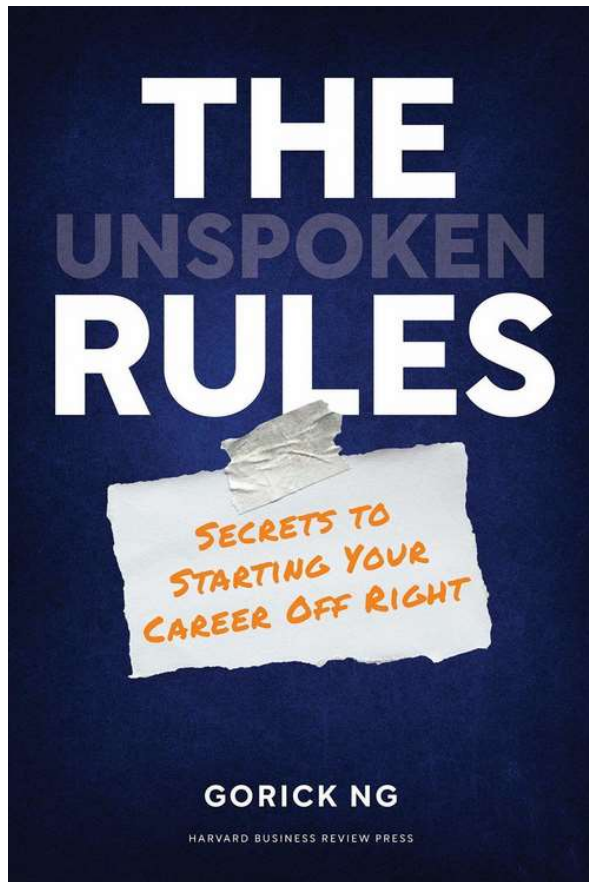


‘Unspoken Rules’ should be heard

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“The Unspoken Rules: Secrets to Starting Your Career Off Right” by Gorick Ng. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2021, 300 pages, \$26 (hardcover).



“Competence means you can do your job fully, accurately and promptly without needing to be micromanaged – and without making others look bad,” Gorick Ng explains near the beginning of “The Unspoken Rules: Secrets to Starting Your Career Off Right,” his new handbook on the ins and outs of getting your work life off on the right foot. “This means not undershooting to the point of looking clueless and not overshooting to the point of looking overbearing.”

“True competence can be difficult to measure,” he continues a little later. “It’s easy if you’re a baker or coder; one simply has to taste your cake or test your code. But for many jobs – where much of your day is spent interacting with people – measuring competence isn’t easy at all. In the absence of clearly measurable outputs, managers often rely on inputs – like how much progress it looks like you are making on a project, how confidently you speak in meetings and how well you promote yourself. It’s no surprise, then, that the people who get promoted or who get the highest-profile assignments aren’t always the most competent – even within organizations that claim to be meritocracies. Your

actual competence still matters, but, as we’ll discuss later in this guide, your perceived competence can be just as important.”

So begins a book I honestly wish I had read decades ago when I was closer to the beginning of my career than to its inevitable conclusion. “The Unspoken Rules” is a veritable gold mine of information and insights that every student coming out of high school or college needs to read. Seriously, I found myself nodding in agreement with some deceptively profound point Ng was making on every single page. Fair warning for my students: Expect to see this as a required textbook in one of my graduate career services classes during the upcoming summer session. Not only is the information provided useful for your individual career, it is essential reading for anyone who is charged with helping the next generation find their way through the wilderness that often characterizes the employment landscape during this turbulent era.

Structurally, the book consists of an introduction, 15 chapters arranged in five major sections and an afterward. The initial chapter, “The Three Cs: Competence, Commitment, Compatibility,” is followed by the first section, “Secrets to Getting Started” (chapters 2-4), “Secrets to Shaping Others’ Perceptions” (chapters 5-7), “Secrets to Getting the Job Done” (chapters 8-9), “Secrets to Getting Along with Everyone” (chapters 10-11) and “Secrets to Getting Ahead” (chapters 12-15). The narrative flows seamlessly from one concept to the next; Ng creates a meticulous portrait of the successful career from inception through retirement. The manuscript is exceptionally applications-oriented, with a number of activities and exercises that serve to reinforce the content on multiple

levels. It is obvious the author is working from a theoretical framework, but the prose is not academic. I can see virtually anyone using this exquisite little primer to guide and augment their vocational decision-making.

As is usually the case with the kind of professional advice Ng is offering, I was especially drawn to the sections that dealt with negotiating the intricacies of human interaction. In my own experience, it is not those with the most expertise and/or technical competence who are typically the most successful – it tends to be those who are good at reading people and the interpersonal dynamics that define most contemporary work environments. See if you can relate to the following anecdote from “Read Between the People,” the 10th chapter and one I found particularly on target:

“As much as we’d like to think we’re all in it together at work, people have their loyalties. One former high school teacher I interviewed told me about a time when she transferred to a new school. When she arrived, she kept hearing her co-workers complain about the school principal. She didn’t get along with the principal either, so one day she criticized him in front of one of the vice principals. ‘This vice principal is on my side,’ she thought. ‘After all, she’s so nice to me.’ Little did the teacher know that the vice principal was good friends with the principal – and ended up telling him what she said. This teacher called what she learned ‘the lesson of first loyalties’: though people may be friendly (and even loyal) to you, their ‘first’ loyalty may be to someone else.”

Admit it: You probably learned this the hard way (as most of us did). This is one of the reasons I give the following advice – true story – to my students as they graduate and secure that all-important first job: ‘For the first six months, nine months, year: Keep your mouth shut. Learn the job. Learn the history. Learn the personalities. Learn the power structure. Learn the territoriality. Learn the politics.’ If they don’t, they invariably find themselves in the kind of conundrum faced by the high school teacher. By the way, oftentimes you can recover from that kind of misstep; occasionally you can’t. Many people forgive; a few forget.

A research associate in the Managing the Future of Work project at Harvard Business School, Ng has a BA in government from Harvard College and an MBA from Harvard Business School. A first-generation college student and the first in his family to graduate from high school, he serves on the board of directors of the Toronto Foundation for Student Success; his resume includes serving as an employer engagement specialist at the University of Massachusetts, where he supported the university’s talent pipeline development efforts with the Boston business community. In 2013, Time magazine included him in the top 25 future leaders from around the world; his work has been featured in The Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, CBC, The Toronto Sun, NECN, Ming Pao, and World Journal. This is his first book.

Even though most of the insights Ng provides are universal, some are notably applicable to the unique and challenging circumstances precipitated by the pandemic. For instance, the author demonstrates how junior staff members can thrive in a remote environment – you know, like the one a lot of us have been living in for the last year or so. Specifically, Ng elaborates on how to build and sustain relationships while working remotely, how to establish “presence” in virtual meetings, how to ask for assistance without appearing lazy, how to impress your supervisor without in-person interaction and how to showcase your competence, compatibility and commitment when you are not physically at work. A tall order, I know. But the author delivers on what he promises. The man, as we say where I come from, knows his stuff.

One of the reasons I put so much stock in the recommendations Ng presents is because he based the bulk of the “evidence” for his thesis on more than 500 interviews with individuals in all boxes of the organizational hierarchy. He carefully distilled the transcripts into this cogent little volume that all entry-level professionals – and really anyone at any stage of their career – should have on their bookshelves. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.