Pirate Codes

Many publicly funded organisations value consistency, compliance, and risk minimisation. To that end, they define many detailed rules to guide workers. Rules and instructions that strive to be prescriptive and exhaustive, however, can leave gaps and contradictions that are more confusing or vulnerable to exploitation than superficially looser codes of conduct, such as those used in the golden age of piracy to run tight ships on lawless high seas.

High standards of public accountability and community expectations of publicly funded organisations encourage the adoption of strong controls to prevent risky or potentially shameful actions. This tends to create risk averse internal systems that define many narrow and specific rules, both proscribing and prescribing a wide range of possible actions, with perfect compliance as an explicit goal for workers.

Large publicly funded organisations also strive to ensure consistency of their work at scale, often across many locations. This goal of consistent policy application and customer experience further reinforces guidelines being built around very specific rules designed to reduce workers to algorithms, producing identical responses to tightly defined stimuli.

As rules becomes more prescriptive and specific, this increasingly implies that the rules are exhaustive. Anything not explicitly proscribed can be perceived to be permitted and anything not explicitly prescribed perceived to be forbidden. Omissions are open to exploitation as loopholes, requiring ever more rules over time to close gap as it is identified. The work required to learn, administer, and enforce complicated rules also leaves less time for workers to deliver value to the people they serve.

As new rules are created to fill gaps, the likelihood of internal contradictions increases, adding confusion and difficulty of navigation to the risks of exploitation or confusion. Growing complexity tends to muddy rather than clarify responsibilities, increasing worker anxiety.

many tightly focused rules leave gaps that can be exploited and inconsistencies that can be confusing
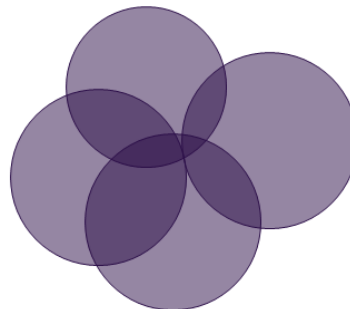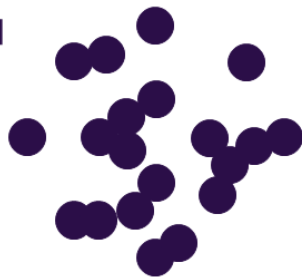
fewer broader rules cover more ground and reinforce core principles rather than conflicting where they overlap

Codes that survive from the golden age of piracy suggest another way of guiding action through smaller sets of common-sense rules. Articles of piracy drawn up for each ship incentivised desirable conduct, disincentivised undesirable conduct, and dictated a few specific rules for managing discipline, dividing treasure, and compensating injured pirates. Most rules were principled and pragmatic, like banning naked flames near the ammunition stores below deck.

A few guiding principles and pragmatic rules with clear incentives and disincentives mitigated risks, with few gaps or contradictions. Rules were anchored in the crew's context, values, and goals, and offered pathways to resolve issues, like prohibiting fighting between crew members on board, but allowing for quarrels to be resolved on shore, at sword and pistol.

The combination of a few broad principles that align with organisational values and a few sensible rules that promote safety and harmony can cover more ground more clearly than a set of complicated and prescriptive algorithms that try to specify everything. A few clear, simple rules are also easier to understand, remember, apply, and enforce, freeing up more time to do the work of creating public value.

Sanctions may be required to correct the most serious unwanted behaviours, but incentives that reward desired behaviour work better for most people most of the time. With fewer gaps and contradictions left open to exploitation, decision-making frameworks can shift from focusing on compliance to focusing on shared goals and desired outcomes. Workers who know what is expected of them, and why, are better placed to keep organisations ship-shape, even under heavy fire.

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