

H4 Consulting Brief

Source of Authority

People working in publicly funded organisations make decisions every day, often without fully understanding the source of their authority. Workers tend to learn and follow soft rules handed down by colleagues, but many rarely consider the hard rules that enable and constrain their work. Workers who, like unqualified drivers in traffic, are not aware of the underlying legal instruments that empower their organisation, are more likely to cause accidents.

Many workers in publicly funded organisations pay little attention to the underlying documents that are the source of their authority. Some even assume that reading and understanding legal instruments is just for lawyers and disregard it as irrelevant to their roles.

Few people test their knowledge about the hard rules that govern their work before taking publicly funded roles. Most are trained on the road by managers and peers, who have their own driving styles and habits.

Onboarding typically focuses on more pressing practical matters, with many workers never being taught to consider the source of authority for their day-to-day work. They follow the examples set by leaders and colleagues and just assume that the hard and soft rules align perfectly. Surprisingly often, that is not true.



low awareness of underlying legal instruments makes boundaries less visible, making it harder for well-intentioned people to work within their authority

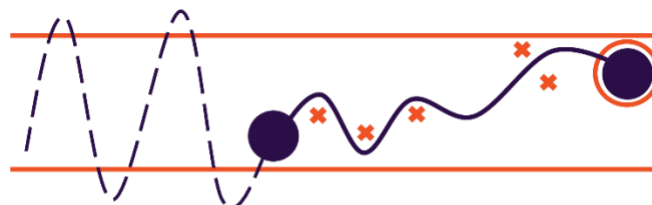
Before being allowed to control a car on the road, new drivers must pass a knowledge test to demonstrate they know the rules. Similarly, requiring workers to understand relevant hard rules before they start their journey makes it more likely they will arrive safely.

Organisations can help workers to be better stewards of authority by regularly signalling the need to refer to underlying legal instruments. For example, leaders can require that briefings specify the source of their authority to decide any matter submitted for their approval. Making this a standard practice reminds workers not only of the need to obey the rules, but also to recognise and act when those rules diverge from community standards and other legal requirements over time.

Not knowing the rules makes it easier to break them unintentionally. A driver with no understanding of road rules, for example, is more likely to run red lights and exceed speed limits, or blood alcohol limits.

Soft rules tend to drift away from the hard rules over time as expectations shift. Workers may not even notice growing gaps between what they are legally bound to do, what the community expects them to do, and what they actually do.

Even knowledgeable, experienced drivers rely on traffic lights, line markings, and signs to prompt safe decisions on the road. But workers in systems that lack clear signals about the nature and limits of their authority are rarely prompted to consider authorising instruments, increasing the risk of a nasty accident.



learning the hard rules before starting work and noting signals along the way makes it easier to stick to boundaries, avoid nasty accidents, and drive towards goals

Workers who can demonstrate that they know key hard rules before they start work, like passing a mandatory knowledge test before driving a car, are less likely to overstep their authority by accident.

Sustaining awareness of, and attention to, legal instruments over time helps workers to align practice and authority. It also helps them to recognise when community standards move away from that practice, suggesting that the organisation's legal powers and authority might need to be reviewed and updated.

Regular signals reminding workers to refer to legal instruments can help them shift from systemic ignorance to consistent awareness of the hard rules. Knowing the source of authority drives better results and keeps workers, and organisations, safer.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: info@h4consulting.com.au
Find additional resources at www.h4consulting.com.au/resources