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Home > [The Brazen Careerist](#) > [E-mail this story](#) [Close print window](#)**The Brazen Careerist**By [Penelope Trunk](#) • Bankrate.com**Getting ahead on the job by breaking the rules**

If you want to stand out in the workplace, you have to break with convention. You will have to be the person who says, "Why do we always do it this way? I have a better idea."

But be careful: People who break all the rules all the time are not innovators or a breath of fresh air, they are sociopaths. Rules create order and process, and no company can operate in a state of anarchy. The key to breaking rules is to know which rules to break.

Break rules that matter. You always take a risk when you do things differently, so make sure there's a big payoff. Does your company have a dress code? Adhere to it. No one ever made corporate history by wearing torn jeans on casual Friday.

Weigh the risks. A lot of rules deserve to be ignored, but sometimes breaking rules is more trouble than it's worth. As a marketing executive in a software firm, I was required to have engineering sign off on every word on box copy.

The process became an opportunity for code-heads to make illiterate proofreading comments. But I still got sign-off every time


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About Penelope Trunk

Penelope Trunk is a New York-based writer who in the past has started Internet divisions at Fortune 500 companies, founded two technology-focused companies and endured an IPO, a buyout and a bankruptcy. Submit your comments [here](#) or learn more about Penelope by reading her [bio](#).

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because while breaking that rule would save me a day in the box production schedule, it would cost me weeks of assuaging engineers' egos.

Know the reason for the rule before you break it. The best example of this is the renegade [barista*](#) at Starbucks (if she has not been fired yet). She keeps adjusting the composition of standardized drinks. She says she gives customers what they want even though they don't know to ask for it. This would be a great idea in another company, but people love Starbucks because wherever you go -- Los Angeles or Des Moines -- the drinks are consistent.

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Break rules so that you can be more effective. Andy Grove broke rules of convention by pioneering the idea of management by walking around. He didn't necessarily set out to break a rule, he just wanted to manage in a way that felt comfortable to him, and walking around talking to people suited him well.

Break rules that other people would be scared to break. In 2000, when everyone was still running on Internet adrenaline, stock analyst Jon Joseph announced that the chip sector was in for a big fall. At the time, he received so many death threats that his

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company hired a bodyguard for him. Recently, he was rewarded for going against the grain by receiving a top post at Smith Barney.

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Before you get giddy about breaking the rules, keep in mind that most people with standout careers spent part of their lives as good rule followers.

Jeff Bezos is renowned for bucking the conventional wisdom that CEOs shouldn't micromanage. He does, and it works well for him. But before he was a rule breaker, he spent the beginning of his career in consulting and finance positions where he followed the rules for entry-level employees and did what he was told to do.


If you think you have a situation where you should definitely break a rule, remember that good rule breakers are good salespeople. You can't just break a rule and think it'll stick. You have to convince people why your way is better.

Get people behind your new way of doing things, so that your new direction can have the large impact you hope for. Break a rule and people will gossip; lead down a new path and people will follow.

** A Barista is a person who creates your espresso-based morning fix.*

-- Posted: June 23, 2003

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