#notarule

winning at business
and life by breaking
rules that don't exist
jason kotecki

Blessed are the rule breakers. They shalt inherit the Future.

We have always admired the great renegades of business, brave souls who dared to deny the status quo, defy the odds, and pioneer a new normal. Nicolas Tesla. Richard Branson. Tony Stark. One thing all of them, and that all great titans of industry have in common is this: they were able to identify rules that don't exist and had the courage to break them.

Of course, there are plenty of rules that DO exist. If you commit fraud or neglect to pay taxes, I hope you look good in an orange jumpsuit. But the rules that DON'T exist greatly outnumber the ones that do. History is filled with examples of those who profited greatly by dispensing with so-called "rules":

@henryford: Thou shalt manufacture thy goods one at a time. #notarule.
@waltdisney: Audiences shalt not sit though a feature-length animated movie. #notarule
@browniewise: House parties are no place for selling. #tupperware #notarule
@stevejobs: Computers shalt be beige. #notarule
@netflix: Thou must charge late fees in order to get customers to return movies. #notarule
@rockybalboa: Thou shalt not train for a boxing match by punching meat. #notarule

Here's the exciting news: a revolution is underway and you're invited to be a part of it.

As you know, the internet has already changed everything. Entire industries have been wiped out. Gate keepers have been toppled. The way we've always done things is no longer the way we do things. And It's only getting started. What lies before you is a wonderful opportunity. There have always been rewards reserved for the rule breakers. But now, like never before in history, the title of Rule Breaker is no longer reserved for the lone geniuses and larger-than-life icons. It's open to everyone. In fact, it's a mantle you must embrace if you want to survive.

In times of great change, we naturally fall back on the tried and true to maintain a measure of security. But although the status quo may feel safe, it's the most dangerous place to be. In a landscape changing faster than ever, rule breaking is a requirement. The ones who keep doing things the way they've always done them are in for a rude awakening, and possibly early extinction.

The president of a real estate company was telling me about the recent arrival of an online portal that allows would-be home buyers to search and virtually tour all of the homes on the market. Visitors are funneled to a real estate agent, who of course pays for the privilege. The president lamented the fact that his business model was being upended, and bragged that his firm had started posting videos online years earlier.

I encouraged him to think about what business they're really in, and figure out what value his team could provide that an online portal simply could not. The task before him is to examine which rules that don't exist his firm is following. If he continues doing things the way they've always done them, his agents may be looking for a whole new thing to do real soon.

Breaking rules is the new black.

In order to join the ranks of Melitta Bentz, Milton Hershey, or Milburn Pennybags, we have two challenges.

" Although the status quo may feel safe, it's the most dangerous place to be. In a landscape changing faster than ever, rule breaking is a requirement. The ones who keep doing things the way they've always done them are in for a rude awakening, and possibly early extinction.

The first is that these rules are so ingrained within us that we don't even stop to consider an alternative. In hindsight, the successful choices great rule breakers of the past made seem obvious. Building an amusement park that is safe, clean, and enjoyable for both children and adults is a no-brainer now. So why didn't anyone do it before Walt Disney?

Uncovering rules that don't exist is one thing, but actually breaking them is separate pail of worms. That's the second challenge.

Every industry has a widely accepted way of operating. Going against the grain can be a scary proposition. You are likely to encounter scorn, criticism or ridicule. You might fail. Breaking the rules can be scary as hell.

So, how do you get good at noticing the rules? And how do you muster up the courage to actually break them?

First, as a primer, I'll share seven commonly held rules that don't exist. Then we'll explore some ways to get better at seeing them, followed by strategies for breaking them with confidence.

Let's go!

Seven Rules You Should Totally Break

1 | **Thou shalt wait for permission from your boss before doing something awesome.**

Did you know Steven Spielberg was originally going to use stop-motion to animate the dinosaurs for *Jurassic Park*? It was a no-brainer, especially since he had Phil Tippett, the master puppeteer responsible for bringing many of the *Star Wars* creatures to life.

But some rebels at Industrial Light & Magic, who lived by the motto "always question the established system," did some covert experimenting. Even though they were told that creating the dinosaurs in CGI was not an option (no one believed they'd look realistic enough), the team secretly started working on a computer-generated T-Rex animation in their off hours.

One day, some producers saw it playing on a monitor, and everything changed. Stop-motion was out. Spielberg re-wote the ending to include a dramatic close-up of the T-Rex fighting off two raptors, and with that, movies would never be the same. People could tell stories they never thought they could tell.

"I love the term 'you will never.' If I had listened to 'you will never,' the T-Rex never would have been built." —Steve "Spaz" Williams

Your boss, banker, or board of directors may not get your vision when you tell it to them. Try showing them instead.

2 | **Thou shalt not have too much fun at work.**

We are in a war against Adultitis. Especially at work.

Putting googly eyes on inanimate objects, decorating your cube for Halloween, and making cupcakes for coworkers are some of the weapons we have on our side.

Too bad some people prefer keeping them locked away.

After speaking at a conference for 911 operators, a woman shared what a drag it was working at her dispatch center. "It didn't used to be that way," she said sadly. "We kept toys at our work stations and had a lot of fun decorating our offices for every holiday. But our new boss doesn't allow it. He thinks we should be more serious. It's really affected the morale of our whole team, and even officers who stop in ask where our decorations went."

Stories like this remind me why burnout is so rampant in today's workforce. It is possible to LOVE what you do but HATE where you work, and burnout happens when people work in such an environment.

Burnout can be easily resolved. But it requires leaders who see power in bringing fun to the workplace and are smart enough to understand that having a little fun in no way diminishes the seriousness in which one takes his or her responsibility.

I can't imagine many more serious occupations than being a 911 dispatcher. On a regular basis, they hear screams of terror and horrible tales of human suffering. And with great professionalism and compassion, they listen and they offer help. To think that anyone can survive—let alone thrive—in an environment like this without a little fun and humor is just plain idiotic.

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Don't get me wrong, I want my bank to take security seriously. But that doesn't mean it has to take itself so seriously.

Too many leaders see something like decorating an office as a frivolous waste of time. Even if they acknowledge a morale problem, they refuse to believe that such simple solutions can be effective. And that's where they're wrong. We human beings worship complexity, but
the truth is that the simplest solutions are often the ones that work best.

Our world is aching for silliness. Not just in the backyard, but in the boardroom as well.

3 | Thou shalt only do things that scale.

In a world filled with entrepreneurs with visions of blockbuster IPOs dancing in their heads, it's easy to get hoodwinked by the idea that everything you do must be scalable. It's a good thing to keep in mind, but a terrible thing to make into a rule.

I remember when I was first starting out, I tried to do everything I could to appear bigger than I was. As I yearned for credibility, I was downplaying some of my best advantages, the very ones ginormous companies would die for. Namely, the ability to listen, be nimble, and do things that don't scale. Like sending handwritten thank you notes to every single customer.

No, this isn't scalable when you have hundreds of thousands of customers. But it's just the thing that can energize a group of early adopters, the very people who will tell you what about your product or service works and what doesn't, and will sing your praises to everyone they know.

You know what does scale? Pre-printed generic thank you notes. Inflexible one-size-fits-all policies. Customer service centers outsourced to India manned by telephone operators curiously named "Bob Thomas." (Why do they always have two first names?)

Spam sandwiches may be scalable, but that doesn't mean they're tasty.

A better strategy is to focus less on what scales and more on what matters. Like caring.

4 | **Thou shalt determine a thing's importance by how easily it can be measured.**

Before a speech I gave recently, the executive director who hired me shared the results of a survey they commissioned to evaluate their effectiveness. By all accounts, this organization had met or exceeded all of their performance metrics. But as the leader admitted, "most performance metrics don't tell a really good story."

She's right, you know. Things like income, expenses, and profit margins can give us a handy snapshot of the health and growth of an organization. But they do not tell the whole story. In fact, they can be a rather poor reflection of happiness delivered or lives changed.

After all, who can accurately measure how profoundly a soul has been moved? Or the precise generational impact of a tool that empowers an individual to lift themselves out of poverty? It's much easier to calculate the things that are easily measured—like last quarter's profits—and assume everything else takes care of itself. At best, this technique only provides part of the story. At worst, it can lead us down some bad roads.

The answers to questions like "how many contracts did we sign?," "how many locations are we in?," and "how much did we spend on advertising?" are easily calculated. Many of us spend the majority of our time monitoring those stats while assuming that our efforts spent to improve them will result in a corresponding uptick in the quality of our story.

Not so fast.

Just because something can be measured doesn't make it important.

5 | **Thou shalt let others define thy success.**

Business is a game. Of course, you need money to keep playing, but it's dangerous to think that there's only one way to win, when in fact, there are many.

For some people, winning is getting acquired by Google.

For others, it's going public.

For some, it's about improving the condition of people in need.

Total annual revenue, number of employees, and the address of your business are all metrics used to define winning. Although each of these are valid definitions, they all require a different bag of tactics. Problems arise when you steal tactics before understanding the strategy behind them.

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If you read any popular business magazine, you might be inclined to think that unless you are in the Fortune 500, you are an insignificant schlub.

My brother Doug has an extremely boring but obscenely profitable online business selling fall protection. He has one employee, almost no overhead, and the business demands a relatively small amount of time, which allows him to spend more time on more engaging, albeit less profitable, creative pursuits.

As Charlie Sheen would say, "Winning!"

As the old adage goes, be careful that you don't spend your life climbing the ladder of success only to find, once you reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.

In order to avoid this, the first step is to figure out what game you want to play.

Step two: play that game as well as you can.

Step three: don't be distracted by people playing a different game.

6 | Thou shalt be realistic.

Who's to say what's realistic or not? Was is "realistic" to expect that Mario could defeat Bowser and save Princess Toadstool by hitting bricks with his head and navigating an underwater world sans any shred of scuba gear?

And do we really believe that Orville and Wilbur Wright were deemed "realistic" by their fellow townsfolk while they used their bicycle repair shop profits to try and build the world's first "flying machine"? After all, in 1902 (just ONE year before the Wright Brothers' great success), Lord Kelvin—the otherwise brilliant dude who determined the correct value of absolute zero as approximately -273.15 degrees Celsius—said, "No aeroplane will ever be practically successful."

And just fifty-eight years after the Wright Brothers' breakthrough, was President John F. Kennedy being "realistic" in when he declared that America would send a man to the Moon by the end of the decade? (By the way, the first handheld pocket calculator would not be invented until five years AFTER Kennedy's speech.)

Meanwhile, is it "realistic" today to think that we will ever find a cure for AIDS or autism or Alzheimer's disease?

If a dream is realistic, it's not really a dream. It's a to-do.

If you're going to dream, you might as well dream big. And if you're ever accused of dreaming too big, then you can rest assured that you're on the right track. Just pretend you're a long lost member of the Wright clan.

Don't be realistic. And be very, very cautious about what you label as "impossible."

For as John Andrew Holmes wisely said, "Never tell a young person that something cannot be done. God may have been waiting centuries for somebody ignorant enough of the impossible to do that thing."

7 | **Thou shalt not let thy princess dress get wet.**

One day, while enjoying a walk by the lake with my family, my daughter Lucy began wading in the water, delighted by the sand squishing between her toes. She was wearing last year's Halloween costume—a pink and yellow princess dress—because, well… just because.

The gentle waves kissed the bottom of her gown. I considered telling her to be careful not to ruin it, but I did't want to spoil her fun.

Meanwhile, my son Ben, outfitted in his Incredible Hulk costume—you know, just because—was lying face-down in the sand like a big green turtle who had come in with the tide to build a nest.

By the time I turned my attention back to Lucy, she was in lake water up to her armpits, sparkly princess dress and all! I stood there, in stunned silence, as the supercomputer in my brain whizzed through its vast database in search of some rule frowning upon the intermingling of lakes and princess dresses. The warm smile that beamed widely across her face suggested that perhaps this was yet another rule that doesn't exist.

In that moment, Lucy was unquestionably living life as well as it can be lived.

Too often, we fall far short of this ideal. Why? Because we're afraid of getting our princess dress wet.

Our "princess dress" is the carefully-curated version of ourself that we show off to others. It's the way we look, speak, and act. It's our degree and our job title, our home and hairstyle, our cars, clothes, and 401ks, all wrapped into one pretty package and tied with a bow that signifies that we are responsible, sophisticated, and successful.
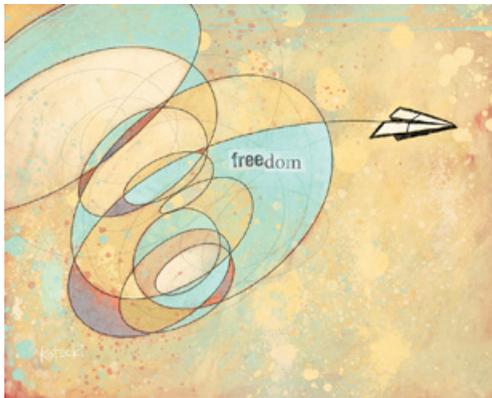
In order to keep this princess dress looking good, we must live a life of restraint. No full-out running, no sitting on the ground, and certainly no swimming in lakes.

We are given countless opportunities to dive headfirst in to the experience of life, but we are too afraid to mess up our hair, our clothes, or our reputation. Because running through puddles, making a mess, or doing something silly for the sheer sake of fun sullies the dress we've worked so hard to preserve.

While settling for good enough, we miss the insanely great.

Guess what? After the dip in the lake, Lucy's princess dress went into the washing machine and came out good as new.

Don't settle for dipping your toes into this adventure called life. For best results, spend more of your time up to your armpits in awesome.

Don't be afraid to get your princess dress wet.

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How to Get Better at Spotting the Rules

1 | **Start a Practice Project.**

I recently started an ongoing project called [#notarule](#). Every day, I post a rule that doesn't exist. Sometimes they are rules my family has broken. Sometimes they're rules I've noticed someone else break. After a few weeks of posting regularly, other people started sending me rules. As the project unfolded, I got a lot better at noticing rules that don't exist. Turns out it's a skill that can be developed with a little practice. Start flexing your rule breaking muscles by starting a personal journal, with the challenge of listing one #notarule each day.

2 | **Take Advantage of Newbies.**

It's one thing to encourage you to question everything. It's another thing to actually do it, because we're creatures of habit. The rules that don't exist have woven themselves into the tapestry of our lives, making it nearly impossible to consider doing anything differently. However, new eyes are not handicapped by this. Take advantage of new hires, or employees who've been recently promoted to a new position or department. Implore them to ask "why?" and "why not?" a lot. Give them rewards for doing so before they become conditioned to doing things a certain way just because. When they ask these questions (and if you're doing

a good job, they will ask a lot, and it will become maddening) take time to answer them. If you can't remember the reason, or if the reason is irrelevant, outdated, or stupid, you've just struck oil and discovered a rule that doesn't exist!

3 | **Hero Worship.**

I am a fan of Hugh MacLeod, who is well-known for drawing cartoons on the back of business cards. He broke the rule "Thou shalt make thine art upon traditional surfaces." It reminds me that art can come in many shapes and sizes, and that sometimes the most unusual forms are the most effective at getting noticed. Who are your heroes in business and life? If they experienced any measure of success, you can bet they broke at least a few rules that didn't exist. Analyze what they were and see if there are any lessons you can learn.

> **"** *Constantly comparing ourselves to our competitors makes for a lot of "me too" products and services. … What are successful people and organizations doing in the industries completely unrelated to your own? Is there anything you can "steal" and adapt to your own situation? (Hint: the answer is yes.)*

4 | **Become a Thief.**

Constantly comparing ourselves to our competitors makes for a lot of "me too" products and services. To be truly innovative, one must look outside one's immediate sphere of influence. My brother Dan was inspired by a process he experienced at Disney World and is now spear-heading a multi-million dollar project at the hospital he works at based on that very same idea. Peanuts creator Charles Schulz looked for ideas at bookstores by roaming the sections he rarely visited. What are successful people and organizations doing in the industries completely unrelated to your own? Is there anything you can "steal" and adapt to your own situation? (Hint: the answer is yes.)

5 | **Simon Says Who.**

How do other professionals in your field do things? How are companies in your industry *supposed* to operate? What are the absolute givens? Make a list of at least 50 of them. It may be difficult, but don't stop until you get to 50, because there are at least that many. Once you've completed your list, for each one, ask, "Really? Says who?" If the answer is "the IRS," or "The Constitution," feel free to move on to the next one. But challenge yourself to see if there are any opportunities in going the opposite direction. Ask, "what if we did _____ instead?"

How to Get Better at Breaking the Rules

1 | **Get Real with Risk.**

Own the fact that staying put is not safe, but risky. We are often afraid to break rules because we are wary of the negative consequences of upsetting the status quo. Our fear of loss is stronger than our desire to gain. What we need to own in this climate of fast-paced change is that staying put is is dangerous. Blockbuster could have done what Netflix did, but they were too entrenched in their old way of doing business. By staying the course, they lost everything.

2 | **Tinker.**

That being said, you don't have to bet the farm. All you have to do is get good at what I call tinkering. To tinker is "to repair, adjust, or work with something in an unskilled or experimental manner." Take special note of those words "unskilled" and "experimental." For some reason, we grown-ups think we have to master something on our first attempt. Naturally, that's impossible, so we don't even try. Kids are under no such illusions. They tinker all day long.

And when you were a kid, so did you.

Don't worry about being perfect, don't worry about outcomes, and don't bite off more than you can chew. Just start trying things. Gmail and AdSense, now-gigantic pillars of Google, both originated in small, experimental projects that Google encouraged its employees to undertake. You never know what small actions taken today could lead to game changing innovations tomorrow.

3 | Assemble Avengers.

Someone in customer service might be aware of a rule that the product development team could break which could increase sales by 30%. An intern may have an insight that the CEO would have never considered. Salary and position within an organization are poor indicators of where great ideas come from. Encourage ideas from everyone. There is safety (and power) in numbers. By getting everyone involved, you'll build unity. And when it's time to head in a bold new direction, you'll have everyone on board.

4 | Do Things That Don't Matter.

Again, jumping in to the deep end of the pool and suddenly upending the way you've done everything can be a recipe for disaster. It is not reasonable to expect that anyone used to doing things a certain way can immediately transform into an industry-shifting, rule-breaking rebel for the ages. However, it is unfair to assume that such tendencies are part of one's DNA.

They can be developed, and the tolerance for breaking rules that don't exist can be strengthened gradually. A great way to do this is by practicing with things that, in the grand scheme of things, don't really matter. For instance, experiment with how you run a meeting, tinkering with time, format, location, or what type of food you have on hand. Move casual Friday to Wednesday. Change up your morning routine, from what you have for breakfast to how you get to work. Every step you make will grow your comfort zone. Before long, you'll find yourself more willing to break even bigger rules.

The world needs more curious and brave people breaking rules that don't exist.

You have everything you need to help lead the charge.

Blessed are the rule breakers. They shalt inherit the Future. ⬚

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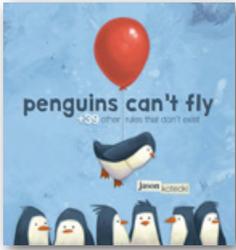
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Jason Kotecki is an artist, speaker, and author. Jason and his wife, Kim (a former kindergarten teacher), are the dynamic duo behind Escape Adulthood and founders of the Cure Adultitis Institute. In their crusade to annihilate Adultitis, they encourage people to design lives with less stress and more fun. As a speaker, Jason empowers organizations and individuals to drive innovation, prevent burnout, and achieve new levels of productivity. Jason is a *Batman* fan, *Star Wars* watcher, retro t-shirt wearer, avid eater of sugar-laden cereal, and father of three kids. He lives with his family in picturesque Madison, Wisconsin, where they enjoy long walks by the lake and eat way too many cheese curds. Learn more at [EscapeAdulthood.com](#).

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