THE RULES TO BREAK

RICHARD TEMPLAR

The author of the international best-seller *The Rules of Work*
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Introduction

When you're young you're told all sorts of things: I want doesn't get, the best things in life are free, familiarity breeds contempt, patience is a virtue. And others personal to your own family or teachers. Some of them are drilled into you, some of them you just pick up along the way. As you get older, you pick up even more sayings, principles and beliefs, many of which you just assume to be true and never think to question. So by the time you arrive into adulthood, you're living by a mixed bag of so-called “rules,” whether you know it or not. You might only know it when you suddenly find yourself spouting one of them to a struggling friend or youngster and then think “where on earth did that come from?”

Trouble is these principles, given as “advice” from well-meaning people, often aren’t true. And many of them are right some of the time, but whoever told them to you failed to explain that there will be times when you should disregard them, or even take the opposite approach.

The point is, you have to learn to question, to think for yourself, not to follow mindlessly the rules set down for you by other people. Otherwise you’ll be making yourself miserable for no reason. Learn to trust your own judgment (now there’s a proverb you can follow all the time).

I’m not saying everything you’re taught is wrong, whether it’s a popular homily or a value impressed on you by your family. I’d entirely agree, for example, that it’s always a good idea to look before you leap. But I agree with it after having thought it through. However, I also think, for example, that it can sometimes be a very good idea to change horses in midstream. And I disagree that attack is the best form of defense, although once in a while it may be the only one that works. And money is certainly not the root of all evil. We can’t pass the blame on to those poor, inanimate dollars and coins.
These pretender rules may not all be popular sayings, however. Some of them are beliefs that are incredibly widespread among people. They may be worded in any one of a dozen different ways, but boiled down they all mean the same thing, and the underlying common theme is seriously unhelpful.

Since writing *The Rules of Life*, and my other Rules books (which outline the behaviors of people who get the most out of life and find it easiest and most fulfilling), I’ve discovered that people really do love rules. And that’s part of the problem. Many of us love rules to the point that we just don’t think to question them. I’ve had a lot of emails from readers who have discovered that they are living by rules that are actually what I’d call “imposters”—well-meant advice or beliefs they have just picked up along the way. And that’s why I set out to write this book. To shine a light on the unhelpful beliefs and behaviors that so many of us are carrying around and give them a good poke to see if they really do pass the test.

Think. That’s the message. Question everything you’ve been taught, and don’t live by other people’s rules until you’ve considered whether you agree with them. Whether you’re 18 or 80, examine the childhood principles you were told to follow blindly, and decide for yourself whether they’re right. Just regularly catch yourself and ask “why do I believe that?” and “is it helpful?”

I’m not giving you permission to ignore any rules and values you don’t happen to like. (I wouldn’t do that—you don’t need my permission for anything.) That’s not the way to happiness or success. Be honest with yourself, and sometimes you’ll find yourself reluctantly agreeing with principles you wish you didn’t. Just don’t get tied down unthinkingly to other people’s values. When you become an adult, you’re allowed to develop your own set of principles.

So here are the so-called rules that I encourage you to break, at least some of the time. These are the ones I’ve found to be surprisingly common among people from all walks of life. At the end of each entry, I offer you a more reliable “replacement” or proper

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1 Yep, even mine.
Rule to put in its place. I hope you find them useful, and do let me know how you get on. You can contact me via my Facebook page (below). I can’t promise always to find time to respond, but I can promise you that I’ll read your post with interest, and I’d love to know about any rules you’ve successfully broken.

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Author’s Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the many people who have helped me with this book, and especially the following readers:

Olabisi Adebule
Nikki Betts
Ned Craze
Glendon Hall
Virginia Josey
Debra Pennington-Bick
Nick Saunders
Publisher’s Acknowledgments

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Success Is a Good Job Earning Lots of Money

People are always ready to tell you that you’ll never be successful if you don’t do this or that. I’m willing to bet that you’ve already heard something like: “You’ll never make anything of your life unless you buckle down and work harder/go to college/get good grades/get a well-paid job/get a ‘proper’ job.” You know the kind of thing.

But hang on. How are we defining success? And is there only one narrow path that leads there?

The parents, teachers or well-intentioned friends who tell you these things are probably assuming what you want out of life is a nice house and plenty of money and a job that commands respect. Let’s set aside for a minute whether they’re right about that, and assume it is for now. Is it really true that being good at exams, going to college, landing a job at a prestigious firm, and working your way up the corporate ladder is the only way to achieve those material goals? No, of course not. It’s one way, but not the only way. There are plenty of real people who’ve left school early and made a fortune.

But who says that money and an important job are the things that constitute success for you? They may be commonly used measures of success, but that doesn’t make them right.

The only way to determine what makes for success is to establish what will make you content with your life. And for some people that might mean a flashy car or an impressive job title. If that does it for you, fine, then that’s the thing to aim for.

But if it just doesn’t feel right, that’s because you’re one of the many people who are looking for something else in life. Success to you could mean a big family with lots of kids, or a job that leaves you enough time to pursue your other interests, or the
satisfaction that you’re helping people, or an absorbing job that fascinates you even if the pay is pitiful and the promotion prospects zero.

I know someone who only felt content that he’d achieved what he wanted when he was living self-sufficiently on a wild Welsh hillside with just his dog for company. And someone else who only felt successful when she was able to get a flat in London and live the city life, regardless of the fact that her job was pretty basic and going nowhere. I know people who’ve regarded success as being able to get out of the big city and live quietly in the country with a more modest job and a smaller house. And those who have been happy in almost any job so long as it keeps them out of doors. One of my sons is really happy living on a classic boat he’s spent years restoring—he’s not bothered about how he earns the money to look after the boat. His feeling of success comes from having rescued it and created his own home from it.

Even the people who do yearn for a more traditional idea of success can have widely differing views of it. Some want money to flash it around, others so they feel safe. Some people want a top job for the status, others for the challenge. We’re all different. For almost everyone, attaining success will mean hard work and a clear focus. But only you can know what to focus on.

So don’t let anyone tell you what it takes to succeed, because they have no idea what success means to you. You, on the other hand, need to think about what it means, or you can’t work towards it.
Some People Are Just Born Lucky

It’s easy to want someone else’s life, to covet what they’ve got, to wish you had their skills, talents, friends, money, lifestyle. That’s because you can only see what’s on the surface—what they let you see. And you probably only notice the stuff that you envy.

When I was a boy, there was this kid in our class who did well in every subject. He was so brainy he barely had to try. Boy did I wish I could be like him. It was several years before I realized that actually he worked a lot harder than I thought. He was bright, but not that exceptional. And the reason he worked hard was because his parents were strict disciplinarians and wouldn’t let him watch TV or go out unless he’d done the work they expected from him. With hindsight, I was glad no one had listened to my younger self and waved a magic wand and given me his life. I’d have hated it.

Actually, thinking about it, there were kids at school going through all kinds of stuff we knew nothing about at the time. Alcoholism, bereavement, divorce, abuse…and it’s still true as an adult that I probably don’t know the half of what goes on in other people’s lives.

So I’ve stopped envying people, because I have no idea whether I really want to be them or not. At least I know where I am being me. I’m used to it, and I have some control over it too, which counts for a lot. And even if other people seem genuinely happy and well-off now, who’s to say where they’re headed? It could all come crashing down in a few years, and I’ll be very relieved I stuck with being me.

Besides, have you ever stopped to think about the people who envy you? I bet there are a few. Maybe they envy the whole “you” thing, or perhaps it’s something specific—your confidence, your athletic skill, your friends, your social life, your university degree. We have a foolish tendency to take for granted the things we have, and just focus on what we lack. Maybe we should see
ourselves through other people's eyes more often. We’re all a mishmash of positives and negatives, and your own mix is no better or worse than anyone else’s.

And there’s another thing. As long as you focus on other people, you don’t get round to tackling the things you dislike about your own life. Instead of wishing you had what they have, why not spend a bit more time thinking about how to get what you want for yourself? A bit less self-pity and a bit more get-up-and-go and there’d be nothing to envy.

RULE 2
DON’T ENVY OTHER PEOPLE
You Need the Right Qualifications

Sweating over assignments? Under pressure to get the best grades you can? Teachers or parents or friends or tutors telling you how your whole future depends on it? Let me tell you a secret—exam results really aren’t as important as everyone tells you.

They’re a shortcut. That’s all. A good exam grade tells a university or an employer what they need to know in the simplest way. But plenty of people have happy and successful lives on the back of some pretty poor exam results. Einstein famously failed his university entrance exam, proving that there’s also a lot exam results don’t say about you.

Look, I’m not saying don’t bother. For most people, life is a lot easier if they get the best grades they can. Plus if you’re young it certainly smooths your relationship with your parents. But it’s not worth making yourself miserable over. You can retake exams, go back to college five or 25 years later, work your way up from the bottom, pick a career that doesn’t need qualifications... so long as you have dedication and aren’t afraid of hard work, you can do most things with or without good exam grades.

I’ll tell you something: since two years after I left school, not one employer has ever asked me what grades (if any) I got. OK, that wouldn’t happen in any career, but there are still countless jobs where experience and natural ability count for far more than exams. When you’re 18, they’re all an employer has to go on. By the time you’re 28, they’re far more interested in what you’ve done with the last 10 years of your life than what you did at school.

And another thing—I remember all that sweating over whether to take chemistry or physics, or which language option to do, or whether we really needed to take history. But unless you’re going into a very specific career such as medicine, for example, I can tell you it just doesn’t matter what subjects you take. Take the ones you’ll enjoy.
Do you know, my commissioning editor for this book has a degree in physics. What damn use is that for a career in publishing? Bet she sweated buckets over choosing it when she was 18 though. I know a comedy writer who studied ancient Greek. I have a brother-in-law who agonized over whether to do philosophy or computing—not knowing then that he’d work in conservation, for which he’d actually want a degree in environmental biology. So he went back five years later and got one of those too.

You see? Everyone else just wants the best for you and all that stuff, and they feel safer if you get top grades, but the truth is that you may not need any of it—and if you do need something you don’t get, you can sort it out later. What appears to matter desperately now will seem like a fuss about nothing in a few years’ time.