INTRODUCTION

The best work environment is one in which employers and employees work together as a team, supporting, leading, and sharing goals. In such an environment, it’s up to each person to meet his or her responsibilities and do a good job. Every employee on the team must help the employer sustain this spirit of cooperation and achievement. None of this is possible unless you can follow instructions.

This packet is about following instructions. As an employee, if you don’t follow instructions, you won’t have good relations with your employer. If you don’t have good relations with your employer, you won’t be able to do good work, and you may lose your job.

THE PROBLEM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Following instructions is an important part of any job. If you don’t follow instructions, you will find it very difficult to keep a job. Following instructions is central to success in most businesses or industries, whether they are retail, service-oriented, product-oriented, or information-intensive companies.

People who don’t follow instructions are at a disadvantage on most jobs. Here are some of the possible consequences of not following instructions on the job:

- Mistakes are made which affect clients and customers.
- Reports are filed with mistakes in them.
- Products are manufactured or produced with flaws (some may be serious or even fatal).
- Service is slow.
- Sales decline and customer service is inferior.
- Personnel safety is compromised.
- Company policies and procedures are not observed.
EXPLORING WORKFORCE ATTITUDES  FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

CAUSES OF NOT FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

There are many reasons why an employee might not follow instructions on the job. Among the most common excuses heard are the following:

- I didn’t hear my supervisor say to do it that way.
- I know a better way to do it.
- I didn’t have time to do it the way I was told.
- I was in a hurry.
- Nobody else does it that way.
- That’s the old way to do it; we do it differently now.
- It’s boring to do things the same way, over and over.
- I’m too creative to just follow orders.
- That’s not the way I was taught to do it on my other job.
- That’s not for me.
- I’ll do it my way.
- I didn’t understand what was told to me.

WHAT IT MEANS NOT TO FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS

Following instructions doesn’t necessarily mean being uncreative, stodgy or boring. It does mean having some consistency in what you do each day. It also means listening to your supervisor or other superior and respecting her or his way of doing a task or job.

An employee who refuses to cooperate demonstrates a negative attitude. When an employee says to his/her supervisor, “I’m going to do things my way,” he or she is being insubordinate (defiant). This type of attitude can certainly affect a person’s employment status.

Procedures and policies exist in a company for a reason. They aren’t just rules that management invents to harass employees or stifle their creativity. There’s always a reason why a particular procedure or policy exists.
EXPLORING WORKFORCE ATTITUDES  FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

Of course, each company has conditions or procedures which need to be changed. But the change doesn’t need to occur on a random basis. If you change the procedure in one way and the person at the next desk does it a second way and another a third way, there will be no consistency in any of your changes. The changes need to be thought out carefully and then implemented on a company-wide basis.

Let’s take an example. Let’s say that your company always files end of the month reports on the final working day of each month. You have an idea about how to make the procedure work more smoothly. So you start filing your report in a different format without telling anyone. As a result, the whole company’s statistics for the month are incorrect because you made an unauthorized change. You didn’t follow instructions and as a result, the entire company’s report for that month was incorrect.

A more productive way is to do what some people call “going through channels.” When you have an idea or see an area that needs improvement, go to your supervisor and talk the idea through with him or her. Who knows? Your change might just become company policy. But don’t try to go it alone. It doesn’t benefit either you or the company.

CASE STUDIES

HARRY AND HIS HAIR

Harry works in a chemical plant that manufactures antibiotics, eye drops, and other medicines. He was told when he took the job that he would either have to shave off his beard and mustache or wear a face mask when he was on the job.

Harry became very angry about this regulation. His beard and mustache were very handsome and had taken a long time to grow. Harry also had long hair, which he often wore in a ponytail. That was no problem; he could just pull it back on the job. But the beard was a different matter. Why should he cut it off or squash it down under a stupid face mask?
Harry began to complain about the rules to his coworkers. “Where do they get off telling me how I can wear my beard?” Harry would say. “This company has no right to tell me how I should look. This look is me, and nobody has a right to make me change it.”

Of course, the company really didn’t care how Harry looked. But the Quality Control program personnel did care about the safety of the workers and the purity of its products. The company could not afford to have workers pulled into moving machinery parts or to have long hairs and dandruff dropping into the medicines. The company policy was firm: all workers had to shave or wear a face mask and keep facial hair covered.

Harry didn’t like the rules, so as time went on, he grew more and more careless about obeying them. During the third week on the job, his supervisor called him in and told him that if he was seen on the job one more day without wearing the face mask, he would be terminated.

Harry wore the mask two days in a row. The third day, his supervisor was away at an all-day meeting, so Harry pocketed the mask. Someone else saw him and reported him to the supervisor. Now Harry is looking for another job where he can wear his hair and beard any way he pleases. Hairy Harry is no longer employed.

**REBELLIOUS RITA AND THE REPORTS**

Rita prides herself on being a rebel. Rita never does anything exactly the way others do it. Rita thinks of herself as creative, innovative and daring. Others just say that Rita can’t follow orders and seldom does anything right. Rita is often at odds with her employer and her fellow employees.

Rita has a job in a company where reports are filed on an almost-daily basis. Precision in filling out the reports is important, especially in reporting sales figures for the week. It’s Rita’s job to collect those figures then double-check them for accuracy before the reports are turned in to regional headquarters.
EXPLORING WORKFORCE ATTITUDES
FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

Rita followed the procedures, as she would say, “pretty much,” during the first two weeks on the job. Then Rita discovered that she could take the figures right off the individual salesperson’s daily reports. Doing this would save her several hours on Friday—hours that she could use for making personal calls or doing errands, getting ready for the weekend.

Rita’s supervisor, Jane, found out about her shortcut the next week and sat down with Rita. She carefully went over the company policy and procedures manual to make sure that Rita understood exactly how the report was to be filled out.

Jane stressed the importance of accuracy in collecting and adding the figures. “That’s how regional headquarters makes its projections for next quarter, so it’s important that the figures be absolutely accurate. Check them with each salesperson in person on Friday, then total them and enter the totals on the sheet exactly as the manual shows,” Jane cautioned her. “Follow the procedure in the manual exactly and you’ll have no trouble with the reports.”

Friday morning came, and Rita was behind in her work. She had the best of intentions about checking the figures with each salesperson—until Donna called and told her about a terrific sale at the mall. If Rita could come over half an hour early and stay just a few minutes late, they would have time for a quick lunch and a look at all the bargains. Rita said yes and went back to her old way of doing the report.

Rita was late getting in from lunch and naturally, she used her old tried-and-true shortcut to get through the report in a hurry. What she didn’t know was that two of the salespeople were new and had filled in their totals incorrectly. They were waiting for Rita’s phone call to correct the errors they had made.
EXPLORING WORKFORCE ATTITUDES  FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

The phone call never came, but Rita’s report was filed—full of errors and incomplete figures. Jane called Rita in next week to tell her that she was terminated.

KNOW-IT-ALL KEITH

Keith is a very intelligent person. He always seems to catch on to complicated puzzles and word games before anybody else does. He understands complex procedures and remembers them easily. Keith knows he’s bright and prides himself on his intelligence.

Keith recently came to work in an information systems company. Because he’s intelligent and personable, some of the programmers and systems analysts began talking with him. Keith quickly picked up enough of the jargon and concepts to feel comfortable talking their language.

Keith’s job requires him to do certain tasks in a certain order, over and over again. But Keith soon decided that doing it this way was “beneath him.” “I’m too smart to be stuck in such an uncreative job,” he told one of his coworkers. “After all, I know more than my supervisor does. I’ll just rewrite the procedure; after all, this whole system is long overdue for a complete overhaul.”

So Keith, without his supervisor’s knowledge, did a total rewrite of one section of the systems manual. So far so good—except that Keith was unaware that his work also impacted on the work of five other persons. Each of them was unaware of the changes Keith was making; they were basing their work entirely on the manual as it was originally written.

The results were disastrous. Keith’s refusing to follow the manual cost the company hours of productive time—not to mention hundreds of dollars of lost profits. Now Keith’s supervisor is looking for his replacement. “We don’t want anybody so ‘creative,’” he told the Personnel Director. “We just want someone who can follow the manual without rewriting it.”
EXPLORING WORKFORCE ATTITUDES    FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

PROBLEM PREVENTION

How can an employee prevent the problems that happen when he or she doesn’t follow instructions on the job? Very simple: he or she should follow instructions unless there is a compelling reason not to do so.

No employer or supervisor wants an employee to do something that is unsafe or that would result in a life-threatening situation for either the employee or their coworkers. An employee should not be asked to do things clearly unethical or that would be damaging in some way to clients or customers.

Such situations, fortunately, are rare. Most cases of not following instructions are situations in which people feel that they are too smart, too creative, too stubborn, too busy or too overworked to follow instructions.

At other times, employees do not take the trouble to learn the procedures required on their jobs. They do not pay attention during orientation, or fail to memorize important parts of employee handbooks or manuals. As a result, they are constantly in a position of “faking it” instead of simply learning what is expected of them. Still others find the instructions too difficult to understand and fail to ask for assistance. In this situation, asking a few questions can usually clarify things.

People like Keith feel that they are superior to the job they are asked to perform. They are not qualified for a higher-level job, but feel frustrated because they think they know more than their coworkers or even their supervisor. Often, people like Keith understand their own portion of the business, but don’t see the total picture. Keith did not understand how his job impacted on the work of five other people. He didn’t know that changes in his work needed to be coordinated with five other workers. Keith thought he knew it all. In reality, he didn’t know nearly enough—and the company paid for his mistakes.
Here are a few steps that can help an employee learn how to follow instructions:

• Learn everything you can about your particular job. Learn each procedure you are asked to perform, step by step.

• If you have questions or suggestions for improvement, see your supervisor. Work with him or her on each step until you understand it.

• If you fully understand the procedure and still have a suggestion for improvement, meet with your supervisor again. Make your suggestion and ask him/her who you should see to offer your suggestion. Don’t simply start doing things differently until you have cleared the change.

• Understand that companies have policies in such areas as dress and grooming, being on time to work, sick leave, vacation and personal time, etc. for a reason. If you must ask for an exception for any of these policies, talk it out with your supervisor ahead of time. See if you can work out a compromise.

• Know how your position impacts on other workers in the company. If you make changes in your duties or in particular procedures on the job, think through how it will affect others and act accordingly.

• Remember that communication is the key to maintaining good relations with your supervisor and coworkers. Most problems can be talked out and solutions reached as long as you are willing to communicate with others. What can’t be resolved is the problem you create by not following instructions and taking matters into your own hands.
The purpose of this Response Packet is to help students realize the importance of following instructions as an employee. Although concepts learned, like listening well and following through, could be applied to many different situations—such as one’s role as a student. Questions were written to facilitate class discussion where students can learn from each other.

If you need additional space to answer a question, please use the space on the reverse side of the page. Should you have any questions about this material, please ask the person who gave you the packet.

1. What is the value of following instructions on the job?

2. What are some reasons why persons may fail to follow instructions on the job?

3. Can you simply change a procedure you don’t like without consulting your supervisor? If not, why not?

5. How would you describe Rita’s attitude toward her position?

6. What was Harry’s problem with the grooming and dress code in his company? Was Harry right or wrong in not complying with it? Why?

7. Was the company right in requiring Harry to comply with its dress code? Why or why not?

8. What was Rita’s problem in filing her reports? Was it all right for Rita to take a shortcut in preparing the report? If not, why not?

9. Did Keith really know as much as he thought he did? If your answer is no, why not?

10. Why would it be important before accepting a job offer to be clear about the job description?
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If you need additional space to answer a question, please use the space on the reverse side of the page. Should you have any questions about this material, please ask the person who gave you the packet.

1. List three excuses for not following instructions that are often heard in your company.

2. What instructions did you not follow that resulted in your working on this packet?

3. Agree or disagree with the following statement; then state your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing: “Following instructions to the letter proves that you’re a follower, not a leader, and don’t have the necessary creativity to become a supervisor or manager.”
4. Why do supervisors stress the need to follow instructions on the job?

5. Why do most companies have detailed policy and procedures manuals? Explain in detail.

6. Imagine that you are Harry’s supervisor. What would you say to Harry about the importance of following the company’s grooming code?

7. Imagine that you are Rita’s supervisor, writing an explanation of why Rita was terminated. What reasons will you give to back up the action you took?

8. How do you think Keith’s supervisor reacted when she discovered that Keith had changed his work procedures without informing anyone?

9. How might Keith’s coworkers react when they found that some procedures had been changed without being informed?

10. Name three ways to prevent problems that result from not following instructions in your company. Which one’s would a good goals for you?
STUDENT RESPONSE PUZZLE 1  FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

NAME ______________________ DATE ______________________

Across

1. Your supervisor or employer do not want you to do things that are considered this
3. This is key to maintaining good relations with you supervisor or co-workers
6. People like Keith feel _____ to the job they are asked to perform
9. Following these is an important part of any job
10. When you have an idea to improve something where you work it’s a good idea to talk with this person first

Down

2. Jane stressed the importance of this
4. Procedures and these exist in a company for a reason
5. He didn’t like the company rule about personal appearance
7. His job requires him to do certain tasks in a certain order, over and over again
8. She is Rita’s supervisor
STUDENT RESPONSE PUZZLE 2  
FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

NAME  DATE

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instructions  accuracy
policies  Keith
supervisor  unsafe
Harry  superior
Jane  communication

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Preparing for Today's Workforce: A Curriculum for Teens
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