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Dave Miller: *From the Gert Boyle studio at OPB, this is Think Out Loud. I'm Dave Miller. First generation college students and people without a lot of prior work experience who are entering the workforce might not be aware of certain "unwritten rules." So a new collaboration is starting up to help people learn some of these expectations or customs. It's a partnership between the Portland Opportunities Industrialization Center and Portland State University. Joe McFerrin II is the POIC President and CEO. Ame Lambert is a Vice President for Global Diversity and Inclusion at PSU. They join us now to talk about this new partnership. Welcome to Think Out Loud.*

Ame Lambert: Thanks for having us.

Joe McFerrin: Thanks for having us.

Miller: *Joe McFerrin, first. What do you mean when you talk about this phrase "unwritten rules"?*

McFerrin: So the first thing that comes to my mind, in the context of this conversation, around unwritten rules is that getting a promotion within a company is not necessarily based on who does the best job. And the second thing I would say is that it's important to know that within a particular company rules can be different for different people, different departments and different aspects of the organization.

Miller: *Let's take these two, in turn. What do you mean when you say that getting a promotion is not necessarily, it doesn't mean that you're the best at your job? What do you mean?*

McFerrin: So what I mean by that, most roles, most jobs, there's a metric, there's outcomes and if you look at competing with a coworker around outcomes, just because you're at the top, in terms of outcomes does not mean that you're necessarily going to be the first choice for the promotion. And, and it, most companies are looking for people who are well rounded. So not only performing well on the performance metrics, but also, leadership, getting along with others and reinforcing a positive and healthy culture within a company or organization.

Miller: *And is the unwritten part here, is the idea that the the aspects you're talking about in terms of job performance or, or meshing in some corporate environment or nonprofit environment, they're not things that are spelled out clearly in a handbook or in the rules, but things that your just have to somehow soak up yourself or have ideally learned before you got there?*

McFerrin: Absolutely. It's just like attending, one example would be attending optional networking events. It's important to do those things in addition to performing well in your primary job and primary role is doing those extra things that will demonstrate to your employer and your company that you're more than just a top performer, but you're willing to go that additional mile and that you value relationship building, with this particular example.

Miller: *I'm gonna, I want to come back to the second point you made, because it's an important one that we will definitely linger on, that the "unwritten rules", so to speak, they can be different for different people, but Ame Lambert, I want to, I want to bring you in here and as I, as I know, the Vice President for Global Diversity and Inclusion at Portland State University, so going back to this, this first big question, what do you mean when you use the phrase "unwritten rules"?*

Lambert: Yeah, there are different ways of talking about it in the literature, the hidden curriculum of college, tacit rules, implicit rules, they're the norms, the expectations, the right way to be, to show up, to speak, and the idea is, if you don't know it, then you don't belong, right? Then obviously you are not the right person and actually, if you have to ask about it, people like, why don't you know this? Right? This is like the way to be, right? And so both ways it's a lose, lose proposition. And so you need folks, two years in Portland, Willamette, right? You say it any other way and you stick out, you show that you're not from here. These things are happening all the time in all kinds of spaces, in college and when people go into the workplace.

Miller: *What's an example, a concrete one that you can see in college before we get to the workplace, in college or university. What's one of these tasks are unwritten rules that can be a real challenge?*

Lambert: Office hours are a very mysterious thing, right? If you are not familiar with the concept, right? Why am I going to the principal's office? I didn't do anything wrong. I'm not in trouble, the idea that your faculty member is a human being who wants to build a relationship with you and is interested in who you are as a person is a foreign one, right? And so people, we actually encourage all of our students, go see your faculty, use office hours, right? When I moved from public to private, another very concrete example was hearing that folks were calling to talk about their financial aid packages. This other university gave me this much money. You only gave me this much money, right? Like making a deal. That was mind boggling to me as a person coming from a public institution and lots of students do not know that that's an option.

Miller: *From the perspective of being at the university yourself, now, being a representative of this university, how much responsibility do you feel? That this falls on the shoulders of, of the university to actually, to teach these, to make these tacit or implicit rules, explicit in some way to level the playing field?*

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Lambert: Well, I think it's critical, and I do think that, and one of the things that we, I'll put a plug in here, one of the things is if you're first generation, we hear this all the time. You're first generation, all the way right? You're first generation in the university, first generation in different positions and careers, right? And so we just completed the first cohort of our leadership academy for our employees or high potential high performing employees, talking about these things, trying to make some of these things explicit, what works for you as an individual contributor is not going to work when you're a manager and being a manager and excelling there, you need different rules, right, when you get like upper middle management and senior leadership. So I do think that institutions of all types have a responsibility to make, they have to uncover them, right? Because if they're implicit, then they need to make them explicit and then they need to communicate this in all kinds of ways.

Miller: *Joe McFerrin, I mean can you think of an example in your own life where you didn't actually fully understand the expectations or implicit rules in some environment that you found yourself in?*

McFerrin: Yeah. I remember before I joined POIC, out of college, I was doing some lightweight construction, building playgrounds and I was working on the playground up in Washington Park. And amazingly enough it's still there 30 years later, and I understood that I needed to follow all the rules and guidelines with my boss. I understood that clearly, I had a lot of support and training, as a child from my family. So I understood that part. But what I didn't understand was that when you're working in an environment where there are multiple companies, so there were, there was, there were tons, not tons, there were several construction companies working on Washington Park and then obviously there's a Superintendent. What I didn't realize is that I was being watched by people

from other companies. I thought I just needed to focus on making sure that my employer understood that I was doing everything by the book and being productive. But I didn't realize, I let my guard down and there was a report from another company. It wasn't anything really egregious. But again, being African American on a job site, very few of us, you're under the microscope and it was reported back to the Superintendent of the project and then I had to meet with my boss to hear about it. And so that was a real eye opening experience for me, especially. My work history has been pretty strong, so I was really caught off guard and it was a very valuable lesson. People are always watching and it doesn't matter if it's, it goes beyond your employer and extends to employer partners, vendors, etcetera.

Miller: *I think this gets to what you mentioned at the beginning, which I wanted to turn to, when you said that the rules are different for different groups of people. What exactly do you mean?*

McFerrin: Yeah, I mean to be quite candid,

Miller: *Please.*

McFerrin: Being African American in a city, in a state like Oregon, often, as an African American, you stick out like a sore thumb. And so people just naturally are watching and other people that may be of the same age group, in the same role, same level of experience, maybe the same job, they're not being watched as much. So, when things happen in a workplace and someone mentions to your Supervisor or it gets out, or the water cooler conversation, oftentimes people like me are like, well, hold on, Bob and Mike, they've been doing the same thing. Matter of fact, they, whatever the activity or action may have been, they do it all the time. But the point is, is that it's unwritten that, in this town, with our demographic makeup, and especially in the workplace, the unwritten rule is, the rules are different.

Miller: *Ame Lambert, how do you prepare your students for that, if what we're talking about is, in a sense, learning on the job?*

Lambert: Yeah. That's a question. I do think that making these rules explicit are really important. I think what I have found really helpful is, so what Joe's talking about, right, the neuroscience of this, the fact that the brain is going to remember people that stick out, right? So if you're tall, if you're a different skin color, a different weight, you have a different accent, the brain's gonna remember more about what you do. So I think making these things explicit to students and recognizing the burden on them, because when you're hyper-scrutinized, then you're also hypervigilant, right? So you're never able to relax and if you're not able to relax, how do you bring your full self to the table? How do you access your best self, right? So emotional intelligence is a gift for everybody. It is supercritical if you're a minoritized in any way and understanding these kinds of different rules and different expectations. Women for example, regardless of background, but emphasized when they're women of color, you have this likability factor. So you have to be good at your job, but people also have to like you and if you're a woman of color, you better not be threatening, right? So all of these things, being explicit about these things so that people are able to kind of build their, their toolkit and their strategies as they're going into the workplace and especially as they're advancing into leadership positions is important because the research is making it very clear that the gap at the top starts at the first promotion. And so we've been saying we're not just trying to help you get your first job, we want you to get your first promotion and then kind of build capacity beyond that. So that the demographics can look a little different at the top.

Miller: *Joe McFerrin, this gets us to the partnership that you all are going to be starting in the fall. Can you describe how this came to be and what it's going to look like?*

McFerrin: Yeah well this partnership came to be, I have to give Dr. Lambert just tons of credit here. She called the convening of the black community and we had a couple of sessions and I had the opportunity to listen to our elders and folks my age and students and young people. And what came out of that was, wow, there's a resource here that we need to tap into and currently, like so many companies throughout our country, we're struggling to find a workforce. And so I was thinking, wow, with all this talent right here in our town, how can POIC and PSU work together to get talented students to work? So let's look at a new strategy, let's not wait till the students get to their senior year or graduate from college to offer them a job or offer opportunities or try to recruit them. Let's start now. And so I was thinking and talking with Dr. Lambert and others, I thought, well why don't we just pilot something and let's offer students real jobs right now. And I believe this is why I'm so excited about this day. I believe it's gonna be a win-win, I think, for the students, they're gonna get real work experience with a real wage. We're gonna pay them part time, we're gonna offer a tuition award. And then our community will get the services that we so desperately need. So I'm really excited about it. We're at the beginning phases and I'm looking to launch real, real soon.

Miller: *I mean it sounds like in some ways an old idea, I mean it sounds like a paid apprenticeship where in addition to the particulars of the corporate job, it seems like you also want them to learn the more unspoken parts of the job, I mean, but is that a fair way to put it? But this is not a groundbreaking idea. This is an old idea to tackle newish problems?*

McFerrin: I would agree. And I would also say that these are real jobs. I want to emphasize that we're looking at positions in finance, human resources, development, communications, teaching, counseling, mental health, case management and community safety. And again POIC is in a position where we really need to build up our workforce and what a better way to do this in partnership is to work with young people, and some will probably even be older students and get them real life experiences right now? So yes, I would agree, Dave, it's, there's nothing really new under the sun. It's just that we're gonna bring this back and make it stronger and better than ever.

Miller: *Now, this is not going to provide jobs for thousands of people. This will be more limited than that obviously. Ame Lambert, I'm curious, in the bigger picture what you imagine it might look like broadly if, why maybe what it would take for the kinds of, of workplace norms or expectations or quote unquote "rules" for them to be more broadly known by, by young people before they get to that first job, what it would take to have a more systemic solution?*

Lambert: Well, that's an excellent question. I think that having more folks like Joseph is a mutual admiration society, for folks who have made it, quote unquote, folks who have resources, who have access to different spaces coming back and mentoring, right? Coming back and building relationships, coming back and sharing that wisdom. I think all of the co-curricular things that are happening on college campuses emphasizing this, right? And they're talking about, yeah, here's your job and so you need technical excellence, but you also need this social-emotional capacity and then you need these navigational skills and you need to understand these unwritten rules, always in the context of, this is not about assimilation, this is not about you changing or becoming someone different, this is about choice, this is about empowerment, this is about fluency, right? We want, it's about building capacity that you already have. So it needs to be when we're thinking about developing students, this always needs to be a part of the conversation. And increasingly, employers are talking about things beyond technical skills and this needs to be something that both employers are asking for and that their onboarding students into.

Miller: *Ame Lambert and Joe McFerrin II, thanks very much.*

Lambert: Thanks for having us.

McFerrin: Thank you, Dave.

Miller: *Ame Lambert is the Vice President for Global Diversity and Inclusion at Portland State University. Joe McFerrin II is the President and CEO of Portland's Opportunities Industrialization Center, POIC at Rosemary Anderson High School. Coming up after a break, we're going to hear about the challenges and the opportunities for Salem's downtown.*