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Service Improvement  
and Redesign tools

# Simple rules and breaking them

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## What is it?

In complex systems such as those found in healthcare, there are sets of underlying principles or ways of thinking and behaving that govern the way that things operate. These 'simple rules' can be useful in enabling people to understand complex systems. However, these rules can also provide a barrier to those trying to improve services. Sometimes these implicit rules of 'how things work' need to be made explicit and then broken in order for services to improve.

## When to use it

Whenever new ideas are proposed, there is a tendency for these ideas to be incremental modifications or adjustments to the way that care is currently delivered. While this is good, sometimes it is not enough and more radical changes are required to deliver the necessary improvements.

These more radical changes are likely to challenge current roles, norms and ways of working within the system. If a current project is stuck or struggling to make improvements, it can be very useful to consider the simple rules that are operating and which may need to be broken to take things forward.

## How to use it

1. Identify the part of the process or service that you want to focus on. This tool naturally links to [process mapping](#). An easy way to use it is to look at some of the steps that are identified in the process map and start to ask why each step is there and then identify the simple rules that are operating.

2. Identify the current simple rules that are governing what happens. You can do this through group discussion, by working through a process map or even by simply observing the system to see what actually happens on a daily basis. Think about:

- Why is that step in the process?
- What are the underlying mental models (ways of thinking) behind what is going on?
- What are the unwritten rules that are operating?

3. Creatively challenge the simple rules that are operating by considering what aspects of the rule can be broken or what aspects of the rules you may want to keep. Try proposing an alternative simple rule.

To identify and break rules, it can be useful to think about:

- **Where** – changing the location that something happens in, eg why does it have to happen in hospital?
- **Who** – changing who does something, eg why does it have to be a healthcare professional – could the patient do it for themselves?
- **When** – change the order in which things take place to make the experience better.

## TIPS

- Give several examples of simple rules in daily life to help participants understand the basic concept, eg traffic in a city centre. Describing the movement of individual cars would be too complex. We all know that individual drivers are following a few simple rules regarding which side of the road to drive on, which way to drive around a roundabout, the distance to keep from the car in front and so on.
- A common simple rule in healthcare is that patients must pass through low cost resources before gaining access to high cost resources. Talk this through in terms of who the patient first sees at their GP surgery or A&E. Many A&E departments now put a medically trained person closer to the beginning of the process, violating this simple rule and dramatically improving patient flow.
- Give the group you are working with an example that you think is a simple rule for their topic or system.
- Note that some rules are formal rules such as laws or regulations. You could still challenge the rule and consider what could be done within the limits of the rule.
- Not all simple rules need to be changed but working through them helps you to better understand the environment in which the improvement needs to happen.
- Many people find it difficult at first to identify simple rules in their own work practices. We get so used to 'the way we do things around here' that it can be hard to step back and see them more objectively. Try to include people who don't work in the immediate area, such as patients or carers. They are more likely to ask, 'Why do you do it like that?', which helps identify the simple rules and underlying mental models.

## Example

Patients with known hypertension needed to make a regular appointment to see the practice nurse for a blood pressure (BP) check. This wasn't always convenient and they were taking up appointment slots that others could use. The simple rule was that only a healthcare professional could take and record an accurate BP.

The Milton Abbas surgery in Dorset put a static automatic blood pressure machine in the waiting room. Patients could pop in at their convenience, take their BP and take the printout to be entered into their clinical record.

## What next?

- Review all the ideas that have come from breaking the simple rules. [Six Thinking Hats®](#) can help you get down to the final few ideas.
- Run several small scale tests to learn more and see what works in practice ([PDSA](#)).
- Share the findings. Consider using [stakeholder analysis](#) and [communications matrix](#).
- Implement the best ideas.

## Other useful tools and techniques that can help you

- [Thinking creatively to solve problems](#)
- [Brainstorming](#)
- [Fresh eyes](#)
- [That's impossible!](#)