

CORPORATE TABOOS — VOLUME II

Leadership Failures We All See But No One Fixes

Issue #4

Double Standards: The Quiet Killer of Team Trust

*— Lessons from Juran's Quality Trilogy
and How to Enforce One Standard for All*

The newsletter for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.

The War Story

The attendance policy at Kelton Manufacturing was clear, specific, and printed in the employee handbook: three unexcused absences in a rolling ninety-day period triggered a formal written warning. Four triggered a performance improvement plan. Five triggered termination review. The policy applied to everyone.

Except, it turned out, it did not apply to everyone.

Terri, a machine operator on line six, received her written warning after her third absence — a Wednesday when her daughter's school called at 6 AM and childcare could not be arranged in time. The warning was issued the same afternoon, signed by her supervisor, and placed in her personnel file.

That same quarter, Wade — a senior process technician with sixteen years at the plant and a working relationship with the plant manager that predated the current ownership — had four absences. He received a conversation. The conversation was described, in the supervisor's notes, as 'counseling regarding attendance expectations.' No written warning. No documentation in Wade's file. The supervisor later explained, when pressed, that Wade's tenure and institutional knowledge made a 'more flexible approach' appropriate.

Terri knew about Wade's absences. So did the four other operators on line six who had been present when Wade's supervisor made the phone call that resulted in 'counseling' rather than documentation. So did the two operators who had received written warnings themselves in the past twelve months for attendance issues that were, by the policy's plain language, less severe than Wade's.

None of them said anything formally. What they did was considerably more consequential: they updated their working model of what the policy actually meant, which was not what the handbook said. The policy, they now understood, was a document that applied to people without tenure, without relationships, and without the specific kind of standing that Wade had accumulated over sixteen years. The policy was a tool of selective enforcement, and they had just watched a demonstration of how it worked.

Over the next eight months, the line six team's discretionary effort — the extra attention to quality, the willingness to flag issues before they became escapes, the initiative to cross-train on adjacent processes — declined in ways that were real but entirely unmeasurable. No one filed a grievance. No one quit. They simply recalibrated their engagement to match the fairness level they had observed. Which is what people always do.

People do not need a policy manual to detect double standards. They need about thirty seconds of observation. What they do with that information determines the trajectory of your organization's quality culture.

Name the Failure: The Three Faces of the Double Standard

Double standards in organizational life take three distinct forms, each operating at a different level of visibility and with a different pattern of damage. Understanding which form you're dealing with is the first step toward addressing it.

Form	How It Operates	Who Sees It	The Damage Pattern
Explicit Seniority Exception	Policies, processes, or standards are openly applied differently based on tenure, title, or organizational standing. The exception is sometimes acknowledged but framed as 'contextual judgment.'	Everyone — the differential treatment is visible and the rationale, when offered, is unconvincing	Immediate erosion of policy credibility. The standard becomes a tool of enforcement against the less powerful rather than a shared expectation.
Invisible Favorite Exception	Standards are applied selectively based on personal relationship with the decision-maker, without any acknowledged rationale. The inconsistency is denied or attributed to 'situational differences.'	Everyone except, often, the decision-maker — the pattern is visible from below and invisible from above	Slower but deeper erosion of trust. Because the inconsistency is not acknowledged, it cannot be discussed. It becomes an underground fact that shapes behavior without surfacing.
Convenience Exception	Standards are applied when convenient and waived when enforcement would require effort, conflict, or disruption. High-performing teams or high-revenue periods produce informal exemptions.	Those directly affected, plus the leader's own team if they observe the pattern	The standard ceases to function as a standard. It becomes a guideline with unpredictable enforcement — which is worse than no standard at all, because it creates the illusion of consistency without providing it.

Kelton's situation was primarily the first form — the explicit seniority exception — which is paradoxically both the most visible and the most commonly tolerated, because the rationale ('institutional knowledge,' 'earned trust,' 'context') sounds plausible even when the differential treatment is not. The form that sounds plausible is the one that persists longest, because it offers the decision-maker a coherent internal narrative that justifies the behavior to themselves.

The Juran Framework: Quality Requires Consistent Standards

Joseph Juran's Quality Trilogy — Quality Planning, Quality Control, and Quality Improvement — is most often applied to product and process quality. Its implications for management standards and accountability are less frequently cited and considerably more uncomfortable.

Juran's framework rests on a foundational premise: quality is conformance to requirements, and requirements only function as requirements when they are defined clearly, applied consistently, and enforced without exception based on who is being measured. A requirement that is waived for some and enforced for others is not a requirement — it is a preference, enforced selectively, which produces exactly the variation in outcomes that quality management exists to eliminate.

Quality Planning Applied to Accountability Standards

Juran's Quality Planning process requires that requirements be defined in terms specific enough that conformance can be objectively assessed. Applied to management standards and policies, this means the attendance policy must define what constitutes an absence precisely enough that two different supervisors, evaluating the same facts, reach the same conclusion about whether a violation has occurred and what the consequence must be.

The Kelton policy met this standard on its face: three unexcused absences, written warning. But the undefined term 'unexcused' — and the undefined concept of 'contextual judgment' that Wade's supervisor applied — introduced the variation that allowed differential treatment to occur within the letter of the policy. Quality Planning requires closing those gaps. Not 'unexcused absence' but a precise definition of what constitutes excused and unexcused, applied by the same criteria to everyone.

Quality Control Applied to Standard Enforcement

Juran's Quality Control process monitors actual performance against the standard and identifies deviations requiring corrective action. Applied to double standards, this requires monitoring not just whether standards are being violated by employees but whether standards are being applied consistently by supervisors.

This is the part most organizations skip entirely. They audit defect rates, attendance records, and safety incidents. They do not audit whether the consequences for those incidents are applied consistently across the population. The absence of that audit is what allows the double standard to persist invisibly — the data exists, but no one is looking at it through the lens of consistency.

Quality Improvement Applied to the Standard Itself

Juran's Quality Improvement process addresses the chronic sources of variation — the systemic causes that produce inconsistent outcomes repeatedly. Applied to double standards, chronic inconsistency in standard application is not primarily a supervisor behavior problem. It is a system design problem: the standard was not defined precisely enough, the training for applying it was not rigorous enough, the audit mechanism to detect inconsistency was not in place, and the consequence for inconsistent application was not established.

The chronic double standard is a process failure. Treating it as a character failure of individual supervisors produces temporary improvement in the cases that have been identified and no improvement in the structural conditions that produce new cases.

Juran's Most Relevant Insight for This Problem

Juran estimated that 85% of quality problems are caused by systems and processes, not by individual workers. Applied to double standards: 85% of double standard problems are caused by imprecisely defined standards, absent enforcement audits, and missing consequence structures for inconsistent application — not by supervisors who are uniquely unfair. Fix the system and most of the supervisors will apply the standard correctly. Leave the system broken and even well-intentioned supervisors will produce inconsistent outcomes.

Why Double Standards Persist: The Rationalization Architecture

Double standards persist not because leaders are unusually dishonest but because the rationalizations available to explain differential treatment are genuinely persuasive — to the person applying the standard, if not always to those observing it.

The Rationalization	Why It Sounds Plausible	Why It Fails the Standard Test
"I'm using contextual judgment."	Good management does require contextual sensitivity. Not every situation is identical.	Contextual judgment that consistently favors the same categories of people — senior, connected, high-revenue — is not judgment. It is bias with a professional name.
"Their institutional value justifies the exception."	Some employees do have disproportionate institutional knowledge or relationship value.	Institutional value is a compensation question, not a standards question. It is why Wade might earn more. It is not why Wade follows different rules.
"The policy doesn't account for all situations."	Policies often have gaps that require interpretation.	If the policy has a legitimate gap, the fix is to close the gap in the policy — not to apply an informal exception that only some supervisors know about and only some employees benefit from.
"They've earned some flexibility."	Loyalty and tenure do deserve recognition.	Flexibility earned through tenure is a policy feature, not a supervisor's unilateral decision. If tenure-based flexibility is appropriate, it belongs in the written standard — visible to all, applied consistently.
"I know this person — they're dealing with something."	Personal knowledge of context is a legitimate input to decision-making.	If personal context modifies the standard, it must modify it consistently — for anyone in comparable circumstances, not just for the people the supervisor knows personally.

The thread running through each rationalization is the same: the exception is defined by relationship and discretion rather than by criteria that could be applied to anyone in comparable

circumstances. When the exception cannot be described in terms that would apply to the next person in a comparable situation, it is not contextual judgment. It is a double standard with a good story.

How Double Standards Destroy Quality Culture Specifically

The damage double standards do to a quality culture operates through a specific sequence that is worth tracing precisely, because each step in the sequence is a point where intervention is possible.

1. The double standard is observed — not reported, not complained about, simply registered by the people who are present. In most cases it is observed by multiple people simultaneously, creating a shared fact that is understood but unspoken.
2. The observers update their model of what the standard actually means. The written policy is now understood as aspirational — the actual policy, they now know, includes an implicit exception structure that the handbook doesn't describe. This updated model is accurate.
3. Behavior adjusts to match the actual policy, not the written one. People stop investing energy in standards that they understand are selectively enforced. This is rational — why sustain the burden of a standard that others are not bearing?
4. Quality output degrades in ways that are real but causally distant from the double standard. Defect rates creep. First-pass yield slides. Improvement initiative participation drops. The instruments show the output; they do not show the cause.
5. Leadership diagnoses the output problem without tracing it to the root cause. Training programs are launched. Process audits are conducted. The double standard that started the sequence is not on anyone's diagnostic checklist. It continues.

This sequence is not hypothetical. It describes what happened on line six at Kelton Manufacturing — and it describes what happens in any quality environment where standards are applied inconsistently. The quality tools diagnose the output variation. They do not, without deliberate effort, diagnose the accountability variation that produced it.

The Line Six Calculation

The line six operators did not consciously decide to reduce their effort. They made a rational adjustment: the standard, they had observed, was not equally applied. Sustaining full engagement in a system that rewarded compliance differently based on who you were was a bad trade. Their disengagement was not a values failure. It was a logical response to the information they had been given. The question for leaders is not 'why are they disengaged?' It is 'what did we show them that produced this outcome?'

Enforcing One Standard for All: Five Operational Practices

The fix for double standards is not stricter enforcement of existing policies — it is a system that makes consistent enforcement the path of least resistance rather than the path of most resistance. Here are the five practices that build that system.

Practice 1: Define Standards with Objective Criteria and No Interpretive Gaps

Any standard that contains undefined terms — 'unexcused,' 'appropriate,' 'reasonable,' 'contextual' — is a standard that will be applied differently by different supervisors and in different situations. Before a standard can be enforced consistently, it must be defined precisely enough that two different supervisors, given the same set of facts, reach the same conclusion about whether a violation has occurred.

This requires walking through the policy with the people who will apply it and asking: 'What would you do in each of these scenarios?' Every scenario that produces different answers is a gap in the policy definition. Close the gap in the written standard — not in the supervisor's head — so the exception structure is visible, consistent, and applicable to anyone in comparable circumstances.

Practice 2: Audit Enforcement Consistency, Not Just Compliance

If you measure whether employees comply with the standard, you are measuring half the picture. The half you are not measuring — whether supervisors apply the standard consistently — is the half that determines whether the standard means anything.

Add consistency auditing to your standard management process: quarterly, pull the records of all policy enforcement actions in a given category. Sort them by the characteristics of the employee involved: tenure, role, shift, supervisor, and any other variable that could plausibly influence enforcement. Look for patterns. If the data shows that written warnings for attendance cluster in one shift and 'counseling conversations' cluster in another, that is not a coincidence. It is a double standard embedded in your enforcement data, waiting to be found.

Practice 3: Remove Discretion From the Consequence, Not From the Context

The goal is not to eliminate supervisor judgment entirely — context is real and matters. The goal is to move supervisor judgment upstream, where it belongs, and remove it from the consequence structure, where it produces inconsistency.

Upstream judgment: the supervisor determines whether a circumstance meets the defined criteria for an exception (which are written in the policy and apply to everyone). Downstream consistency: if the criteria are met, the consequence is defined and applied. If they are not met, the consequence is defined and applied. The supervisor does not have discretion over the consequence — only over whether the defined criteria for an exception have been satisfied.

This structure means Wade's institutional value is irrelevant to whether his fourth absence triggers a written warning. His institutional value might be relevant to a retention conversation. It is not a criterion in the attendance policy, and the attendance policy is what determines the consequence.

Practice 4: Make Consistency a Supervisory Performance Standard

Double standards persist in part because supervisors are not held accountable for applying standards consistently. They are held accountable for their team's output metrics, their engagement scores, their safety records — but almost never for whether their enforcement of organizational standards is consistent with their peers' enforcement of the same standards.

Add consistency of standard application to the criteria on which supervisors are evaluated. Not in a punitive way — but in the same way any process quality metric is tracked: as feedback that reveals whether the process (in this case, policy enforcement) is producing consistent outcomes, and as a trigger for investigation and correction when it isn't.

Practice 5: Create a Safe and Visible Mechanism for Naming Inconsistency

The operators on line six knew about the double standard. They did not have a way to name it that felt safe and would produce a genuine response. The result was that the information stayed where they were — in the informal knowledge of the people most affected — and never reached the people with the authority to act on it.

Build a mechanism specifically for naming double standards: a structured process, separate from general grievance channels, through which employees can identify specific instances of differential treatment, with a defined response obligation and follow-through timeline. The mechanism must be visibly used — which means the response must be visible, not just the process. If concerns enter the mechanism and nothing observable happens, the mechanism will stop being used within two cycles.

One Standard in Practice: What It Looks Like

Double Standard in Action	One Standard Applied
<i>Senior employee misses four days; receives a 'counseling conversation' with no documentation</i>	Fourth absence triggers written warning per policy — regardless of tenure, role, or relationship with supervisor
<i>High-performing team exempted from safety audit during peak production period</i>	Safety audit schedule is fixed and applies to all teams; production pressure is not a criterion for exemption
<i>Executive's expense report submitted late; finance processes it without comment</i>	Late expense report triggers the same late-submission process regardless of the submitter's title
<i>Quality escape by a veteran operator attributed to 'process ambiguity'; same escape by a new hire triggers disciplinary review</i>	Root cause analysis process is applied consistently; consequence follows from the cause, not from the operator's tenure
<i>Dress code enforced for shop floor; office staff observe it selectively</i>	Dress code applies to defined zones and functions with no role-based exemptions not written into the policy

Double Standard in Action	One Standard Applied
<i>Improvement initiative participation tracked for hourly workers; exempt for salaried managers</i>	Participation expectations are defined by role and written into the policy; exempt categories are identified in advance, not after the fact

Quick Reference: The Double Standard Diagnostic

Run this diagnostic quarterly against your team's or organization's enforcement record. Any 'Yes' answer requires investigation and response.

Diagnostic Question	If Yes — Action Required
Do enforcement records for any policy category show statistically different outcomes by tenure, role, shift, or supervisor?	Treat as a consistency defect: root cause analysis, corrective action on the policy definition or enforcement training
Does any policy contain undefined terms that different supervisors would interpret differently?	Convene a policy clarification session; update the written standard to close the interpretive gap
Has a policy exception ever been granted based on a criterion not written into the policy?	Document the criterion and determine whether it belongs in the policy; if yes, add it; if no, retract the exception
Are supervisors evaluated on the consistency of their standard application, not just their team's output metrics?	Add consistency of enforcement as a supervisory performance criterion in the next review cycle
Is there a functioning mechanism for employees to name specific instances of differential treatment?	If no mechanism exists, create one; if one exists but isn't being used, investigate why and fix the design
Have the same double-standard concerns been raised more than once without structural resolution?	Recurring double-standard complaints are a systemic failure, not individual incidents — escalate to Juran's Quality Improvement process

The Bottom Line

Kelton Manufacturing's quality metrics declined over the eight months following the Wade incident. Not dramatically — the kind of decline that gets attributed to 'market conditions' or 'seasonal variation' or 'the new equipment learning curve.' Not the kind that triggers a root cause analysis with the attendance policy as a variable.

Wade retired two years later. His institutional knowledge was not documented. He was not replaced effectively. His departure and its aftermath are covered in a different issue of this series.

Terri is still at Kelton. She does her job competently and correctly. She does not raise her hand for improvement projects. She does not flag early-stage quality concerns before they become escapes. She has not been formally counseled for any of this, because none of it is in the policy. She is simply a person who watched the policy applied to herself and to Wade in the same quarter, updated her understanding of how the organization actually works, and calibrated accordingly.

The quality problem that Terri represents is not disciplinary. It is diagnostic. And the diagnosis begins with a question that most quality audits never ask: not 'what did the employees do?' but 'what did we show them?'

A standard that is applied to some and not others is not a standard. It is a preference — enforced selectively, understood universally, and trusted by no one.

Coming Up in Issue #5

Why 'We Don't Have Time to Train' Is a Leadership Failure — Building a Continuous Learning Culture with Deming's 14 Points and Toyota Kata. Leaders who treat training as an expense rather than a strategic necessity, and the skill gaps that compound while they wait for a better quarter to invest.

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Forward it to someone who needs it. You know who they are.