

SONA and strategic rule-breaking: The art of doing the unexpected for amplified results

 By [Douglas Kruger](#)

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Rules are a great idea. Except when they aren't. If you're fascinated by the idea of breaking rules, last Thursday's amazing travelling circus show, the State of the Nation Address, will have struck you as a veritable feast of chaotic delights. Wearing your proudly South African cap, your emotional reaction may have been somewhat different, but let's put national dignity aside for a second and think about the idea of strategic rule-breaking.

SONA 2017 was a study in the often arbitrary nature of rules, and how they can be used or abused at will by power-groups.

One of the primary complaints aimed at the beleaguered, battle-scarred Speaker of the House was her rigid upholding of in-house procedural rules applied against members of the House, which appeared to pale into pettiness – or even become a form of malice – contrasted against the wholesale transgression of the Constitutional laws by the President (at which point we must be politically correct and add a wry: 'allegedly').



Kruger with his latest book released with Penguin, looking at the concept of strategic rule-breaking for businesses.

Rules – all rules – are human constructs. Always.

Sometimes they help. And sometimes they get in the way. Sometimes breaking them earns you exponential results.

What we learn from SONA, and from politics in general, is that rules are not sacrosanct or pre-existing. They are ours, they are malleable, and they are but one more tool. And they can be used for or against the interests of various parties.

I'm fascinated by the idea of strategic rule-breaking. Not the kind of anarchy that blindly screams 'Down with the Man!', then tries to live off the land and off the grid in the hippy-hills of California.

No, the kind of strategic rule-breaking the Elon Musks of the world are engaging in, which is a subtly different creature. A far cry from a yearning for anarchy, this kind of rule-breaking is more of a yearning for speed. It wants results and it asks to be streamlined in order to make things happen. It cares about getting rockets into space quicker and cheaper, and it is monumentally disinterested in the burden of formalised procedure or the bogging maw of bureaucracy.

Turns out that rules are not the safest approach, either.

The Israeli Defense Forces, one of the most elite and effective fighting forces on earth and one which has as its only tradition, 'to be traditionless,' makes a point of studying the rules of arcane bureaucracies, in order to figure out how these organisations hamper themselves, so that they, in turn, may remain agile and intelligent.

To this end, they studied NASA's changing culture of the years. During one of NASA's greatest disasters, the Columbia debacle of 2003, NASA had coalesced from a learning organisation into an utterly rule-bound culture. They were a bureaucracy through and through, to the extent that even when scientist warned of impending disaster ('The shuttle is leaking foam!'), the bureaucrats fought back, declaring that their tick-boxes could accommodate for foam, which was a known quantity. 'But that's too much foam,' the scientists persisted, prioritising human insight and intelligence over rules. But to no avail. Bureaucracy won, and the disaster went ahead as planned.

Rigid rules, it turns out, are no match for intelligent debate. And their implementation does not guarantee prosperity either. Far from it, in fact.

Take the nation of India. When I spoke there at a recent conference, I got into a conversation with my host about India's business boom. Despite the relatively poor performance of the other BRICS nations, India has been surging ahead, and continues to do so relentlessly.

I recounted something I had read about their government repealing restrictive laws in the 1970s and '80s.

'Absolutely,' my host said. 'The Raj laws. The government of India was so tight and so tough that they strangled business worse than anything we ever had under imperial rule. Nothing was possible. Everything was red tape. The answer was always no. Rules, rules, rules – they were very unfriendly to business. Probably the biggest problem was petty bureaucrats who could deny you anything if they didn't like you. And of course that just breeds corruption, because to get past these little tyrants, you had to... you know... make them *like* you,' he said, rubbing his forefingers against his thumb.

Once the government started repealing restrictive laws, the economy began to boom. And it hasn't stopped since.

In *Why Africa is Poor: And What Africans Can Do About It*, Greg Mills discusses the cost, to entire countries, of petty, protectionist rules. Basically, he asserts that there is no real point to them. Governments just want control. It's led by ego. But actually, efficiency – in which governments get out of the way and allow business to happen, or better still, build infrastructure that makes it easier for business to happen – is much more lucrative than control. The trouble is, bureaucrats have a disappointing tendency to adore their little bit of control.

Where India is repealing red tape and getting out of the way of its highly industrious, incredibly intelligent people, it appears to be prospering greatly. Nevertheless, the ego of its leadership could do a little more 'letting go'.

So where does that leave us?

Last Thursday, the opposition parties decided not to play by the rules. They intentionally took a left-field approach and operated outside of legislated expectation.

For better or worse, the end-result is this: I remember precisely one thing about SONA. And it's JuJu pointing a finger in the president's face and yelling, 'You are rotten to the core!' on international television. As for what the president then said when the order of rules was restored...? Who knows? That's now the weaker transmission. It's lost in the greater effect of rule-breaking. And that's the entire point of breaking rules. Sometimes a desired result is greater than the importance of the rule.

Which rules, limitations, expectations or social constructs stand between you and your desired result? Certainly, some are sacrosanct and may not be broken. But some are not. Have you explored which is which?

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