

Ritual Design: Crafting Team Rituals for Meaningful Organizational Change

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Abstract. Culture in an organization is hard to grasp due its intangible nature, but it can have huge influence on the organization's success and people's experiences. We proposed a ritual design framework to craft more deliberate organizational culture, and ran a two-session-class in partnership with a large corporate organization. The results showed that organizational rituals can be designed deliberately and organically when employees have a safe, structured environment to play with new cultural rituals, and they are given license to challenge the status quo. This initial design research shows that organizational rituals are most desired for increasing creativity, resilience, and cohesion among team members. It also shows that a ritual design framework can allow for organic, democratic culture-building.

Keywords: Human Factors · Human-systems Integration · Systems engineering

1 Introduction

An organization's culture is hard to define but essential to the happiness and productivity of its members, and the success of the group. A successful culture can show in an organization's ability to adapt to transitions in management, workforce, customer needs, or reorgs. It shows in how people of diverse backgrounds are included and respected, and how cohesive a sense of community there is among the members. And it can show in its members' creativity and ability to innovate, to create new, successful products and services.

This intangible thing of 'culture' has an enormous effect on people's satisfaction and the organization's well-being. The challenge then is, how can an organization craft a culture that is strong and flexible, that supports resilience, diversity, cohesion, and creativity?

Our hypothesis is that good organizational culture can be created with intentionality, and that using a framework of ritual design is a promising way to do so. This hypothesis is in alternative to a 'default strategy' of following the default practices, habits, and events of the people in an organization. It is also an alternative to a top-down strategy, in which a central group of leaders attempt to define a culture and impose it top-down on an organization. Our proposition is that an organization can provide structured, deliberate framework with which to

empower people of all levels of its members to define rituals that will contribute to a better culture.

This paper documents this approach and design research into its application at a large corporate enterprise software company. We developed a ritual design framework and proposed it as a hypothetical tool for culture change. Then we watched as interdisciplinary design teams attempted to follow it, to diagnose opportunities for interventions and then craft them. Our findings from the workshop show that there is great promise for an organization to use ritual design as a framework to encourage democratic culture-making, and to enhance its mission and spread its values.

In our earlier design research, we used a ritual design approach on a more personal, less organizational level. In that work, we showed how deliberately creating rituals can help individuals to craft new habits for themselves to create meaningful, momentous experiences for themselves as they tried to live their values [15]. Other design researchers have also written of the power of rituals to enhance the design of services and consumer products [12]. In addition, managers have observed how to use rituals derived from sport, religion, and other traditions to enhance community-building and creativity among their employees [6].

In this study, we expanded upon the design of rituals from the personal to the organizational. Our research leverages participatory design and design thinking methodologies, to explore what types of challenges in organizations ritual design can best address, and what types of rituals may work to build good organizational culture. To evaluate our design framework, we ran a two-session-class in partnership with a large corporate organization. Student groups were paired with teams at the organization and scouted out issues for possible organizational change, and then prototyped new rituals to be implemented. We found the framework of ritual design to resonate with the designers and the corporate teams. The act of creating rituals was found to be empowering and constructive, and the rituals themselves were found to have most promise in enhancing cohesion and resilience in teams, while also potentially enhancing creativity.

Our work contributes to discussions of organizational culture-building, stimulating creativity, and change management. It also feeds into the smaller interdisciplinary community analyzing how rituals can be useful in design with regards to user experience and service design. Our experiments in crafting team rituals on site at a large corporation showed what methods, ritual interactions, and intervention points are most successful.

2 Organization Challenges as Our Starting Point

We began our study with the overarching question of how organizations culture can be defined in better ways, with a hunch that rituals play an important role in the creation and continuance of culture. This question is of interest because of the intangible nature of culture, mixed with the powerful influence it exerts. When we looked at the existing state of organizations, we observed several challenges with regards to meaning and culture.

First, the relationship between individual employees and the organizations is breaking. In the US workforce, for instance, the majority of employees (50.8%)

are not engaged with their work. Moreover, 17% of them report being actively disengaged at work [4]. These findings have been flat for the last 15 years [4]. Disengaged employees tend to have less motivation, which affects an organization's performance and cohesion [13]. There can be many reasons for such an acute crisis in the modern workplace, including job roles, organizational structures, work processes, and culture. We see that this lack of engagement signals a cohesion problem within the culture.

Second, organizations face challenges with resilience, because their staff and their fortunes are constantly changing. Their transitions might be based on internal forces such as the changes in the management and their workforce; or external forces such as shifts in technology, customer needs; or simply the macro level economies that they are functioning in. Think of organizations that are going through a re-org. According to research, 80% of reorgs fail to deliver the intended result, and they create stress and anxiety among employees. A re-org's consequences are even worse than layoffs, and can result in 60% decline in productivity [8]. During the transition times, employees usually are left to their own psychological rollercoaster, and lack tools for resilience.

Lastly, the nature of work is changing rapidly with technology and its societal implications. Thanks to automation and machine learning, job roles are getting saturated. According to research, non-routine cognitive jobs have risen to 60% of the employment within past two decades, whereas routine cognitive and manual jobs shrunk in the same period [1]. This means two things. Creativity becomes even more important to stay relevant as an organization. Secondly, productivity becomes a key benchmark to stay afloat during the transition to a machine-run world.

We shaped our inquiry and hypothesis around these three challenges that organizations face: cohesion, resilience, and creativity. We observed that the culture of an organization might be changed, in order to enhance these factors and to improve employees' work and an organization's success. In order to change the culture to achieve these outcomes, we supposed that the design of new rituals might be a key factor. As the next section delineates, rituals play a key role in an organization's culture. That led us to ask two questions. First, can rituals be designed for an organization, to set or change its culture? Second, can organizations craft a culture that has cohesion, resilience, and creativity using rituals?

To answer these questions, we first turned to the literature that discusses the role and power of rituals for organizational culture, to craft our hypotheses. Then we held an exploratory design workshop with a partner organization to test them and gather further insight about the power of ritual design to build better organizations.

3 Literature on Rituals' Role in Organizational Culture

Rituals are a repeated enactment of a particular set of behaviors, scripts, and interactions [2]. Though they may have been traditionally studied by anthropologists as ways to understand large-scale religions or nations, social scientists seeking to understand modern companies and teams have also begun to

examine them. The literature on organizational culture documents that rituals have a special power to bring people together and give them a sense of purpose, values, and meaning. As Turner finds, rituals can anticipate and generate change. Or they can be an enforcer of the normal order, by reinscribing what is normal and expected. [19].

Especially in the realms of sports, politics, and religion, rituals unite people and bring out deep emotions, creating a shared identity [7]. Rituals decrease anxiety, and improve performance [14]. Rituals in the workplace can strengthen the organization's desired behaviors, by creating focus and a sense of belonging, and making changes stick [6].

Overall, rituals are found to be a crucial, if hard to evaluate part of culture. Organizational culture is "fiendishly difficult to define", and many formal scholars of organization economics and management are reluctant to examine the topic at all [5]. Heskett proposes a culture framework of visible and invisible forces that defines a culture. Visible forces are artifacts, behaviors, and metrics, invisible forces are beliefs, values, and assumptions [9]. Rituals exist as a bridge between the visible and invisible. They can help organizations to manifest their values in the everyday life of the company [18], and strengthen their culture [17].

A main question of rituals, and of culture-building generally, is the power dynamics of them. For example, Gideon brings a more critical lens to presentational rituals. He characterizes them as a vehicle for organizations to practice normative control over employees [11]. But there is a promise for a more bottom-up culture building centered on growth and needs of the employees [10]. One of the values that we hypothesized ritual design might bring, is that it could allow for employees to design the rituals, and thus the culture, that they want to see in their organization. Rather than only central management imposing rituals to define culture, could we democratize culture-building through design sessions in which all kinds of stakeholders can propose and implement new rituals?

This might be to enhance a person's sense of agency and meaning at work. Chalofsky identifies the needs for interventions in the workplace that provide people greater meaning at work. These types of interventions would give ways to people to express meaning and make sense of the purpose of work. These types of interventions can provide people intrinsic motivators to perform their work better, and more satisfaction in their working lives [3]. They will help a person integrate their sense of self with the work itself, with positive outcomes of a sense of balance, a feeling of being in control, and a sense of purpose and worth [3]

The literature pointed towards the possibility of rituals to make a more humanistic, holistic work-self workplace [17], or to allow for more democratic agency in asserting what the culture should be. We integrated these findings with the outcomes of our previous research into the design of personal rituals, in order to create a hypothetical framework for ritual design for organizational culture, with which we could test the value of designing rituals and how rituals might enhance creativity, cohesion, and resilience.

4 Our Proposed Ritual Design Framework

To explore these research questions of culture creation and the power of rituals,

we drafted a framework of ritual design. It stems from our observations in the literature, as well as our previous design research into the creation of personal rituals. We hypothesized that this ritual design framework would be of use to people inside of an organization looking to create better culture, and also that it would lead to the development of sticky, effective rituals that could enhance cohesion, creativity, and resilience.

The core of our framework is the notion that rituals can be designed intentionally, using a design process. Ritual design is an approach to act more deliberately when designing meaning and culture. It brings rituals as a mindset and a lens for understanding any given design brief. It then applies ritual tools and mechanics to design interventions. Interventions live under the umbrella of experience design. The form of a ritual design can be many, from an interaction, to a product that embodies or enhances a ritual, to a service involved in one, to an organizational program that formalizes it.

We developed this framework in initial design research sessions on how people can craft rituals for themselves [14, 15]. These sessions showed that to design a ritual, there is a pattern of interactions. The designer needs to set a specific context, a prop, act, and a narrative goal. Context is the setting where the ritual will occur and the hook that will trigger it. For example, one context could be “the first day at work”. A prop is a symbolic object or act, such as your orientation booklet. An act is a series of repeatable actions, such as repeating an oath. A narrative goal is what the individual or group wants to happen at the end of a ritual, such as feeling connected or instilling loyalty.

Having defined these steps to create a ritual, and observed the ability of people to craft rituals to improve their own personal lives, we decided to use this framework as a starting point to explore the power of rituals for organizational culture. Our guiding question was: will design teams and organization members be able to use this process to craft rituals that have value? And, secondly, will the rituals they craft be able to live up to the promise delineated in the literature, of promoting more democratic, human-centered culture?

In order to investigate how design thinking and ritual design approach could help craft meaningful rituals for an organization, we decided to run a two-day design studio class at Stanford d.school, in partnership with a large corporate organization located in Palo Alto. We planned the workshop as a two-day exercise, with the first day as learning the framework and using it to spot opportunities for rituals, and the second day as prototyping, testing, and refining new rituals.

To examine how rituals can be deliberately crafted, we structured our class exercises around context discovery, and design of a ritual through props and acts. Based on our literature review, we set out creativity, cohesion, and resilience as potential ritual goals. For context discovery, we deployed human centered design methods, including interviews, service safari, and experience mapping to help students to discover the right context for a ritual.

We also worked with our partner organization before the workshop, to determine how a ritual design sprint could integrate with their challenges. From these discussions, we distilled several key insights about how a design process can serve organizational culture-building.

1. A democratic diversity of organizational perspectives. Our partners in the organization specifically requested to include employees from different positions in the organization's hierarchy as interviewees and co-designers. They recommended that we include employees who are managers, team members, interns, and executives. They believed this diversity of roles would lead to a more meaningful selection of challenges that the teams would work on.

The hypothesis was that team members would be most interested in creativity and productivity rituals, managers would be concerned about team cohesion and retention, executives would be interested in longer-term values and missions being upheld, and interns would be interested in team cohesion and creativity. The partners' diverse points of view would lead the teams to richer culture-building, and proposals that would more likely work with the various stakeholders and be 'sticky'. This finding from the partner reinforced our hypothesis that ritual design can allow for more democratic, open culture-building in an organization.

2. A hunger for cultural tools and deliberate crafting, but not universally. The people in the partner organization we spoke with were those employees particularly interested in culture. They have been thinking about the organization's challenge around bringing the best work from employees, and using organizational culture to do it.

They felt, though, that they haven't had enough time to fully understand their current culture dynamics, or to craft a vision of the culture they wanted. They flagged that they were not necessarily representative of all managers or executives in the company. These discussions indicated to us that culture-building might not be an organization-wide priority, but that a self-selected set of people are passionate about it and are eager for experimentation with it.

3. The importance of lightweight human behavior expectations. Another concern from our partner was that the proposed rituals be light and uncomplicated. They predicted that the most successful rituals would not require too much effort from people, or disrupt their current behaviors too drastically. They encouraged us to adjust our framework, as a heuristic to judge proposed rituals by how light, non-demanding, and adaptable they are.

This initial feedback from our partner organization helped to reaffirm our ritual design framework, with this select group of employees agreeing that they had great concern for their organization's culture and they saw value in setting about a deliberate design process to craft new rituals.

In our first day of the workshop, student design teams learned our framework. They then conducted interviews observations, and mapping with their corporate partners, to identify points in which a specific team's culture could be improved. We encouraged the teams to focus in on a local team's situation, rather than the entire company's culture. At the end of first day, each team identified a specific opportunity in which new rituals could enhance the company's culture.

Brief 1: Virtual Team Connections: How can we connect a team that works virtually, potentially using their once-a-year in-person get together? (And especially with the condition that many of the team-members aren't confident in their English public speaking abilities?)

Brief 2: Spreading Design Thinking: How do we help a team, who's tasked with bringing design thinking to their entire company, to help others level up their

skills, and make design thinking less of a “check-it-off-now-I’m-done” experience, and more of part of their daily practice?

Brief 3: Onboarding New Employees: How do we help a creative team, that’s fairly large (around 40 people), effectively welcome a new team member — and help this new employee to feel part of the team more quickly and seamlessly?

Brief 4: Cross-Generational Team Bonding: How do we help people of different generations in a team better find ways to hang out and connect? Especially when young people would rather go out after work to get drinks or dinner, but parents need to get home to their family and don’t especially want to hang out after work hours.

Brief 5: Assignment Anxiety: How do we help employees who are doing rotations or internships, who don’t have a permanent team assignment yet, get a greater sense of continuity and confidence about their place in the org? And particularly when many of the employees in this cohort may be in competition with each other for placements?

These design briefs affirmed our hypothesis that rituals can serve culture. The students and partners identified the potential for rituals to enhance cohesion and community, as well as to enforce resilience, and in one brief, to enhance creativity.

On the second day, the teams used the ritual design framework to craft, structure, and test new rituals. After several cycles of sketching, enactment, and feedback, each team proposed a ritual for their partner group to implement.

Ritual 1: Circle Up, to help virtual teams connect better when they have in-person sessions. The team comes together, sitting in a circle, and then each member takes a turn in the center to share out something small. Once the person shares, the rest of the team claps and cheers. It’s about raising the energy level, celebrating each other, and increasing their bond.

Ritual 2: Design Thinking Drip, with the team who’s responsible for spreading creativity throughout an org now using special delivery boxes. After they train another team on design, they will then send them surprise, curated boxes of prompts, hints, tools, and gifts. These surprise boxes will be staggered, arriving at unexpected points after the training, to provide a delightful jolt of creative energy and resources.

Ritual 3: Crash the Desk, to welcome new hires with a surprise treasure hunt on their first day at work. When the employee is distracted away from the desk, their team-mates fill up their sad, empty new desk with their own personal objects. Then the employee must go on a hunt, talking to all their new co-workers to try to find the objects’ owners, and hearing stories about why they’re special. The goal is to build more personal one-to-one connections, and reinforce the new bonds being made.

Ritual 4: One Box to connect random people inside a team for special occasion in a ‘regular’ way. Team members (or people in the same building) enter their name into a box. Each week, one employee draws a name from the box, to choose a ‘work-date’ thing to do, and co-worker to do it with. This might even just involve being each others’ lunch buddy. The goal is to bring a spark of random connection, while also making ‘hanging out’ part of work life, rather than something that happens only after hours for people without family obligations.

Ritual 5: Graduation Ceremony for New Talent, to have a playful party when people on the ‘new talent’ track, after their first year rotation, are finally given their official, permanent assignment. The ceremony will make this transition time more of an official celebration, to give recognition to the anxiety and momentousness of it, from the employee’s perspective. It should also lighten the competitive tension felt between the employees.

Each of these rituals was vetted by the partner team, and in some cases were actively created along with partners as co-designers. The teams handed off video explanations of the ritual, for their partner teams to take, enact, and adapt going forward.

5 Findings

Reflecting on the design work and ritual output of the workshop, we found that the ritual design framework resonated with our design teams and our self-selected corporate partners. Those people who are interested in improving organizational culture found the focus on rituals to be quite useful and the design work in creating them to be enjoyable and fruitful. In our debriefs with the stakeholders, they affirmed that crafting small interactions, to embody and spread particular values, was a strategy they found to be very promising for their own culture. We identified several more specific insights about the design of rituals in organizations.

5.1. Ritual Design Framework Resonates

When we analyzed the flow of all the designed rituals, we observed that teams had employed the ritual design framework elements naturally. They prototyped the rituals as narrative arcs, with a context hook, symbolic prop, and repeatable acts.

The teams found that rituals would have particular strength during transition times, such as starting a new job. The framework could be emphasized particularly during an employee’s transitions, or when an organization is going through a larger-scale transition.

Among the goals of the rituals, cohesion was the dominant theme. Teams found rituals to have promise for creating bonds, a sense of identity, and strengthening superficial relationships. Creativity was a less prominent theme, with a few teams highlighting that rituals could be used to stoke creative work.

We gathered an insight about the service design nature of many of the rituals. Though we had proposed the framework to be for an interaction that could be repeated, the teams crafted more ‘ritual services’ as ongoing programs. For example, the One Box and Design Thinking drip rituals were designed as ongoing services with multiple touch points. The New Talent Graduation Ceremony and Crash the Desk are part of an ongoing program. We will incorporate this insight, that rituals could be a service design, into our framework in upcoming workshops.

5.2 Rituals Are Strategies to Assert Culture

As we hypothesized based on our literature review, the design teams uncovered the democratic potential of rituals for culture-building. Ritual design can be a powerful means for an individual to assert the culture they want an organization to have. Regardless of their place in an organization's hierarchy, a person can craft these small, special interactions to make the organization more in line with the values and behavior they want.

Particularly for people who may feel stuck or unhappy in an organization, seeing culture through the lens of ritual design can help them figure out strategies to bring people together in better ways. It is proactive, it focuses on small interactions, and it brings a 'je-ne-sais-quoi' factor of meaningfulness and excitement.

As we heard from some of our student participants, in past working environments they found the status-quo of relationships in teams to be toxic — without respect, with adversarial competition, and a lack of a 'team' culture. This is where they found that a ritual design framework could help. It puts anyone inside an organization as an agent of positive culture change. You do not have to wait for the culture to change for you — you can quickly, creatively prototype your own relationships and team culture. Ritual design can be a tool-set to playfully craft new interactions, and embed new values into the day-to-day.

5.3 Low barrier prototyping

Another observation from the workshop is that the process of ritual design can be a cheap, quick, meaningful way to spark new culture. A design workshop is relatively cheap and informal, but it provided valuable 'safe, creative space' for reflecting on current culture and playing around with new behaviors, is very valuable. Prototyping new rituals is quick and free, because they are small interactions. They do not require intensive technology or expertise. Rather, what is needed is more in terms of human capital: buy-in from some employees, who are willing to engage in brainstorming and improv, and who are open to spend time in design work.

Running a workshop also can bring out the people inside an organization who are potential culture-makers, but who haven't been given the opportunity to be so yet. You don't need a whole organization to engage in this kind of ritual/culture design — just a few ones who are passionate about better ways of working. It also benefits from having outsiders co-design with employees. The students helped bring a fresh, naive perspective, that encouraged the employees to reflect more systematically on what was going on in their work culture. They also brought creativity and their own experiences to spark good ideas for rituals.

As one of the students observed, what's really necessary for a ritual design's success is a person in the org to be passionate and charismatic about it. One person can craft a ritual and then spread it outward — as long as they can get others to suspend over-thinking and inertia, to join in.

In our debrief with our partners, we formalized this process so that it can be

repeated throughout the organization. A ritual design workshop can be easily repeated, through setting out some constraints (quick deadlines, going through the steps of the design process, and ending up with a 1-minute video), and supplying the participants with a little training, some brainstorming prompts, and some coaching. The workshop itself can be a force of positive change, helping employees give voice to where they think culture is breaking down, and then giving them creative agency to make small, funny, delightful new rituals that would improve their work-life.

5.4 A Mindset of Ritual-spotting

Another insight that emerged was that culture can be crafted in even more everyday ways than a design workshop. Once a person has gone through this process, they have a powerful mindset with which to spot and foster organic rituals. Put simply, ritual design can be an intentional way to get to organic organization culture. Seeing the workplace through the lens of rituals — and with the knowledge of the design process — can help an employee see good things that already exist, to build from one-off interactions into regular rituals. We call this ritual-spotting.

Alternatively, this lens can help them to see breakdowns, fail-points, and let-downs that they can then target with a new ritual as a design intervention.

We heard from several of our participants that they were most excited about developing their own toolbox of strategies and practices to develop better work-lives and team behaviors where they work. By playing with ritual design, they started to realize that one important strategy can be converting their routines to rituals.

The workshop helped them understand difference between routines (actions that get repeated regularly, like stand-up meetings) and rituals (actions that carry a je-ne-sais-quoi factor of meaning, magic, or values). They were able to see this special power that rituals have, to bring values out through behaviors, and to bring people together and give them a unique sense of satisfaction and bonding. With that insight, they started to think of strategies to make the things that they do on a regular basis (rather thoughtlessly) more meaningful by layering a ritual into them.

5.5 An Alternative to Top-Down Culture, Culture By Default

In our debrief, the participants reflected that ritual design can be an alternative to more top-down, heavy attempts at culture-building. Rather than company retreats, centrally-planned events, and other big attempts to set culture, when employees themselves craft and spread rituals, they're much more likely to get engagement, and they will have more meaning and resonance for the teams.

This leads to our final big takeaway: ritual design can be an antidote to “culture by default”. If an organization is not intentionally crafting rituals that reflect their values and mission, it's likely they have rituals that don't actually serve them. For

example, in our background research, we heard many examples of org rituals that involve heavy drinking, or the manager's personal preferences. In many cases, an org's culture is set by rituals that have been inherited from fraternity and college rituals, or that are built too closely around the manager's defaults.

Going through a ritual design process helps to think more deliberately about what kind of values and experiences the culture should embody — and then what kinds of behaviors would best serve this — and especially with an eye to the diversity of the employees in the org. Not everyone wants to celebrate successes, say goodbye to departing team-members, or bond with co-workers through alcohol, or through after-work parties, but often these are the go-to rituals that pop up. With more intentionality, creativity, and co-design, an org can make sure that its rituals reflect its employees' preferences and its own values.

Conclusion

When we think about the big challenges facing modern corporate organizations, around retaining talent, weathering transitions, and improving engagement, culture and rituals can address them. We argue that intentional use of the design process to craft new ritual interactions in the workplace can allow for democratic, organic culture-building. It is a strategy to allow for people from various levels of hierarchy in an organization to assert the types of values and behaviors that they want the culture to be. Rituals have particular power because they can be modest, easily prototyped interactions, but they can hold tremendous significance and emotional sway. The ritual design framework that we have refined lays out a clear path with which to craft new rituals, making it easier for teams to reflect on their current culture and then prototype and refine new rituals to address problems.

Our workshop demonstrated that rituals are designable, and that, at least for people who are interested in matters of 'organizational culture', the process can be lightweight and satisfying. Our next round of research will examine which of the designed rituals succeed, insofar as they are embraced and practiced by the partner teams. We will evaluate which of the rituals continue to be performed after several months, or if they are adapted. We will also experiment with rituals in a longitudinal manner for the 'stickiness' factor in rituals, and inquire into the qualities of rituals that stick. We are not defining success as widespread adoption throughout the organization, but rather by whether a specific group practices the ritual. If they do, this will demonstrate that the ritual provides them value.

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