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Career Compass No. 99: Harness the Hidden Power of Rituals

Amid all the uncertainty in local government, rituals can help us focus, relax, and serve as a better leader and colleague.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Dec 12, 2022 | ARTICLE

I'm a mid-manager who leads a program team in the community services department of a mid-sized suburb in the Southeast. The team is inundated with new and changing demands to

- *Digitize services and procedures.*
- *Respond to new populations and user groups, such as families living in cars and RVs.*
- *Decrease the carbon footprint and water usage at our municipal facilities.*
- *Work with colleagues and community stakeholders in virtual environments.*



Team members complain that they feel harried, disconnected from each other, unappreciated, and lack opportunities to pursue new learning and development. I sense that team members feel our work lives are unsettled and even out of control. To make matters worse, there is a lot of churn in our department and the team itself, with talent moving to other organizations and new staff joining us. As the team leader, I, too, feel unsettled.

How do I help our team (and myself) feel more settled and focused?

The world of local government has become much more turbulent, uncertain, and “messy.” This disruptive, ever-changing world will remain your reality.

The new normal certainly requires that leaders help their teams:

- Acknowledge the messiness and all the changing demands.
- “Narrow the focus” by identifying a few priorities that the team can adequately address.
- Clarify the end goal but allow flexibility in how to get there.
- Advocate for the team so that the department director, city manager, and city council support a few priorities within your team’s capacity to respond.
- Take a few steps forward on any priority, be ready to pivot, fix up mistakes, and learn as you go.

(See *ICMA Career Compass No. 94: Leading in Turbulence*.)

As we deal with a lot of uncertainty, rituals can help us manage some of the “messiness” in our personal and work lives.

What Are Rituals?

Rituals are defined as a prescribed set of actions regularly repeated in a precise manner by an individual or members of a group. According to anthropologists, from the beginning of human time, cultures have used rituals to forge identity, support group values, promote learning, and build community. (See Francesca Gino and Michael

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Norton, “*Why Rituals Work*,” *Scientific American*, May 14, 2013.)

Let me give you an example. When I was growing up, my family had a ritual of getting together every Sunday. My grandmother Rebecca would cook a large Lebanese meal that was followed by drinking Turkish coffee. We all shared what was going on with ourselves and told family stories. There was no excuse for missing a Sunday lunch. These Sunday lunches brought us together as a family, passed on culture and family wisdom, provided a sense of identity, and allowed us to unwind and get ready for the coming week.

Why Are Rituals Important?

Rituals that are practiced individually or by our teams give us a sense of certainty and a small measure of control amid a lot of change and turbulence.

As we transition from the post-pandemic, The Gallup Organization has found that 55% of all employees are not engaged. (See Heidi Grant, “*Rituals Make Us Value Things More*,” *hbr.org*, Dec 12, 2013.) Rituals are engaging and allow us to reduce anxiety, increase productivity, and enhance the quality of our day-to-day lives at home and on the job.

As the world of local government becomes even more turbulent, rituals are more important than ever. Dimitris Xygalatas has stated, “Rituals impose order on a chaotic world. They make our lives more predictable and safe.” (See Eric Barker, “[Barking Up the Wrong Tree](#)” blog, Oct 10, 2022.)

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Personal Rituals

Many of us have personal rituals at the beginning of the day, at midday, and at the end of the day. We conduct these ritualistic activities without much thinking because they have become habits.

Each of us has different personal rituals that give us a sense of comfort. For instance, some people walk their dog at the same time each day or read to their child at bedtime.

Here are some of my daily rituals:

Morning rituals

When I get up, I walk to my neighborhood commercial area and pick up several newspapers. Once I return home, I make myself a breakfast of oatmeal and coffee. I enjoy my breakfast on the patio, reading the newspapers. Once I finish with breakfast and newspapers, I say to myself: “OK, Frank, it’s time to get to work.” I enjoy my daily morning ritual which launches me into work and helps me become quickly productive in the morning.

Mid-afternoon rituals

After working for several hours—usually on the computer—I get tired and feel the need to get reenergized. So I take a five-mile roundtrip walk to downtown Palo Alto, where I pick up my mail at the post office, often with stops at the bank and library. The walk helps me get some needed exercise and provides the opportunity to think and reflect. It also allows me to return to work with renewed energy.

End-of-day rituals

At the end of the day, before going to bed, I review my calendar for the next day, put alarms on my phone for any appointments or calls (I get easily distracted), and write down a to-do list and circle the most important item so I start with it the next day right after my morning ritual. As Dan Rockwell has stated, “Plan tomorrow tonight.” (See “[5 Morning Habits](#),” *Leadership Freak* blog, Aug 3, 2022.) In bed, I then read a crime mystery that helps get me to sleep.

There is nothing special about these rituals but they do help me develop a daily rhythm and feel somewhat in control of my day. The rituals also make me more productive and help me feel satisfied with my work.

Team Rituals

Team rituals can also help create a sense of some control as well as promote learning, foster social bonds, and enhance productivity. Here is a sampling of team rituals:

Monday morning huddles

To launch the weekly endeavors of your division or program team, you might institute a “Monday Morning Huddle.” This is a 15- or 20-minute in-person or virtual check-in at which team members briefly state their top priority for the week and any help or support they may need from other team members. This huddle helps people focus on the most important to-do for the week plus emphasizes support from team members.

Connection activities

With many team members (especially those doing mostly remote work) feeling somewhat disconnected or isolated, it is imperative to promote social bonds. Consider instituting a “connection” opportunity at the beginning of every in-person, virtual or hybrid meeting. Research indicates that high-performing teams spend 25% more time talking about non-work topics, such as family, hobbies, sports, and the like. (See Ron Friedman, “[5 Things High-Performing Teams Do Differently](#),” *hbr.org*, Oct 21, 2021.)

For example, you can start the meeting by asking every team member to share in pairs and then in the larger group their favorite coffee or team mug and why it is important to them. Or, you can ask everyone to share a photo of a summer experience and why it was fun or significant for them.

The Gallup Organization notes that people are more engaged and tend to stay with an organization when they feel connected to each other. (See Jon Clifton, “[The Power of Work Friends](#),” *hbr.org*, Oct 7, 2022.)

“TEAM RITUALS CAN PROMOTE LEARNING, FOSTER SOCIAL BONDS, AND ENHANCE PRODUCTIVITY.”

“Take 5”

To further promote social connection, some teams “take 5” or “take 10” at the start of any in-person or virtual huddle or meeting. This is an opportunity to share what they did over the weekend or any non-work pursuit or something personal.

Team acknowledgments

You might start any team meeting with an item titled “team acknowledgments.” Team members are encouraged to recognize some milestone or achievement of another team member or simply thank the teammate for their support or assistance. While the formal leader participates in team acknowledgments, it is important that appreciation (and better yet gratitude) is shared by all.

This ritual helps create a culture of appreciation that generates employee engagement.

Learning reports

Also at the beginning of any staff meeting, you can have a standard item titled “learning reports.” Team members are encouraged to briefly share a summary of an article, what they learned at a recent conference or workshop, or what their teen daughter said at the breakfast table.

As a regular agenda item, this learning report assignment can be rotated among team members so learning becomes more of a ritualistic activity.

Debriefs

To further stimulate ongoing learning and adjustments, the team can institute regular debriefs or critiques of current projects or initiatives. While it is important to conduct post-action reports, a debrief at every or every other meeting of a key ongoing project entails asking:

- What is going well as we carry out this key project?
- What is not going so well?
- What are we learning?
- In what way do we need to make adjustments and pivot?

Celebrations and Flops

Many teams celebrate completing a successful milestone, either with coffee and bagels or an ice cream social. Most of our projects take a long time to achieve, so celebrating a milestone maintains a sense of progress and momentum as well as reinforces team cohesion. I call this kind of ritual “purposeful partying.”

“CELEBRATING PROGRESS AS WELL AS WELL-INTENTIONED MISTAKES IS ‘PURPOSEFUL PARTYING.’”

Another kind of ritual is acknowledging flops or mistakes. There is no learning unless we experiment and see what works and what does not. To promote psychological safety in a team setting, some team leaders celebrate with the team a once-a-quarter “fabulous or

almost-fabulous flop.” (Of course, the leader should start this tradition by sharing with the team his or her own error or screw-up.) A team member presents a well-intentioned mistake or something that did not go as planned, and everyone gives the team member a round of applause. Celebrating mistakes promotes learning but also encourages team members to share their vulnerability. Vulnerability creates trust, a key ingredient to team success. (See [ICMA Career Compass No. 32: The Power of Vulnerability](#).)

Creating Powerful Workplace Rituals

There is no one way to do a team ritual. Try a ritual out and see what works. To develop powerful team rituals, I suggest that formal and informal team leaders consider taking the following steps:

1. Be intentional

Figure out what you want to achieve by practicing the ritual. Is it creating a sense of team connectedness or identity, promoting learning, encouraging appreciation for team members and their efforts, and/or building trust? Design the ritual based on the end you have in mind.

2. Tie the ritual to organizational values

In initiating a ritual, emphasize how the ritual supports an organizational value, such as belonging, caring, learning, or employee engagement or support. Most organizations do

not effectively tie values to the employee's daily work. Only 23% of U.S. workers agree that they can apply their organization's values to what they do every day. Only 27% strongly agree that they believe in their organization's stated values. (See "[How to Build a Better Company Culture](#)," Gallup)

*"DESIGN THE RITUAL BASED
ON YOUR END-IN-MIND."*

3. Model the way

Team leaders should model the behavior that they seek. To create a positive ritual, leaders need to share some of their non-work selves or failures as well as recognize the efforts of others if they want other team members to join them in the ritual.

4. Start small and experiment

To use rituals in an intentional way, start with a small effort, such as incorporating team acknowledgments or a learning report or "take 5" at the beginning of staff meetings. See how the team responds.

5. Institutionalize the ritual

Don't deviate from the practice of the ritual. Do the same ritual at the same time and place so it becomes part of the workplace culture.

6. Have a little fun

It is difficult for a team to be successful in an environment of deadly seriousness. Therefore, include a little fun in conducting rituals. For instance, a connection ritual may have team members share a vacation photo or some hobby or interest that no one knows about. Food and beverage always add a little fun to the ritual.

Still a Lot of Messiness

These personal or team rituals don't negate the feelings that our personal or professional worlds are out of control. However, they engage us in some regular activities that give us a small measure of stability and normalcy.

Team rituals are particularly important because they help amid all the uncertainty to develop a culture of connection, belonging, focus, learning, and appreciation.

Questions for Readers

So that we learn from each other, what are your personal rituals that enhance your productivity or sense of control or just give you some satisfaction?

What are some rituals practiced by your teams? What are the positive impacts of these team rituals?

Send me your responses at frank@frankbenest.com.



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