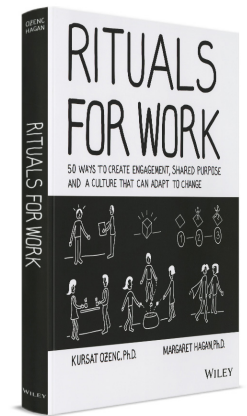


Rituals for Work

50 Ways to Create Engagement, Shared Purpose, and a Culture That Can Adapt to Change

by **Kursat Ozenc, Ph.D. and Margaret Hagan, Ph.D.**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Rituals for Work shows how creative rituals can make our personal and business lives more meaningful and rewarding. Rituals are powerful tools: They reinforce good habits, motivate personal and professional achievement, create a common bond between co-workers, and build shared values. They can transform an organization's culture and provide a foundation to achieve common goals.

A ritual is only effective when its purpose is clearly defined. This book goes beyond simple analysis to provide actual recipes for individual rituals designed to promote specific habits, change negative behaviors, and instill values. Each ritual can be adapted to achieve a multitude of goals and tailored to fit your organization or team's specific needs.

An informative and inspirational resource for executives, managers, team leaders, and employees of every level, *Rituals for Work* provides a blueprint for building a culture of engagement, innovation, and shared purpose for organizations of all sizes, across industries.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To change behaviors, form positive habits, and define shared goals.
- To build shared values, foster innovation, and encourage strong teamwork.
- To deal with conflicts effectively and engage others to find resolutions.
- To learn the fundamental concepts of ritual-building and share your knowledge with your team.

Why Bring Rituals into Work?

Companies and people face big challenges at work today. There are low levels of employee engagement, high levels of stress and fear, inhuman environments, and failed reorganizations. These problems at work require a multifaceted set of strategies to make more human-centered, values-driven, and creative workplaces.

Rituals can be one powerful strategy to improve our work lives—and help us act more like we aspire to be. They are practices that can bond people together, help us move through conflicts, amp us up to better performances, and assist us in adapting to change.

Rituals are actions that a person or group does repeatedly, following a similar pattern or script, in which they've imbued symbolism and meaning. They have unique factors that elevate them above normal experiences. Unlike a routine, rituals are not mindless. They are done with people recognizing that something special is happening that they are tuned into.

They involve some physical movement. There is usually a patterned rhythm of people moving that activates a sense of something special going on. There are symbols at work. They could be props, words, or actions that represent something bigger—usually a higher value. These symbols invoke a sense of the extraordinary that transforms the average into the special.

A good ritual tells a story, which often helps a person make sense of something that is going on, figure out what it means in a bigger picture, and deal with it.

Often, the culture of an organization is set by talking in the abstract. This could be through writing down a manifesto, core principles, or a constitution. Rituals are ways to bring these big, abstract ideas into daily practice. By default, they involve physical actions and concrete behaviors. A good ritual will take the underlying values and intangible beliefs of a company—all these valuable, invisible things—and make them visible, interactive, and lively real-world practices throughout the organization.

Part I: The Power of Rituals

Rituals for Better Work

Rituals give order and meaning. Foundational studies of rituals emerged out of the work of sociologist Emile Durkheim. When he studied religion, he discovered rituals

as a central backbone to how belief systems operate. Rituals make beliefs concrete and graspable for people. People gravitate toward the function and structured behavior that rituals offer. This structure brings people a sense of things being in their control and a sense of meaning.

Rituals also give people a safe space to experiment. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz found that when people act out rituals, they can jump from what the “real” world is to another one that is more ideal. Rituals let people imagine other ways of behaving and living, taking a break from their everyday rules and routines. They give people safe, structured zones to build better ways of living.

A recent review of scholarship on rituals found that the actions of physically going through rituals help people feel satisfied. The ritual actions regulate people's emotions, keeping them calm. Rituals also regulate people's performance, helping them to act in a steadier and more focused way. Finally, rituals regulate people's sense of belonging, giving them a stable feeling of social connection.

Rituals involve four key principles:

- **Principle 1:** Rituals have a magical, je-ne-sais-quoi factor.
- **Principle 2:** Rituals are done with intentionality, with the person tuned into this being a special moment.
- **Principle 3:** A ritual carries a symbolic value that gives a sense of purpose and that's beyond the practical.
- **Principle 4:** A ritual evolves over time to better suit the people and the situation.

How to Bring Rituals into Your Work, Team, and Organization

You may have a hunch that rituals could make a difference in your work life—that you could have better ways of working day to day, that you could improve how your team functions, or inspire a better sense of community. As you think about which specific ritual might work best for your situation, there are some key mindsets to adopt—those of an anthropologist and those of a designer.

- **Anthropologist:** Be a keen observer of situations as they exist. Spot where there are sparks of “meaning” that already occur. Tune into when people are talking about their values, beliefs, and goals. And articulate people's everyday routines and aspirations.
- **Designer:** “Everyone designs who devises courses

Set a context for people to do the ritual in their own way, so they are supported with a structure but are allowed to decide exactly what it is and how to do it.

of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones,” writes Herbert Simon, the Nobel Laureate, in *The Sciences of the Artificial*. Embrace the designer role by trying new experiments to see what works—and by using your existing materials, like routines, spaces, and goals.

Here are several strategies to help you in deploying rituals:

Create a safe space. To bring rituals into a group, the most important thing is openness and transparency among participants.

Facilitate ritual design. To make your ritual successful, you need alignment and collective buy-in from your team members. Use design methods to facilitate conversations and create alignment.

Seed advocates. In every endeavor, you will have more interest from some who believe in the need and value of a ritual more than the others. Find those people and seed them inside a group.

Don’t impose a top-down ritual. For a new ritual to take off, there’s no way to command people to participate without sparking a backlash—and defeating the purpose of it. Instead, set a context for people to do the ritual in their own way, so they are supported with a structure but are allowed to decide exactly what it is and how to do it.

Don’t call it a ritual. Particularly if you’re trying to convince your colleagues who may be skeptical of culture-building exercises, you can simply do the new thing, or ask for them to humor you—without a formal label.

Keep it cheap and lightweight. You can create rituals without requesting a huge budget, arranging large time obligations, or putting too much effort into complicated arrangements.

Tap into the charisma of an instigator. Who in your organization has the ability to bring out others’ creativity and playfulness? They should be involved in the launch. Find “early adopters,” who are already keyed into doing things differently, and empower them to be leaders in the culture.

Don’t mix it up with routine. Rituals can have routine qualities, but rituals are not routines. A ritual is an intentional act; it needs you to be present and committed when it’s happening. Routines, on the other hand, are automated and often only get recognized when they’re broken.

Rituals can be a means to build up habits. That said, building a habit is not building a ritual. Rituals carry a core of meaning and values, which can help an individual or group to get motivated or regulate their emotions in order to build a habit.

Get beyond the “fun.” Not all rituals are positive. Participants can go beyond just the most obvious rituals—which tend to be around creating “fun” energy and structuring the day. That means looking for low points in our working lives.

Make the rituals your own. Don’t use the examples below as strict recipes. Adapt them to your own work culture by drawing from your own history, values, in-jokes, routines, and symbols.

Know they don’t always live forever. Rituals are not always meant to be permanent institutions.

Don’t overwhelm people at first. You have to introduce a ritual in “the sweet spot”—where the experience feels new but not too new.

Now let’s look at a few rituals from each of the five types of workplace rituals: creativity and innovation rituals, performance and flow rituals, conflict and resilience rituals, community and team building rituals, and organizational change and transition rituals.

Part II: Rituals for Work

Creativity and Innovation Rituals

Creativity and innovation happen when people break the script and make non-obvious connections. Rituals can provide a structure for people to switch to a creative mindset and push the boundaries of the ordinary. They can also help teams develop a culture of experimentation.

The Daily Drawing. Use this ritual when you need to fire up your right brain right before creative work or any kind of serious work. Once a person sits down at their desk, they take out a card or a notebook sheet and then spend exactly one minute doodling anything they like. It can be something they will work on, something they are thinking about, or a random sketch. The only rule is that it must be a drawing and it must take one minute—not more, not less.

The goal of the Daily Drawing is to be loose and easy with creative work. Rather than start the day at the desk with the computer and emails, this ritual starts the day with a small creative challenge. It doesn't have to be good; it just has to happen. If it's done every day, it becomes a low-barrier activity to jumpstart creativity without too much thinking or planning.

The Surprise Ride Along. Use this ritual when you need to charge leaders with more empathy for users and find sparks for innovation. The Surprise Ride Along is a way to disrupt a project, with leaders whisked away from offices and boardrooms and into the field. They are challenged to set aside their preconceived plans and spend the day listening, watching, and observing the people the project is meant to benefit. It's a ritual that's about radical empathy and finding new paths for creativity.

The organizers should arrange the Ride Along like a surprise party—the team members shouldn't know it's coming, and they should think that they'll be going about work as usual. Then they'll be told that they're actually going to be spending the day shadowing a customer or serving as front-line staff.

The Ride Along has both a symbolic and functional purpose. The act of spending the day listening and observing should reinforce the value of empathy. And the face-to-face experience can catalyze better work by focusing leaders on specific problems and empathetic understanding of others' experiences. The Ride Along demands a high degree of planning, just like a surprise party.

The Skill-Share Fest. The Skill-Share Fest is a day off from the normal work routine, where team members share their maker skills with one another in a festive environment. Everyone can teach the rest of their team how to cook a certain dish, build something, perform a dance, make a craft, or some other skill that they've developed. It's structured like an “unconference” where individuals can set the agenda by proposing sessions they'd like to offer or those they'd like to attend.

The company Pinterest developed this ritual around one of their core values of “knitting.” They run a Knit Con that lets all of the employees share projects and skills they've developed, so people can learn from one another and create new things. It's a way to encourage employees to bring their “whole self” to work and find hidden connections among team members—appreciating the talents they don't usually get to share at work.

Performance and Flow Rituals

Performance and flow rituals help people to deal with high-stakes work situations, cope with anxiety, and focus on getting to their goals. They can bring a sense of control in times of uncertainty—like during a big meeting, in the middle of a pitch or a trial, or when overwhelmed with too many deadlines.

Rituals' use of repetition and physical action help develop a sense of flow and confidence. Research shows that performing rituals helps people to regulate their emotions, decrease anxiety, and get into a flow state. Following the pattern of a ritual can also help people to block distractions and set rules for themselves about how to work better.

The Moment of Reverence. The Moment of Reverence is a short ritual that occurs right before an important event, meeting, or talk. It is taken from a hospital team practice at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. Right before a surgery begins, the whole team of doctors, nurses, and others stop what they are doing. They take a short moment to remember the person on whom they are going to conduct the surgery.

The goal is to ensure that everyone remembers the humanity of the situation. It's about breaking the routine procedures, pausing to recognize the importance of what's happening, and appreciating the people involved. The moment can also reinforce the mindfulness that everyone should be proceeding with—to encourage care, precision, and empathy.

At Beth Israel, before operating on a patient, the team pauses right after completing the pre-surgery checklist for a moment of reverence. The circulating nurse reminds everyone who the patient is, if they are someone's mother, father, sister, or brother, and to be considerate of the patient's needs. Everyone is silent during the moment. Once the set time is over, the team continues on with the medical work.

Six Daily Questions. Six Daily Questions is an individual ritual to remind yourself of your goals and life priorities on a daily basis. Business educator and coach Marshall

Goldsmith designed this ritual to keep himself focused on his primary goals. Every day, at the same time, he arranges for someone to call him. They ask him the same six questions every day (that he wrote himself, for himself):

- Did you do your best to set clear goals?
- To make progress on those goals?
- To find meaning?
- To be engaged?
- To be happy?
- To build good relationships?

The person on the other side just listens without judgment, and says encouraging words before hanging up. Behavior change is hard. It needs goal-setting, awareness, and a persistent attitude. Six Daily Questions is a daily reminder ritual to help individuals get there.

Rituals can be strategies to navigate conflicts, to manage anger and frustration, and to move towards a more constructive relationship.

Silent Disco Thursdays. Silent Disco Thursdays is a group ritual for employees who want to do heads-down work without meetings and distractions. During a set time, everyone is silent and listening to their favorite music. The ritual is meant to rescue teams from meetings and the fatigue that comes with interruptions, distractions, and small interactions.

Every Thursday, employees who want to join can come to the silent disco area, grab their headphones, and do their work as if they are at a party. Just like at Silent Discos in other contexts, the central organizers can broadcast a few channels of music, and everyone can choose on their headphones which channel to listen to.

Conflict and Resilience Rituals

Conflicts are an inevitable part of work life—as are failures.

Both can bring intense emotions and possibly destroy relationships. Rituals can be strategies to navigate conflicts, to manage anger and frustration, and to move towards a more constructive relationship.

Ideally, they can structure spaces for more candid, transparent communication—as well as personal resilience to deal with mistakes. They bring awareness, reflection, and mindfulness to increase people's ability to manage negative things at work.

Burn the Argument. Burn the Argument is a ritual to move people past a conflict that flared up. After a conflict has arisen among team members, have them release their emotional energy by symbolically burning their feelings.

Instead of hoping that the people will be able to move on after the argument, have them explicitly write down what they were arguing about and what their feelings are. Make sure that they hear each other's point of view. Once everyone is done, ask each person to silently reflect on how they might move past the argument. Give them one minute, and then ask them to let it go silently.

Then have them put these written-down accounts and emotions into a shredder—or have them tear them up. Then, combine their scraps together, and burn them in a heatproof container. The goal is to have the symbolic actions translate into real forgiveness, in which the people agree to move forward and to acknowledge each other's points of view.

No Rehash Rule. If, during meetings, there's a tendency for people to circle around the same complaints or discussion topics, the No Rehash ritual is a small prompt to move past them.

The ritual is a short one, built around a No Rehash rule that you must establish in your organization. During a meeting, anyone is empowered to invoke this rule when they feel the meeting is being derailed or getting repetitive. They can hold up a "No Rehash" paddle, card, rubber chicken, or other symbol. They don't need to say the word—the action should be a signal for the people talking to come back to the point and to leave the topic that has been exhausted.

The ritual should be a short, humorous reminder to keep meetings more focused and to let people feel they are able to cut off unproductive lines of conversation in a direct but not confrontational way.

The Small Moments Jar. The Small Moments Jar helps teams build a healthy culture by instilling a habit of recog-

nizing contributions of all shapes and sizes. When a teammate does something great—whether it's helping out on a deadline, giving a great presentation, or bringing in fancy cupcakes—another teammate can write it down on a small slip of paper and put it in the jar. The jar should be emptied regularly, such as at the end of the weekly all-hands meeting.

The Small Moments Jar should be integrated into the team's day-to-day, with a low threshold of what can be recognized. The jar should grow week to week, with all kinds of small appreciations. After there are at least 25 to 30 notes in the jar, you can start pulling notes out to feature them. The trigger to open them could be a weekly meeting, a team lunch, or another regular activity where everyone is together. The goal is to spotlight small, positive moments.

Community and Team Building Rituals

A community ritual can help build a shared identity through symbols, stories, and history making. These then can become reference points for people to draw on core values and feel connected.

Rituals can also be key for better meetings. They can bring humor, surprise, and meaning to routine work, to bring the best out of co-workers. They can help bring people into sync, get more productive, and build stronger empathy.

The Remote Holiday Party. Holiday parties are not easy to run when team members are in many different locations. The Remote Party is a ritual meant for distributed teams, so that people can get to know each other and relax together virtually. It's a way to develop work relationships beyond just connecting around work videos or conference calls.

When it's holiday season, the facilitator can set a holiday party deliberately for distributed teams. They will set a theme and schedule a party time where everyone can join comfortably, across different time zones. The celebration can be structured with in-person time to mingle, eat, and drink—and then times for virtual connection for gift exchanges, awards and thank yous, and other more formal activities.

Depending on the level of technology, there can either be videoconferences set up inside a party room—for whole groups to be calling in to other groups—or it can be individual to individual. The facilitator should set up a shared music list, so that the different offices can play music for each other. If they want, they can also encourage people to dress up in special clothes.

Walking Meetings. The Walking Meetings are a simple

ritual that has people walk together, along a route, when they are trying to talk through a problem or brainstorm new ideas. It shifts typical meetings or seminars from static, sedentary face-to-face gatherings to side-by-side active experiences.

A Walking Meeting is particularly powerful if a group has been in a long conference or working session, sitting with their computers in front of them for a long stretch. By changing how people are arranged, giving them a common destination, and having them walk alongside each other, the group can develop new connections and gather more inspiration during the meeting time.

Research shows that walking boosts creativity and convergent thinking. As people move in sync, their minds can also synchronize as well. Walking together can foster bonds between people. And when moving side by side, rather than facing off across a table, people can operate with less hierarchy and develop more peer-to-peer conversations.

Our Year in Pictures. This ritual adapts a family photo wall to an organization. It creates a visual shared history of the people in the organization. At the end of the year, for a holiday party or otherwise, the team shares photos of the past year.

These images can be from work events, parties and offsites, screenshots of their daily computer life, or pictures of their work product. Everyone must share at least one photo. One person, with graphic design skills, then takes the images and assembles them into a huge collage poster. They can either print it out as a large poster to be framed and hung up, or even as a large vinyl wall covering to take up an entire wall. The visual can help form work into a narrative and also bring a sense of family to the organization.

Organizational Change and Transition Rituals

Individuals, teams, and organizations have life cycles, just like in our personal lives. At work, there are arrivals, departures, mergers, advancements, divorces, retirements, demotions, and more.

During all of these transitions, rituals can be an effective way to help people deal with change. Rituals can give people back a sense of control, helping them make sense of what's happening, get used to new roles and routines, and maintain stability during times of change.

Crash the Desk. Crash the Desk is an onboarding ritual for a new employee's first day of work. While the person

Rituals can give people back a sense of control, helping them make sense of what's happening, get used to new roles and routines, and maintain stability during times of change.

is away from their desk on a tour or lunch, all of their new teammates leave a personal item on their desk. Then, when the person comes back and discovers their desk full of objects, they must go around with each item to find who it belongs to. When they find the right person, they can chat about what the object means.

This ritual is a welcome tour mixed with a game. It structures a way for a new person to interact one-on-one with different team members, so they can begin to build relationships and don't feel that there's a one-against-many dynamic.

Smashing the Old Ways. Smashing the Old Ways is a ritual ceremony for an organization to officially break from a previous strategy or a dysfunctional practice. In it, the leadership calls the organization together. It sets up a stage where some big, breakable symbol of its “old, dysfunctional ways of working” are set up. Then, when people gather together, the leaders announce, “We are going to destroy these together.”

Each person gets a turn with a sledgehammer to smash the old thing. It's like a piñata game—collectively destroying the thing until it's in smithereens. This is adapted from a Zipcar ceremony, in which employees were invited to smash desktops to reinforce the push for a mobile-first business.

It marks the transitional moment, from one large-scale company strategy to another one, in a strong way. Additionally, it creates a cathartic moment where the negative energy and anxiety about change can be released through controlled destruction. It's also a story for people throughout the organization to hold on to and tell others.

The Name Seeker. Name Seeker is a naming ritual for a temporarily formed project team. When people come together for a short collaboration, often it's hard to get them to feel like they share an identity or to get them to invest in the team.

This ritual has new teammates kick off their collaboration by picking a name together, using their favorite books. They randomly choose words from the books and then work together to make them into a name and form a shared story around the name.

The key of the Name Seeker ritual is to get teams to create a name together that will not last forever but that will work for as long as the temporary team is operating.

Part III: Designing Rituals With and For Teams

After reading about other rituals, perhaps you are interested in creating one that would fit your context and goals. The basic process of creating a new ritual has three big phases: Discovery, Design, and Deployment.

In the Discovery phase, you explore potential moments, inspirations, and intentions that could be at the heart of your ritual. Then in the Design phase, you switch to experimenting with various elements to create the right experience. In the Deployment phase, you think more strategically, about how to roll out your ritual so that it is nimble, low-barrier, and likely to be adopted and adapted by your community.

Step 1—Discover: Set Your Intention. Set an intention to be at the heart of your ritual. What is the point that you want it to make or the emotion you want it to embody? An intention can be based on your or your organization's values, beliefs, goals, motivations, or aspirations. For example, it could be about being a better colleague, inspiring more creativity on your team, or creating a sense of welcome to new employees.

Step 2—Discover: Find a Hook. A trigger is an opportunity moment around which you can build a strong ritual. Some triggers might be when a colleague gets promoted, a product is released, a team kicks off a project, a conflict arises, or a product fails. Once you identify the trigger context, pick a specific situation within this larger context to anchor your ritual. It could be at a weekly meeting, at a coffee break in the lounge, or at a goodbye dinner. This specificity of time and place will make your ritual more likely to stick.

Step 3—Design: Ideate. Brainstorm ritual ideas that would bring your intention to life. Ideally, you can do this with others, to combine your insights. To get inspired, try ritual-specific prompts that draw on what we know from

scholarship about what works, like drawing from Isabel Behncke's work on social technologies:

- **Prompt 1:** Share food and drink.
- **Prompt 2:** Use special costumes—especially things on your head.
- **Prompt 3:** Involve rhythm and movement.

Step 4—Design: Define a Symbolic Prop or Act.

After a first round of brainstorming, see if there's any key moment and symbolic prop or act that you can build your ritual around. There are some exercises that can help you iterate upon your initial ideas.

- **Iteration 1:** Add a magic prop—give extra powers to a prop for your ritual. For example, for an athlete you could give the sneaker a special aura.
- **Iteration 2:** Add a reward moment—of physical, emotional, or social payoff.
- **Iteration 3:** Add a catharsis moment—that would be a particular action to release negative emotions and energy.

Step 5—Design: Refine It into an Arc. A good ritual has a narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end. Take your selected idea and make it into a full arc. You can do this with storyboarding, drawing out the new ritual in steps. Try to refine the ritual based on the ritual principles mentioned above.

Step 6—Deployment: Act Out. Now act it out, to test whether the ritual works in practice. This will be like a second round of brainstorming—but less intellectual and more physical. By acting it out—and taking it as an im-

prov project in which you can change exactly what you're doing—you can refine your ritual into something that feels comfortable, playful, and meaningful.

Step 7—Deployment: Codify. Define the essential script and props, and detail the arc's beginning, middle, and end. List your intention and context trigger to make it complete. Think about how best to involve others and scale up your idea into regular practice. Be open to your designed ritual being adapted. It's an experiment that may fail to catch on in its original plan, but people can improve upon it to make it the right fit for their work life.

We spend so much of our lives at work—whether in a big company, a small startup, or on our own projects. But how much do we invest in making our work lives better? When it comes to our relationships, our creativity, our focus, our life transitions, and the ups-and-downs of our organizations, rituals can help create a more intentional, connected, and meaningful work culture.

IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

- *Disciplined Dreaming: A Proven System to Drive Breakthrough Creativity* by Josh Linkner
- *The Spark and the Grind: Ignite the Power of Disciplined Creativity* by Erik Wahl



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