CORPORATE CULTURE AND COMPANY RITUALS IN BUSINESS

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Abstract

All organizations have rituals — from the mundane everyday routines (coffee breaks, tea time) to major, less frequent events like annual meetings and retirement parties. Smart leaders, however, recognize that rituals like these and others are levers for improving the organization's performance and they take the creation and nurturing of rituals very seriously. It's a subject that I study closely, focusing particularly on the lessons that can be found for business leaders from the world of sport.

Introduction

Rites and rituals in organizations help to boost employee moral, increase engagement and foster a supportive culture. Whether rituals are centered around celebrating individual and team accomplishments or bringing colleagues closer together, they enable the organization as a whole to reach higher goals.

What Are Rites and Rituals?

Rites and rituals, which also include habits and ceremonies, together shape the culture of an organization. Habits usually happen at an *individual employee level*. They are something that the employee does on a regular basis, such as daily or weekly. For example, an employee can eat lunch in the shared lunchroom rather than their desk as a form of habit, or spend five minutes after each meeting debriefing the team about what they learned.

Rituals are generally experienced on a *team or departmental level*. They are also practiced on a regular basis, such as weekly or monthly. The purpose of rituals can vary, from helping team members bond with each other to keeping others updated on business matters. Rituals usually have a goal or objective, such as learning something new or getting to know a recent hire Ceremonies and rites usually take place on an *organizational level*. They happen less frequently than rituals, usually at quarterly or annual intervals. Ceremonies and rites are used to celebrate accomplishments and share company information

How Rituals in Organizations Shape Company Culture

Every organization has a culture, whether it is purposefully created or not. The culture of a business affects the way employees act individually and around their colleagues and managers. An organization's culture is usually built around the vision, mission and core values of the company.

The rites and rituals in organizations also affect the way the company culture is felt throughout the business. For example, if a company culture focuses on employee improvement, it's likely that the organization has interesting company rituals that enable employees to learn new things and advance their knowledge. For example, the company

AIJRRLSJM   **VOLUME 3, ISSUE 10 (2018, OCT)**   **(ISSN-2455-6602)ONLINE**

Anveshana's International Journal of Research in Regional Studies, Law, Social Sciences, Journalism and Management Practices

could hold weekly lunch-and-learn meetings where colleagues can teach each other about various areas of the business.

Many Rituals Celebrate Success

Many rites examples are centered around **celebrating the successes** of individuals, teams and the organization as a whole. Having an employee of the week or month gives people a goal to aspire to, especially if the accolade comes with a prize, such as a gift card or an extra day of vacation.

When projects are completed successfully, businesses can celebrate by having drinks and cake in the lunch room or taking employees out for a meal. This allows team members to bond over their shared experience and breathe a sigh of relief after finishing a busy period at work.

Celebratory rituals don't need to affect the company budget. Simple things like sending out an email announcement with a celebratory picture can also work as a way to mark a milestone. Companies can have a bell in the office that employees can ring whenever they reach a goal, signaling the success for everyone that hears it. Acknowledging the success can be a ritual in itself; it doesn't always need to come with an award or party.

Promoting Skills and Knowledge

Ritual performance is also linked to improving employee skills and **gaining new knowledge**. For many organizations, constant improvement and innovation is a part of company culture. This can be reflected in the rites and rituals. For example, after every project, the team can sit down to debrief and discuss the lessons each employee learned from the process. This can help the team to figure out where things can be improved and which areas were successful and should be replicated.

Gaining knowledge isn't just limited to lunch-and-learns. Interesting company rituals include intensive training programs that every single employee is required to complete, regardless of their role or seniority. This puts everyone on an equal level from the start, and gives employees a full picture of the organization before they start their role.

Solidifying Employee Relationships

Many interesting company rituals are built around **helping employees bond**. Building and maintaining relationships with coworkers is an important aspect of company culture and helps to increase engagement and retention.

Examples include a weekly happy hour in the break room or a morning huddle with the department. This helps employees to catch up on both work and personal life and feel connected to the people they work closely with every day.

Going out with a department or project group to participate in a team-building activity can also help employees establish relationships. Escape rooms or trivia nights enable employees to work together in a fun setting, while axe throwing and bowling allow employees to build and show off unique skills.

Bonding Over Food

One of the best ways to help employees get to know each other and find out how they are similar is by having **rituals around lunch**. Some companies have rituals where everyone in the organizations brings their lunch into the break room every day and enjoys it together. This ritual helps employees make friends and ingrates new hires into the team quickly.

At some organizations, cooking together is an example of a company ritual. Employees spend one lunch hour a week preparing meals for the whole team in the company kitchen which they then eat together. This is great for companies where being a part of the family is an element of the organization's culture.

Many companies offer free snacks and coffee in the lunch room to encourage employees to gather there and spend a few moments socializing. Other companies hire professional chefs to cook for the company on a daily basis, encouraging people to eat in the dining room versus at their desks.

Coaching Employees to Thrive

For some organizations, coaching is a ritual that takes place to **help employees thrive**. The business teaches managers how to coach their team members to learn new skills and advance their careers. This helps employees to feel more invested in the company.

Interesting company rituals also include replacing performance reviews with coaching activities that are tailored to the employee's role and current capabilities. For companies that value creativity and thinking outside the box, performance evaluations don't always capture the full value of the employee. As a result, coaching helps the employee to reach his or her potential.

Encouraging Self-Management

While most businesses have some form of supervisory role, some company rituals include **self-management**. For organizations that value initiative and drive, the management layer of the organizational structure is removed, and each employee is encouraged to manage themselves with the goal of contributing to help the company reach its objectives.

However, self-management doesn't need to be a drastic measure. Businesses can also encourage self-management by having a ritual to set monthly or quarterly goals. When employees set their own objectives, they have a higher sense of investment in meeting those goals.

Keeping it Personal

For many businesses, **focusing on the personal milestones** of their employees is a simple but effective ritual. Knowing and celebrating employee birthdays and anniversaries shows employees they are valued. It also helps colleagues bond over shared experiences such as turning a certain age or spending five years at the company.

These rituals don't need to be complicated or expensive. Having a cake on an employee's birthday or sending flowers to an employee who's had a baby shows them that their

workplace cares about more than just their work. It helps the employee to see their managers and executives as friends rather than bosses.

Corporate culture is embedded in the everyday working lives of all cultural members. Manifestations of cultures in organizations include formal practices (such as pay levels, structure of the hierarchy, job descriptions, and other written policies); informal practices (such as behavioral norms); the organizational stories employees tell to explain "how things are done around here"; rituals (such as Christmas parties and retirement dinners); humor (jokes about work and fellow employees); jargon (the special language of organizational initiates); and physical arrangements (including interior decor, dress norms, and architecture). Cultural manifestations also include values, sometimes referred to more abstractly as content themes. It is essential to distinguish values/content themes that are espoused by employees from values/content themes that are seen to be enacted in behavior. All of these cultural manifestations are interpreted, evaluated, and enacted in varying ways because cultural members have differing interests, experiences, responsibilities, and values. Culture consists of the patterns of meanings that link these manifestations together, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in bitter conflicts between groups, and sometimes in webs of ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction. For these reasons, it is much too simple to define culture in unifying, harmonious terms; for example, in terms of values that are espoused by management and supposedly shared by most employees.

Conclusion

It reinforces desired behaviors. One pillar of Bosch Automotive Aftermarket's recent sales strategy change was to foster entrepreneurship and risk taking among Key Account Managers. To do this, the company ritualized the weekly meeting with the KAMs, as reported by their sales manager:

"Historically the company, like most successful German organizations, had always been very hierarchical. KAMs simply used to do their best to execute what their managers told them, but they didn't take initiative. As a consequence, we had meetings where most KAMs said nothing at all. So we introduced the brainstorming part of the meeting, characterized by the yellow/red card game: if a KAM says nothing, (s)he gets the yellow card and has to leave the room. And if (s)he does it again, (s)he gets the red card and simply cannot attend the meeting next week. The message here was: just don't come next time if you have nothing to say. By introducing this ritual we could arouse creativity and people who had always kept silent until then, when forced to speak, would often contribute the best ideas."

In all the high performing sports teams and companies we studied we found leaders making extensive use of ritual. Indeed, in the sports context, we found that creating or reviving club rituals was almost the first thing that a new coach would do — especially in a team turnaround situation. Smart business leaders do the same, and if performance is struggling at your company, maybe a bit more ritual can deliver that sense of shared identity, stakeholder commitment, emotional energy, and productive behavior that you're looking for.

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