Meeting Rituals that Embed Cultural Values:

A Research Paper

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Brio Leadership
Guiding small businesses to success by building a great company culture!
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**Introduction**

Since the earliest years of my career, I have been fascinated by company culture. As Vice President of a fast-growing software company in the late 1980’s and 90’s, I was instrumental in building a culture of customer service, fun, achievement, accountability, and excellence. Having experienced the personal fulfillment and heady excitement of working in that environment, my experience as an executive and consultant at subsequent companies often paled in comparison.

In completing a master’s degree in organizational development and leadership, I wanted to study culture more deeply. As opposed to broad-reaching doctoral theses, master’s projects must be contained to a highly focused topic. I put my ideas about culture through a funnel, winnowing what I wanted to study as I read the research literature and conducted preliminary interviews, and narrowed my scope to a small, targeted area of study: meeting rituals that embed cultural values.

The word ritual is not a common term in business, but it’s a useful concept for leaders interested in embedding their company’s cultural values into daily actions. There is great diversity of thought about rites and rituals, so I put forward my own definition of ritual: A ritual is a repetitive routine designed to evoke emotion and embed positive, value-driven behaviors in employees. Culture is not created with a one-and-done presentation, party or motivational event; rather it is built over time and must be carefully and continuously nurtured by leaders. Rituals are one of the best ways to consciously build, embed, and maintain a positive culture. Indeed, it is only through disciplined repetition that culture can be sustained.

It’s important to also note that, while studying meeting rituals, I discovered many other insights about ways to improve company culture. In this research report, I wish to share the findings of both the literature review and the action research that I conducted. Moreover, the beneficial practices discovered in this research can be readily applied to growing companies today.

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Culture is a commonly studied issue in business today, with many researchers concentrating on the topic of corporate culture. There are many books that examine how large companies sustain their corporate culture, but very few that devote the same attention to smaller companies. Certainly, big corporations have the financial means to fund their culture initiatives, but smaller companies have the advantage of nimbleness and flexibility that their larger counterparts lack. Indeed, Gallup has found that larger companies are more challenged in creating engagement (a result of a strong culture) in its workers, and notes that companies with fewer than 1000 workers score better on the Gallup engagement index than do larger companies. In the research done for this research report, I focus on nimble, smaller companies that are dedicated to building strong cultures. I’ve examined what rituals they perform to create, embed, and sustain their cultures.

In companies both large and small, it takes continual reinforcement to sustain and uphold strong, positive cultural values, which are the foundation of a lasting/dynamic/engaging culture. An organizational culture is not a one-and-done activity; rather, it is built over time and must be carefully and continuously nurtured by leaders. That’s why I chose to study meeting rituals that embed corporate culture and values. These rituals, which is a fancy word for routines meant to evoke emotion and embed value-driven behaviors in organizations, are relatively easy to study and, in companies that are conscious of their importance, the rituals are repeated regularly. Meetings have been referred to as the “most important management ritual” in themselves, so meetings were attractive to me as a means to study ritual and to embed corporate culture.

In my review of the academic literature, I found many cultural models, or ways of examining an organizational culture. One theme that ran through all the models was the importance of ritual and the benefits they produce for the company. Not only can rituals embed corporate values, but they can both reduce anxiety and help employees make meaning of events. Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee tell a story about an executive in New York City who helped his company create meaning after the events of 9/11, in which colleagues and family members of the company were lost. He spoke regularly to the company and addressed them nightly in emails meant to comfort them and direct their energy toward positive actions. This leader created a culture of emotional support and

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1 Terry Deal et al., Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life, 1 edition (Cambridge, Mass: Basic Books, 2000).
compassion for those grieving and channeled their emotions into a day of fundraising for victims of the tragedy.

What is Company Culture?

Is company culture, like the Supreme Court’s definition of pornography, something that you know when you see it? To the contrary, culture can be defined, albeit differently by different scholars and practitioners. The definition we prefer is this: the set of values, expected behaviors, underlying beliefs and norms found in a given organization. You could think of culture as the “personality” of a company. Or, in the words of Kennedy and Deal, culture is “the way we do things around here.” As Peter Drucker, the venerable management guru, famously quipped, “Culture eats strategy for lunch,” meaning that it takes an engaged workforce to implement an excellent strategy. Much has been written about culture and its importance; instead of summarizing theories of corporate culture, we will focus on techniques a company can use to build a better culture...

Food Rituals in Organizations

Researching the literature for studies on food rituals was fascinating and offers a less frequently found perspective on organizational culture. What I learned is important for all leaders to understand so you can devise meaningful food rituals that advance your culture and embed positive values in your employees.

First, food rituals are extremely common in the workplace and in meetings. In fact, Professor Michaela Driver listed twenty-two different organizational events that include serving food. These events were discovered in her interviews of thirty-five research participants from different organizations. Professor Driver notes that the serving of food can be used by management as a reward to employees for a job well done or as celebrations of goal achievement. Driver reports that employees associate food served by management with positive emotions: participants in her study reported that food is “comforting”, “associated with love and joy” and makes people “happy”. Food rituals reinforce organization culture and infuse meaning into business activities. Professor Barbara Plester studied food rituals in organizations and discovered that eating structures social events and that sharing food incorporates the partaker in the community. Eating together also breaks down the hierarchy inherent in a corporate environment and produces feelings of equality. This is important because building a feeling of belonging or community increases employee loyalty and engagement.

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Professor Plester found that, in food rituals, the participant actually ingests food, which is a symbol of the organizational culture, thereby making it a part of his/her body. Plester thinks that this ingesting transfers the perceived values of the ritual to the self and influences employee’s perceptions of the organizational culture. Her research suggests that ingesting company-served food and drink may be a powerful way to assimilate people into the company culture.

**Small Companies Take Heart: The Value of the Potluck**

The research shows that smaller companies can benefit from potluck meals. Smaller companies may not have resources to provide full meals to their employees on a regular basis. However, Professor Alice Julier examines the particular meaning and outcomes of a potluck meal. Potlucks tend to level the social hierarchy in an organization. They are egalitarian in that no one, including the manager, assumes the role of providing all the food. The cost, the social responsibility, and the preparation of a potluck meal are shared equally across all levels of the organization. The potluck thereby offers a temporary suspension of social inequalities, hierarchies, and differences.

**Key Concepts**

1. Culture is the set of values, expected behaviors, underlying beliefs and norms found in a given organization.
2. Culture is likened to a company’s personality. Just like individual personality types, there is no one best culture.
3. Rituals are an effective way to both study a culture and embed cultural values into an organization.
4. Meetings are management’s most potent ritual. By identifying productive meeting rituals, leaders can reinforce cultural values and positive behaviors.
5. Food rituals in meetings can be a powerful way to demonstrate and embed cultural values. Because food served by a company is a symbol of what the company stands for, ingesting food in a corporate ritual can be a way of embodying corporate values. Managers must be careful in designing food rituals so they reflect the most positive aspects of the culture.

**Case Studies**

I reviewed the data from the five companies in which I observed all-hands meetings and their rituals, interviewed the top executive and the culture champion, and conducted focus groups of employees. This section starts with a brief case study of each company, followed by analysis of the comparative data from each of the companies studied.

In addition to the five small companies where I observed meetings, I also interviewed two executives in large firms to understand their meeting rituals. The results of these interviews are included as a case study at the end of this section.
BKM Total Office of Texas

This company is the largest one studied, with ninety employees and a history of twenty years under the current owners, Carol Roehrig, CEO, and Carlene Wilson, Vice President of Sales and Marketing. BKM Total office of Texas creates innovative workplaces to enrich human connections in offices, hospitals, and schools. A leading Steelcase distributor, BKM’s services include design, project management, installation, warehousing, and furniture refurbishment. Due to their commitment to designing and implementing work spaces that facilitate employee engagement, the management has made it clear that culture is important to them. This company has quarterly all-hands meetings with the purpose of educating the employees on the financial performance of the company, apprising them of the status of ongoing projects and new initiatives, highlighting customer loyalty ratings and compliments from customers, and celebrating recent installations by showing pictures of the finished product, which many in the company never have a chance to see in person.

Because this company provides office design and installation, their corporate offices are the company’s showroom, meant to demonstrate the latest trends in office configurations and furniture. The office layout is open; only managers have high-walled cubicles. The company has strict rules about how each employee’s desk must look. For example, a minimum of personal items can be displayed, no hand-written signs are allowed, etc. The training room, where the meeting I observed was held, is large enough to hold all attendees when the chairs are set up in auditorium style and has modern accoutrements such as modular white boards, a ceiling-hung projector, and colorful desks and chairs. Every care is taken to maintain the office space as professional but trendy environment.

An annual ritual at BKM is to create and share a Holiday Video. Produced in-house by its creative marketing team, the video is sent to all clients and posted on the internet. Employees reported:

“The holiday video is fun and enjoyable. Everyone has a good time. People are dancing around the showroom floor. I can remember all of the last five videos!”

Although the video is ostensibly created as a Christmas greeting card to clients and vendors, it is also a clever way of showing the capabilities of BKM as an innovative office design company. Remember this:

BKM’s showroom = BKM’s office = BKM’s marketing collateral

You can view the BKM team having a great time together and modeling an odd assortment of ugly Christmas sweaters in the 2015 video at: https://vimeo.com/149212563.

Share on Purpose Company

This company is a holding company or incubator for a portfolio of small, rapid-growth companies in the business service industry. In the portfolio are a media company, a training company, and a small company growth consultancy. Led by a highly successful serial entrepreneur, Terri Maxwell, this
company is intent on building a positive culture from the beginning. As the leader of the consultancy group said,

“**We have to build the culture NOW when we are small, because it’s way harder to undo a culture that you’ve built unconsciously**” (L. Armbruster, personal communication, August 18, 2015).

All workers at Share on Purpose are virtual, meaning they work at home and travel to the company’s small office only for a weekly team meeting. All other meetings are held via phone or webinar, including the Monday morning leadership meetings and team meetings. The CEO insists on Monday morning meetings to get everyone focused on the week’s work:

“**That’s an important thing, to demark the weekend from the week, especially in a virtual environment. You can lose productivity if you ease into the workweek. The Monday morning meetings are focused and upbeat**” (T. Maxwell, personal conversation, August 20, 2015).

In addition to Monday morning meetings, each employee has brief weekly meetings with both their manager and their clients. Regarding the rhythm of weekly meetings they’ve created, the CEO remarked,

“**People are more efficient here. They think it’s due to working virtually, but it’s really because of the structure we’ve created**” (T. Maxwell, personal conversation, August 18, 2015).

The company has created a core team comprised of representatives from each of the portfolio companies. This team is responsible for upholding the culture and creating a mind-set for the company. For example, the core team was instrumental in establishing a four and one-half day work week in which no meetings are scheduled on Friday afternoons.

Two artifacts of their culture were especially noteworthy: first, a wall display of acrylic paintings employees created exhibiting/displaying the company core values and, second, the guiding principles of the company posted on the refrigerator in the kitchen. Each of the values was depicted in graphic form on separate canvases and was painted by small groups of employees at a company party held at a wine and painting shop.

The company’s values form the acronym SHARE: Supportive, hopeful, authentic, resourceful, and enthusiastic.

I observed a Thursday team meeting in the office, and attended a “Purpose Party” that the company held at a local restaurant in the late afternoon for team members of all the portfolio companies. The company paid for appetizers and drinks for everyone. They hold a Purpose Party monthly and attendance is voluntary. The goals of the meeting are to provide a face-to-face event so people can socialize across the portfolio companies, update employees on internal news like promotions, and award winners of the peer recognition program a Starbucks gift card worth $10.
Alkali

This company of eighteen employees is a benefits and insurance brokerage group dedicated to changing the way both personal and business insurance is brokered in the US. Alkali has created a number of processes that together are labeled the Empowered Advantage™ program. This program ensures that individuals and businesses get the lowest cost, highest coverage insurance with high touch service from the agency. Important to their culture is their Success Optimizer™ program in which the company automatically re-bids insurance contracts at their annual renewal date, ensuring the customer continues to get the lowest cost and highest value coverage. The Success Optimizer often results in lower commissions to Alkali’s team members, but consequentially ensures customer long-time loyalty. In a gesture of gratitude, the company recognizes a sales person when he or she saves money for a customer upon insurance renewal.

Culture is important to Alkali because it differentiates them from the competition and ensures that the Empowered Advantage™ program, which is counter-cultural for the insurance industry, works and is perpetuated in their organization. I observed both a weekly all-hands standing meeting, held every Monday morning for fifteen minutes, and a Team Growth meeting, which is held monthly for an hour. I also held focus groups and conducted executive interviews to gather data at this company.

A noteworthy ritual at Alkali is an element of the company’s onboarding and training program for new hires. When they complete their 90-day training period successfully, the company takes the employee to a local dinner theatre called Medieval Times, where they are ceremonially “knighted” and sign the Alkali pledge, seen at left. The pledge, which lists the guiding principles and behaviors of the company and has been signed by all Alkali employees for the last 10 years, is mounted on the wall at the front door of the office.

This company does not have espoused values, per se, but has instead identified their ten best habits, including values statements such as commitment to integrity. In the Team Growth meeting that I observed, the CEO went over the ten habits and asked people to talk about what the habits mean and how they are embodied in daily work life.

Acuity Systems

With six employees at the ready, this was the smallest of the companies I studied. Acuity Systems is part of an
international sales training program franchisor. Acuity Systems has sister companies in all the major North American metropolitan areas, which provides an opportunity for Acuity Systems employees to connect with an accountability partner who performs the same job at another franchisee. Besides the two owners of the company, who are admittedly five years from retirement, the rest of the employees are Millennial, making for a young workforce.

I observed their weekly all-hands meeting in their office, sat in on their client training classes, interviewed the CEO, and ran a focus group. What struck me most about this company is the discipline with which they run their company; they operate their own company following the processes they teach in their sales classes. The company's seven values are posted on the door to each person's office.

An annual ritual this company follows is to create a vision map or dream board of each person's annual goals at the beginning of the calendar year. From magazines that the employees bring to the office that day, they cut out pictures that represent their goals, paste them on poster board, and hang the vision maps in their offices. As they accomplish their goals (for example, purchasing a house), they check them off on the vision map. You can see the word “DONE” inscribed on the vision board, above.

Another visually noteworthy ritual is writing quarterly goals with markers on the office windows. Because one doesn't expect to see windows used as walls, this practice commands a visitor’s attention immediately. One employee remarked, “By writing the goals on the windows, we watch out for each other's goals. Once, L'areal walked into my office and said, you haven’t crossed anything off your goals recently” (B. Castillo, personal communication, October 14, 2015).

Marketwave

This marketing agency is comprised of eighteen professionals and led by CEO Tina Young. At this company, most of the staff members are Millennials. Both the CEO and her husband work in the company. Here, I observed a monthly all-hands meeting, called the Victory Laps meeting, in which the CEO updated “Connecting to What Counts” metrics on an infographic drawn in chalk on a blackboard-painted wall. At the beginning of the year, all team members were given a journal with the “Connecting to What Counts” metrics listed on the inside front cover. Team members are expected to note their personal accomplishments in the journal and report them at the Victory Laps meeting. Metrics tracked are activities such as number of proposals sent, speaking engagements landed, new wins, awards won, etc. To show their love for animals, their last metric counts how many dogs the employees own. During the meeting I attended, the team added a rabbit and a parakeet to the total, so now the metric is for total pets. Food was served at this meeting and an informal collegial tone was set.
Like Acuity Systems, Marketwave also has a tradition of creating photomaps or vision boards at the beginning of the year. Marketwave frames the boards, which are eight by eleven inches large, and asks employees to display them at their desks.

A noteworthy practice in this office is the prominent display of core values on the wall where everyone can see them. The values themselves were etched on Lucite plaques with lettering affixed to the wall underneath. These values underscore the culture and are recognized in the Victory Laps meetings each month.

Large Company Interviews

During the interviews of executives at large companies where I did not observe a meeting nor conduct focus groups, I learned how two large companies built a positive culture. The first company was a unit of Schneider Electric. I interviewed the Senior Vice President of Customer Support, Scott Stegner, who told me how food was used as a bribe and a reward for attending a quarterly all-hands meeting, a practice that was also noticed by Driver in her research on the role of food in organizational ritual.9 In this case, Stegner was conscious in his use of food to encourage people to attend the meeting. The SVP’s quarterly webinar-based meeting with his global workforce was entitled “The Cookie Chat” because he insisted that the administrative assistant in each location purchase and serve cookies for the local employees during this meeting (S. Stegner, personal conversation, August 10, 2015). Whenever he traveled to visit one of his teams, he would take the entire group out to dinner. He regularly served food and meals at his leadership team meetings. Exemplifying what several researchers have already confirmed101112, this increased the sense of teamwork and connection amongst the leaders, whose nationalities spanned the globe. One member of the leadership team told me he viewed the annual off-site meetings as a vacation, which he enjoyed more than family vacations (R. Fritz, personal conversation, October 25, 2011).

In the final interview, I spoke with Paul Spiegelman, the CEO of Beryl Health, a health-care call center company that was acquired by Stericycle in 2012. Paul is now the Chief Culture Officer for the large parent company. While BerylHealth was still a mid-sized, independent company, Paul structured the all-hands quarterly updates around the core values of the company (P. Spiegelman, personal conversation, October 22, 2015). The meeting was repeated seven times to cover all shifts twice to leave some employees to staff the phones while others attended the meeting. The first item of business was to quiz the attendees on the purpose and espoused values of the company, then to talk about how the values are lived. The CEO would present a twenty-minute overview of the state of the company, and then open the floor for questions. At the end of the meeting, the CEO would present a randomly drawn winner

9 Driver, “Every Bite You Take . . . Food and the Struggles of Embodied Subjectivity in Organizations.”
11 Julier, Eating Together.”
12 Plester, “Ingesting the Organization.”
Meeting Rituals that Embed Cultural Values

with a $250 gift card. The candidates for the gift card drawing were the recipients of the company’s peer reward program during the past quarter. The peer reward system was based on paper certificates that documented the outstanding effort an employee did and what company value it portrayed. The agenda of this meeting demonstrated the importance of articulating values and purpose at every meeting, as well as the leverage gained when the chief executive is actively involved in perpetuating the culture.

Key Concepts and Practices to Consider

1. If you are a creative company, be sure your office space is the equivalent of marketing collateral for your services and culture. Create an attractive and innovative office space that shows off your services. It’s all about the place!
2. Read customer compliments at quarterly meetings.
3. Review customer satisfaction ratings at quarterly meetings.
4. Ritualize the making of a holiday video showing employees having a good time as a substitute for a holiday greeting card.
5. Carefully design your meetings to create a rhythm to the week. For example, Share on Purpose has Monday morning meetings to energize its remote workforce and jumpstart their productivity after the weekend. Schedule short weekly meetings, either for each department or, if the company is still under 25 people, for the company.
6. For smaller group meetings, allowing everyone to share something from their personal or professional lives creates bonds of intimacy that translate to higher productivity.
7. Use monthly cross-department meetings to break down barriers between people and increase teamwork.
8. Serve food and drinks at monthly meetings to bond as a community and soften the hierarchy of the company. Food can be used as a bribe to encourage or reward attendance at meetings. Remember that food served by the company is a symbol of the company’s values and is a powerful way to embed cultural values.
9. Create a core team (aka culture committee, jubilee team, social committee) to work closely with the CEO to plan events that embed corporate values.
10. Post values and behaviors on the refrigerator in the company kitchen and create visual wall reminders of the company values. Share on Purpose organized a company painting party, where cross-departmental teams created paintings of the core values. Marketwave had the values created on beautiful Lucite panels mounted on a central wall. Acuity Systems framed their values and mounted them on office doors.
11. Create a meaningful acronym of the company’s values, such as SHARE. This makes it easier to remember the values.
12. Ensure that processes align with and uphold the values and purpose of the company. At Alkali, for example, their Empowered Advantage™ program is the process by which they are revolutionizing the insurance brokerage industry.
13. Create a ritual for graduates of the onboarding training. Alkali Resources brings their graduates to be knighted at a local medieval dinner theatre. At the ritual, new graduate sign the company’s Pledge.
14. In order to connect personal goals to the employee’s professional work, design an annual ritual of creating Vision Boards (aka Dream Board or Treasure Map). See appendix A, Envisioning the Year: Creating Photomaps at Work.
15. Visually display individual’s quarterly goals in their offices where co-workers can see them and hold them accountable to their achievement.
16. Build a peer recognition program that recognizes behaviors that uphold company values. Overtly tie recognition to company values.

Emergent Cultural Themes and Suggested Practices

In this section, I analyze several themes that became apparent in conducting research. They are: Food Rituals, Room Configuration, Use of Time, Communications, Core Values, Meeting Rituals, Role of the Culture Champion and Culture Committee, and Role of the Leader. Each of these themes will be a descriptive section that summarizes the research, followed by key concepts and practices to consider.

Food Rituals

It became apparent that employees appreciate and look forward to eating food that is served by the company. Although I asked about food rituals at each focus group meeting, I observed food being served at only two of the six meetings I attended: Share on Purpose’s Purpose Party and Marketwave’s Victory Laps meeting. Both are held monthly for all employees. At Marketwave, food was shared at the Victory Laps meeting by passing bowls of snacks amongst the participants. Finger food such as chocolates and apple chips were in the bowls, and non-alcoholic drinks were available in the kitchen. The menu at Share on Purpose’s Purpose Party included nachos and drinks of one’s choice at a restaurant/bar near the office. At the Purpose Party, the conversation was light-hearted and casual. Share on Purpose’s CEO had described the party as follows:

“Attendance is not required, it’s just social. It’s an opportunity for us to break bread together, to get to know each other. There might be 25 people, or 5 or 6 there. We try different things each month. And when we are clicking along, there are more people there. It’s an indication that something’s not right if people don’t show up. It allows me to take the temperature of the company and the portfolios within it” (T. Maxwell, personal conversation, August 18, 2015).

When asked about the subject of food served at meetings, most employees were enthusiastic and positive about its affect on them. “Food is the universal language. It unites us,” said one employee at Alkali. At BKM, when I asked employees about the possibility of providing food at its quarterly meeting, employees thought it would allow participants to linger over the food, converse and create a bond while sharing food. BKM’s culture champion remarked,

“Even if it were a box of doughnuts shoved on the counter, it represents nurturing” (D. Walpole, personal conversation, July 12, 2015).

Her observation about nurturing confirms the research of Driver, who found that food served by the organization is a symbol of warmth and caring. The culture champion at BKM Total Office of Texas was concerned that because the company is committed to excellence in everything it does (the word “professional” was used by three people to describe the culture), the owners would feel obligated to spend $500 on a catered breakfast if she asked for food at the quarterly meeting. Company leaders must balance, on the one hand, the knowledge that the type of food served to employees represents the values of the company and, on the other hand, the strong benefits of serving food of any type, even junk

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13 Julien, Eating Together.
15 Driver, “Every Bite You Take . . . Food and the Struggles of Embodied Subjectivity in Organizations.”
food, at a meeting. Especially if the leaders want to appear more caring and warm to its employees, serving food is an excellent choice. That said, serving breakfast to employees that are about to be terminated is NOT recommended, as that would be a cruel mixed message!

All of the companies described rituals at social events that included food and drink. At Acuity Systems, the company planned to have drinks at the owner’s home before going to a company dinner at a restaurant. Although Acuity Systems employees noted their intention was to have social events every month, up to now, “It hasn’t been scheduled and consistent” (L’areal Lipkins, personal conversation, October 14, 2015).

With the recent hire of an administrative assistant to coordinate culture activities, the group hoped that the dinners would be scheduled and implemented more regularly.

In addition to Acuity Systems, another company mentioned sharing food and/or drinks at their CEO’s home. At Succeed on Purpose, employees fondly remembered company dinners at the founder’s, Terry Maxwell, home. She discontinued that practice when the company grew too large for her house. It seems that opening the home of the founder or CEO is impactful on employees. Like other food rituals, being served a meal in the CEO’s home appears to break down barriers and build up intimacy among employees and managers, resulting in higher engagement, loyalty, and productivity of the employees.

At Alkali, the company plans a monthly potluck lunch at which the company provides only the meat and the birthday cake for employees; everything else is provided by employees. As noted in Julier’s research, a potluck offers a temporary suspension of social inequalities, hierarchies, and differences and creates a bond between all partakers. She also found that potlucks were a great way to celebrate the diverse backgrounds of the employees, especially if you encourage people to prepare traditional foods from their heritage.

Researchers have found that the consumption of alcohol at company functions tends to relax people, act as a social lubricant and break down the inherent hierarchy in an organization. Thus, serving alcohol is a way to increase bonds of intimacy between attendees. Because alcohol produces a pleasant effect and because food and drink served by a company become an ingested symbol of the company’s culture, alcohol could be an effective vehicle to help build a culture of teamwork and collaboration. Caution though! Be mindful of the legal responsibility of the company when employees drive while under the influence of alcohol. Many companies will either appoint designated drivers, pay for taxis or Uber drivers to get party-goers home safely, or buy a block of hotel rooms for use after a company holiday party, for example. The behavior of the leadership team at these parties will set the standard of conduct for other employees, so be sure to brief your executives on limiting their alcohol consumption at company parties.

**Food Rituals: Key Concepts and Practices to Consider**

1. Serving food can break down hierarchies and build closer relationships among staff, resulting in higher productivity. Food is seen as a symbol of caring for and nurturing your employees.

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19 Plester, “Ingesting the Organization.”
2. The food you serve will be subliminally viewed as symbolic of your company’s cultural values. Employees who ingest these symbols are more likely to embody the values.

3. Carefully choose the food you serve, being conscious of the symbolism of the type of food served. Make sure you serve food that is emblematic of your culture. For example, if you are a wealth management firm that caters only to high net worth individuals, you probably don’t want to have a messy potluck in the office, in case someone might drop spaghetti on the Persian rugs! On the other hand, if you are a scrappy, competitive and growing company that is focused on changing an industry, throwing a box of doughnuts on the counter might be just the right symbol for the cultural values you wish to embed.

4. Consider potluck meals when you want to create an egalitarian culture that celebrates the contribution of each person or when you can’t afford to provide catered meals. Potlucks are beneficial in valuing diversity of the employees when you encourage people to prepare dishes from their heritage.

5. Serving alcohol at company parties can relax people, act as a social lubricant, and break down the inherent hierarchy in an organization.

6. Be sure to provide appropriate care for inebriated employees after a gala event such as a holiday party. Ensure the leadership team models appropriate behavior regarding alcohol consumption at all events.

Room Configuration

The room configuration of the meeting space was a good clue to the culture of the company. At BKM Total Office of Texas, the room was set up for formal presentations, with the presenters in front and the “audience” of employees sitting auditorium style in back. Of all the companies observed, this was the most formal company culture. Marketwave, on the other hand, had a much less formal configuration: the meeting was held in an open area with couches, tables and colorful ottomans set up in a semi-circle around the chalkboard, making it seem more like a living room. Food was passed from person to person in a party-like manner. Marketwave, like BKM, uses its office as a marketing brochure and has consciously designed its space to reflect the innovation and fashionable marketing designs that it creates for its customers. At Alkali, the meeting room’s configuration gave clues to this company’s culture also: the conference room table was purchased second-hand, and the company had already outgrown the size of the conference room. In addition, the office space was clean and neat but not visually attractive in any unusual way. This indicates that the company is frugal in its expenditures, ensuring adequate but not extravagant office space. Alkali is an insurance company that prides itself on saving money for its customers, so an expensive or elegant office would be dissonant to the company’s purpose. At Acuity Systems, the culture is sales-oriented and process oriented. The training room is large, colorful and spacious, but the staff meeting took place at the conference table of the CEO’s office. This configuration was an intimate setting for the participants to share their progress and challenges and to ask for help from others when needed. At Share on Purpose, the round tables and adequate but not elaborate office décor was reflective of the company’s entrepreneurial and nurturing culture.

Room Configuration: Key Concepts and Practices to Consider

1. Be conscious of the implicit cultural messages that your meeting room configuration delivers. Make sure that the space is reflective of, and not dissonant to, the company’s cultural values.
   a. For example, consider the differences between conducting a standing meeting, a meeting configured in auditorium style, or inviting people to gather around a table. If collaboration,
for example, is one of your core values, how can you embody that value in your meeting space? Conversely, if formality and hierarchy are important values to your company, consider configuring your meeting room in a way that reflects that formality.

2. The room configuration also impacts the communication style that can be used in the meeting. If you’d like your meeting to be interactive, the data suggests that round tables and more casual settings, like a living room, will encourage that. Conversely, a formal seating arrangement will be reflected in the behavior of the participants.

Use of Time

At all the observed meetings, there was a standard agenda structure that was unvarying for long stretches of time. At each company, the content of the various sections of the meeting was what changed while the structure remained constant. The discipline of holding regularly-scheduled meetings with a standard, non-varying agenda is an important implication for practice.

In comparison to a flexible attitude toward time in many other countries, in the West we have “a strict sense of punctuality.”[^20] Therefore, the start and end times of a meeting can be important indicators of the culture of the company. At Acuity Systems, the staff meeting started whenever the customers left the office after the morning training classes. The meeting ended abruptly when the CEO and a salesperson had to leave to make a sales visit. This time elasticity might be seen as disrespectful or undisciplined, or it could signal the importance of the customers to the business. At Acuity Systems, it was a common practice and appeared to reflect a focus on the customer rather than disrespect for the employees.

Keeping to a stated frequency of meetings is also indicative of the culture. If a company says the all-hands meeting will be held every month, there is an implicit message regarding the importance or lack thereof of the meeting if a month is skipped or postponed. At all the other companies studied, the culture champion was instrumental in ensuring the consistent scheduling of all-hands meetings.

Use of Time: Key Concepts and Practices to Consider

1. Sticking to a standard and consistent meeting agenda is a ritual in itself. Rather than contributing to boredom, the discipline of a standard agenda allows flexibility in content while providing the comfort of a consistent experience.

2. Create a company-wide schedule of meetings that cascade from infrequent, all-hands meetings to daily huddles of small work teams. Ensure that all managers hold meetings according to this schedule.
   a. See appendix B for a meeting planner template.

3. Once a schedule of meetings is established, appoint someone like the culture champion or the CEO's administrator to ensure the meetings are held like clockwork, as promised to employees. The lack of follow-through and consistency in holding to a company meeting schedule could be perceived by employees to indicate that management doesn’t care about them.

Core Values

In only one of the five companies I observed could employees name the company core values. Instead of espoused values, one company articulated ten best habits, which no focus group participants could remember. In examining their ten best habits, I found the habits could be distilled to five or six underlying values. One company had just a purpose statement and no stated core values. In the two companies that did not have stated values, there were positive values in evidence, indicating that core values are not mandatory in producing positive behaviors. At both of the companies without explicit values, employees could identify productive values that were exemplified in the meetings I observed. All the large companies I interviewed had explicitly stated core values.

Clearly you can build a good corporate culture without articulating core values, so how important are values to the company? As Richard Barrett observes, “When values are not defined, the culture of the organization is subject to the vagaries of the personality of the leader. When the leader changes, the values will change.” This represents a risk for any company that is contemplating a change in leadership. In the absence of espoused values, it is likely that a new CEO will imprint new values on the company for better or worse.

Core Values: Key Concepts and Practices to Consider

1. There is benefit in articulating core values or beliefs, particularly in outlining and sustaining cultural beliefs, norms and behaviors. Whether you identify values or behaviors is up to you.
   a. If you create a list of values, be sure to describe the expected behaviors that support each one. I recommend to my clients to also describe the behaviors that detract from the values. See the Values matrix in Appendix C.

2. Consider creating an acronym of your values. Share on Purpose’s acronym was SHARE, and it was the only company at which all employees could recite the core values correctly.

Meeting Rituals

Many of the rituals observed in the meetings centered on recognition programs, especially peer recognition. In two companies, there was a drawing for monthly winners of the peer recognition program. In both cases, paper certificates were completed by employees to praise co-workers for their efforts and results. The certificates were put in a large bowl and one was drawn to identify the winner. At both companies, a gift card for $10 was the prize, indicating that the reward doesn’t have to be a large dollar amount. At Marketwave, each of the fourteen attendees received recognition and appreciation during the Team Kudos section of the meeting agenda. At BKM Total Office of Texas, the Vice President of Sales recognized employees that were mentioned by customers in satisfaction surveys or emails. At Acuity Systems, people were appreciated and encouraged as they shared their accomplishments.

At two of the large companies interviewed for this study, they practiced similar rituals of drawing a winner from all the submitted peer recognition awards since the last meeting. In the largest company, the recognition program was administered online, meaning that the form to recognize a co-worker was available via the company intranet. In both of these cases, the form included a field to show what core value the recognized employee was displaying. This important connection to the core values is a best practice for other companies.

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21 Richard Barrett, Liberating the Corporate Soul, accessed February 2, 2016, https://books-google-com.fgul.idm.oclc.org/books/about/Liberating_the_Corporate_Soul.html?id=7ZvbAAAAQBAJ.
Another ritual observed in two companies was individual check-ins. The CEO of Alkali used a check-in ritual of asking each attendee to share something “positive and exciting” to start the monthly Team Growth meeting. In one instance, he skillfully guided an employee away from a complaint and back to the positive, signaling the inherent danger in this type of practice when used in larger groups. At fifteen attendees, the Alkali meeting is almost too large to include a check-in because it carries a risk of taking up too much time. The meeting I observed at Share on Purpose was attended by only three people, and the inclusion of a check-in was appropriate and successful in setting the tone for the meeting. At this meeting, the leader asked each attendee to articulate something she was grateful for in the previous week. A ritual of check-in, when it includes both professional and personal accomplishments, demonstrates the value the company places on overall well-being of the employee. Sharing personal information also builds relationships between the manager and employee, and is an indicator of managerial effectiveness.

Meeting Rituals: Key Concepts and Practices to Consider

1. Create rituals of recognition that tie positive behaviors to core values.
2. Consider implementing a peer recognition practice that encourages teamwork and appreciation among employees. See Appendix D for a peer recognition form.
3. Consider implementing a drawing for a small prize from the peer recognition forms that were submitted since the last large group meeting.
4. Be sure to have the leader (CEO or Department head) publically award the recognition, by conducting the drawing (if that is your practice), presenting the award, and verbally thanking the employee for their contribution to upholding the company values.
5. For smaller meetings, consider implementing a check-in ritual in which each attendee shares something positive from either their professional or personal life. This practice bonds the group and creates an open and caring relationship between the manager and employees.

Role of Culture Champion and Culture Committee

At all of the companies I observed, there was a designated person in charge of cultural activities, a role commonly called a “culture champion.” In three of the companies, this person also held an administrative role. At Alkali, this person bore the title of “Strategic Assistant.” She conducts the initial, culture-based interview of all hiring candidates and suggests what topic the CEO should address during the “Steve Speaks” portion of the monthly Team Growth Meetings. At Marketwave as well as at Acuity Systems, the culture champion was the administrative assistant. In contrast, the culture champion role at Share on Purpose was shared among a portfolio company’s president, the CFO and the administrative assistant.

Because meetings and social events require detailed planning, the research suggests that putting responsibility for handling logistical details in the hands of an administrator increases the probability of the events proceeding smoothly and regularly. Indeed, at one company, an employee remarked that their monthly dinners had been erratic, but she hoped that the newly hired administrative assistant would schedule them regularly.

At both of the large companies I interviewed, there was a manager in charge of the culture. One had a position called “Queen of Laughter and Fun,” while the other large company used the title of “Culture Ambassador.” At both of these large companies, the chief culture person chaired the culture committee, which planned cultural activities such as large group meetings, “reward and recognition, onboarding,
communication, our BerylCares program, community service, and events\textsuperscript{22}. The BerylCares program was an employee hardship fund, funded through employee’s voluntary contributions of one or two dollars per paycheck. The culture committee at that company created the guidelines for awarding hardship funds to employee applicants and evaluated each application accordingly. The practice of creating a culture committee was echoed at Share on Purpose Company, where the core team was in charge of protecting the culture. Share on Purpose had representatives from each of the portfolio companies, and its purpose was a dual one, according to the CEO:

“\textit{Half of the purpose \{of the core team\} is to make the culture better and the other is to make themselves personally a better person}” (T. Maxwell, personal conversation, August 18, 2015).

As an example of how Share on Purpose’s core team members explore ways to improve themselves, the CEO mentioned that she recently worked with the team to increase their “abundance mentality” through training and personal exercises.

\textbf{Role of Culture Champion and Culture Committee: Key Concepts and Practices to Consider}

1. Because sustaining a culture takes discipline, it is important to delegate the tactical tasks of scheduling meetings, planning and preparing the rituals, etc. This person or committee can help ensure the regularity of both meetings and rituals within them. Remember that team members notice and interpret a missed meeting or the absence of a ritual as an indication that it wasn’t important enough to schedule and execute. Consider delegating logistical meeting and ritual tasks to an assistant, a culture champion and/or a culture committee (also called a core committee). Although the leader is responsible for upholding the culture, it is wise to get others involved in planning event details.

2. Structure the culture committee to work closely with the CEO for direction and coaching. Remember that culture is set at the top, so the time the CEO spends with the culture committee is time well spent.

\textbf{Role of the Leader}

The research results made clear that the leader of a company has a deeply influential role in embedding cultural values. At all the company meetings I observed, the CEO actively participated in running the meeting. The leader’s activities in the meetings ranged from teaching, inspiring, encouraging/praising, and correcting poor behavior to simply keeping to the agenda.

In correcting, the leader walks a fine line between scolding, which can be de-motivating, and inspiring employees to do better. The CEO at BKM Total Office of Texas walked that line very skillfully when she discussed the importance of tracking error rates (called open issues) and customer satisfaction comments. She motivated people by turning what could be viewed as a negative into a positive:

\textit{“It’s really important about the feedback we receive. The coaches that made the biggest difference in our lives are the ones who corrected us. If you’re associated with a complaint, thank the customer because it will help us get better. Some of you get irked about open issues. If we don’t figure out the why or root cause of an open issue, \{it could affect a customer\}. We do this \{track open issues\} so we can be corrected before they correct us. Open issues are a score of}

Meeting Rituals that Embed Cultural Values

us, not of an individual. We need to learn from feedback.” (C. Roehrig, personal communication, July, 2015).

The skill with which she delivered this message was confirmed by feedback received from an employee on how the CEO’s comments affected her:

“The CEO was brilliant in how she phrased the introduction of open issues, it turned out really positive. That was so motivating.” (D. Walpole, personal conversation, July, 2015).

The leader’s role in ensuring that corrections are presented in a positive light was underscored at Alkali, where one focus group participant said:

“We always start off {the Team Growth Meeting} with positive or exciting news; it sets the tone. The owners want that tone for us and for our clients. Staying positive is important. There might be some corrections, but it still has that tone of positivity. It’s night and day from other companies” (S. Smith, personal conversation, August 2015).

As an example of inspiration at Alkali, the CEO Steven Neuner gives a talk every month called “Steve Speaks.” He often uses the time to teach what he has learned at a conference or from a book he’s read. At the meeting I observed, he reviewed the ten best habits of the company. For the first habit, the CEO solicited input from the President, and then asked other employees to comment on how they see the other habits practiced at the company.

In speaking about the leader’s influence with employees and how the leader can step into a pivotal role of shaping the corporate culture, one of the large company CEOs remarked:

“If you want to be a leader, you have to get out of your office. I am a certified introvert and don’t like to be the center of attention, but we know the impact we can make.” (P. Spiegelman, personal conversation, October 8, 2015)

Taking on the mantel of an executive leader is to assume the responsibilities of both spokesperson and role model for the culture.

At Marketwave, the CEO remarked that her focus was on three things:

“My focus is vision, culture and talent. I have to cast the vision for the culture, but others must protect it.” (T. Young, personal conversation, September, 2015)

This CEO understood that her role was to define the vision and the culture, while at the same time empower her employees, especially her leadership team, to protect and nurture it. In this capacity, she tasks her administrative assistant with scheduling regular all-hands meetings, social events, and community service events. To her leadership team, she has delegated internal processes, project management, and direct employee supervision.

Tom Niesen, the CEO of Acuity Systems exemplified the humility required of a leader. Humility is required to combat the “ivory tower syndrome” so common in executives, in which they isolate themselves from both feedback and bad news. Tom regularly asks for feedback from his employees and doesn’t punish them when they give him constructive criticism:

“I’ll email the whole company, admit that this and that went wrong, and I’ll ask for their advice. I’ll ask, how do you think I handled this situation? Depending on what the feedback is, I’ll either agree or I’ll say, I don’t know” (T. Niesen, personal communication, September 2015).
At Alkali, employees described their CEO as “charismatic” and “inspirational,” and with “the heart of a teacher.” One concern that arises from observing the strong personality of a founder is the ability of the rest of the leadership team to carry on the culture when the company grows and the leader’s attention moves from an inward focus on the employees to an outward focus as the ambassador and chief spokesperson of the company. As Richard Barrett has observed, “Enlightened leaders… must build a values-driven corporate culture that is independent of their identity.”

This is a concern at Alkali, expressed by a focus group participant:

“As we get bigger, there might be a lack of access to Steve; you might not be able to bump into Steve. That’s already changed – my access to Steve is less than before. It was Steve’s enthusiasm and excitement that drew me to the company. (His enthusiasm) was like gas to fill up your gas tank” (A. Smith, personal conversation, August, 2015).

At a company like this, they might be careful to build up a middle manager’s ability to carry and nurture the values of the culture. Also, companies might create structures and programs that embed, maintain and publicize the values, such as people programs, rewards and recognition, and hiring and firing practices.

**Role of Leader: Key Concepts and Practices to Consider**

1. Ensure the visibility of the leader in all-hands meetings. Roles the leader might assume in the meeting include teaching, inspiring, encouraging/praising, and correcting poor behavior to simply keeping to the agenda.
2. Employees view the CEO as inspiring if she publically corrects organizational behavior in a manner that is positive and educational.
3. Even introverted CEO’s must take on the responsibilities of being inspirational, visible and outspoken for the company. All leaders are role models of the cultural values.
4. The CEO or leader is responsible for setting the vision and culture, and talent management, or ensuring that the right people are in the right seats on the bus. Leaders must delegate everything else.
5. A leader must repeatedly ask for feedback in order to avoid the “ivory tower syndrome” of management, in which the executive is insulated from feedback and bad news. The leader must also monitor his reaction to feedback and express gratitude to the giver. It’s OK to disagree with the feedback, but the leader must reward the courage of the person who provided it in order to encourage others to do the same.
6. By developing middle managers and a pipeline of strong future leaders, the CEO can prevent the culture from becoming dependent on either his personality or presence. As a company grows, the CEO must allocate a significant portion of his energy to talent acquisition and development in order to perpetuate the culture and ensure the future of the company.

**Conclusion**

Smaller companies have several advantages in creating a positive culture: They are nimble and flexible, they typically do not have outside investors that call the shots, and they can build community because of their smaller size. Therefore, they often can create a culture of compassion, caring, positivity and

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23 Barrett, *Liberating the Corporate Soul*.
accountability that is harder to build at a larger company. Smaller companies can easily design food and recognition rituals that will aid in embedding the organization’s core values. They should also pay attention to meeting room configuration and what that communicates to the employees, as well as being conscious of the role of the leader and the culture committee in leading and executing the cultural activities.

Of all things, remember that culture is what you do on a daily basis. The oft-repeated rituals you create to embed your values are vital to building and sustaining the culture that you desire.
Appendices

Appendix A: Envisioning Goals

One interesting ritual I found in two of the companies in this research was the annual creation of photomaps (also called vision boards or treasure boards) by each team member. A photomap is a visual representation, using pictures cut from magazines and glued to a poster board, of the personal goals you have for the coming year. I have done a personal vision board for years, but not in a corporate setting. I was intrigued at first, and then became convinced this is a great ritual for both team building and for connecting team member's personal goals to their work at your company. And, if you have a corporate goal of Putting Employees First or Respect for Employees, this is an effective way to embed that value into the culture.

Both companies I studied hold special meetings during January for their team members to create their own photomaps. At Marketwave, a marketing agency, CEO Tia Young explained the process: “I instruct each person to come up with a goal for the various areas of their lives, using the acronym RICHES For LIFE, which stands for Relationships, Intellect, Contribution, Home, Economy & Finance, Spirituality, Fitness & Health and Leisure. I invite them to find a visual from a magazine that represents each of their goals. Everyone brings in magazines from home in January. We gather around the big table and devote 2 hours to create the photomaps.” The company provides each employee with a photo frame (11X14 inches in size) and asks each team member to display their photomap on their desks or bulletin boards.

At Acuity Systems, CEO Tom Niesen also has a company-wide photomap or vision board ritual. One of his team member’s photomap is pictured at the top of this article. Tom encourages them to mark off the goals as they are completed during the year. If you examine the photomap at the top of the article, you might notice the word “DONE” marked across two of the photos. Tom wants to help his team members achieve their personal goals. He explains it by saying, “You will see a treasure board on our people’s walls with pictures of what they want to get, accomplish or buy next year. Once we figure out what they want to accomplish, we say, what can we do to help you get that house, and how much work do we do to accomplish it? We take the big picture and break it into our rocks or quarterly goals for the year.”

How to Create a Photomap

Here is a list of the materials you need to hold a photomap meeting at your company:

1. Poster boards for each team member. Marketwave uses boards measuring 8 X 10 inches, while Acuity Systems and I use boards measuring 22 by 14 inches (half of a standard poster board).
2. Lots of colorful magazines OR a computer and a color printer.
3. Scissors or a paper cutter.
4. Glue sticks.
5. A recommendation of the major life areas to be included in the photomap.
6. Optional: snacks to eat during the meeting
7. Optional: a picture frame for each team member

I recommend setting aside two hours as a company or as a department to create the photomaps. This can become an annual ritual at your company, and one that team members will look forward to. Note, however, that it can take up to a week for team members to complete their photomaps. It took me five days to finish mine because I kept thinking of new items to include or better ways to depict my goals. You can let team members take home their poster board and pictures to do the final gluing on their own time.

At your company’s next departmental meetings, encourage team members to present and explain their photomaps. Then ask how the rest of the team can support each other in attaining their goals. Additionally, at the next one-on-one meeting between the team member and her manager, the manager should offer support in achieving the team member’s goals for 2016. Lastly, ask each person to display their photomap at their desk or on their bulletin board so it is always visible.

I highly recommend this practice as a way to
   a) Connect employee’s personal goals to their work at your company
   b) Have a meaningful and fun New Year ritual
   c) Build teamwork as the teams create and support each other to achieve their dreams.

Appendix B: Meeting Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency:</th>
<th>Participants:</th>
<th>Purpose/Agenda:</th>
<th>Rituals/Description:</th>
<th>Food/Description:</th>
<th>Values instilled:</th>
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### Meeting Rituals that Embed Cultural Values

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**Quarterly meetings:**
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**Semi-Annual meetings:**
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**Annual meetings:**
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2. 

**Annual social events:**
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3. 

**Other:**
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### Appendix C: Values matrix

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Core Value:</th>
<th>Description:</th>
<th>Behaviors that support:</th>
<th>Behaviors that detract:</th>
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Appendix D: Peer Recognition Forms tied to Core Values

Catch Someone Doing Something Right!

On this day, ________, I caught ________ doing the following awesome deed: __________________________

________________________
________________________
________________________

This exemplified our value of ________________
Signed: __________________________

Date: ___________

I really appreciate what ________________ did to help a customer or employee: __________________________

________________________
________________________
________________________

This exemplified our value of ________________
Signed: __________________________
Bibliography

https://books-google-com.fgul.idm.oclc.org/books/about/Liberating_the_Corporate_Soul.html?id=7ZvbAAAAQBAJ.


