

# **The Hidden Power of Workplace Rituals**

by Erica Keswin

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**Summary.** Employees rightly expect to be able to bring their feelings — big and small — to work. One important way to provide that support is through rituals. The author defines rituals using two important benchmarks. First, rituals go beyond their practical purpose,... [more](#)

Leaders are under enormous pressure to address societal issues, maintain an active DEI strategy, and keep employees connected to each other and to the company’s mission. And since employees rightly expect to be able to bring their feelings — big and small —

to work, supporting employees during cultural trauma and strife is every leader's job. It's not always obvious how to address these issues at work, especially when leaders aren't necessarily trained or experienced in navigating such sensitive, emotional topics. One important way to provide the support employees expect is through rituals.

I've studied the impact of workplace rituals on individuals, teams, and the bottom line for many years for my book, *Rituals Roadmap*. This research has helped me define rituals using two important benchmarks. First, rituals go beyond their practical purpose, moving participants beyond transaction and into meaning. For instance, lighting a candle when the lights go out isn't a ritual, but turning off the lights and lighting a candle at sundown is. Second, rituals are sorely missed when they're taken away.

What follows is one case study from a company that took a risk in real time and created a successful response to a tragedy, and over time, that response became a ritual. Here's how they did it, and how rituals can improve psychological safety, purpose, and ultimately performance.

### **Time to Connect**

In 2022, I met Judith Harrison, EVP, global diversity, equity & inclusion at global communications firm Weber Shandwick. After George Floyd's murder, Harrison offered a time for employees to come together to process their grief. Ever since, the company has held the gathering once a month, and sometimes more often in response to traumatic events. Harrison calls this simple circle "Time to Connect."

Time to Connect is considered a ritual for two reasons. First, the gatherings aren't directly related to the company's stated mission — their professional communications work. When I asked Harrison what inspired her to bring people together, she told me,

“I thought having cadenced opportunities to talk through these events, all of which have mental health impacts on many people, made sense.”

Second, as the company’s EVP head of brand impact, Lewis Williams, told me, “I’m a fan [of Time to Connect] and I think it can’t go away now...even if we come back into the office. Especially with the young employees coming in, it’s just a new world when it comes to the employee relationship and what we expect from our employers.” In other words, the employees at Weber Shandwick have come to depend on these regular gatherings and would miss them if they stopped.

### **The Three P’s of Supportive Company Rituals**

Through my research, I’ve also discovered why rituals mean so much to us. Time and time again, when it wasn’t clear to me why a group or team was so determined to maintain a shared behavior, I discovered that rituals support psychological safety and purpose, which leads to increased performance. I describe this simple formulation as the “Three P’s of rituals.”

By applying the Three P’s to Time to Connect, leaders can better understand their own rituals — both current ones and those that have yet to be discovered.

### **Psychological Safety**

When employees come together for Time to Connect, Harrison begins with some prepared remarks about the world event and then asks the same question each time: “So, how are you doing?”

In order to give employees permission to answer this question honestly, she opens the conversation with her own perspective on the issue at hand. Leading by example provides people an opportunity to be real themselves. As a result, employees feel safe to respond to the conversations in whatever way works for them — live, in the chat, or via email after the fact.

For instance, after the shooting in Highland Park, Illinois, earlier this year, Angela Salerno-Robin, SVP media relations, responded with “I am not okay”:

These sessions are a time for us to support one another and talk in a safe space. This time was different. This time, I was the one who personally needed the support. Highland Park is my home. We moved our family here from Chicago to give our children a “safer” place to grow up. It’s hard for me to put into words how we are feeling, but I can tell you that as a family, as a community, and as a nation — we are not okay!

It’s not uncommon for participants to cry and share out loud or via the chat function. They engage in whatever way is comfortable for them. Not only do they appear to feel psychologically safe enough to do so, but their raw participation creates more safety for others. As chief of staff Jill Tannenbaum put it:

I didn’t expect to get emotional on that call, but I was so moved by the humanity and the openness. With a topic that is debated with so much passion and vitriol outside our walls, inside our walls feels safe, enabling a conversation in a way that is immensely supported and always kind.

Ultimately, creating psychological safety starts with leaders’ willingness to model it.

## **Purpose**

Helping employees find purpose in an organization is critical to engagement and innovation. One way to do this is to ensure that a company’s values are clear, actionable, and widely distributed. Tying those values to key rituals is the perfect way to incorporate purpose into employees’ shared experiences.

Weber Shandwick's values of courage, inclusion, curiosity, and impact lend themselves particularly well to making this connection. The ritual of Time to Connect is the ideal way to bring personal and professional purpose together in one very powerful, shared experience based on the company's values. The creation and endurance of this ritual speaks to the courage and curiosity of the employees and company leadership. To be brave enough to take the leap into the unknown and open up these challenging conversations is by definition courageous. And to create a forum for people to listen to one another is an expression of curiosity.

Employees have expressed gratitude that Time to Connect creates a safe, inclusive space for *everyone* to share, not only those most obviously affected by the events discussed.

### **Performance**

When I asked Harrison about the business results of Time to Connect, she told me, "Based on people's comments about how much they look forward to the calls and how 'therapeutic' they are, I think the business impact is in engagement, with belonging and trust being subsets of this category." What's more, studies show that community co-creation, a feeling of genuine care, and solidarity have been found to be closely tied to retention.

The numbers speak for themselves. Each month, over 200 people show up, and keep showing up — as themselves, bringing their whole selves to work. Daryl Drabinsky, EVP head of digital health, North America, was so inspired that she initiated "Time to Connect: West" for West Coast employees to connect after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.

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Time to Connect is a powerful example of a simple way leaders can provide the kind of response and support employees are expecting from their companies. Enlisting regular rituals helps leaders offer healing from specific traumas and disturbances

while at the same time aligning their workforce with their values and increasing psychological safety and belonging. At a time when the call for authenticity has moved way beyond any brand buzzword, rituals are good for people and for business.

## EK

**Erica Keswin** is a bestselling author, internationally sought-after speaker, and workplace strategist. She helps top-of-the-class businesses, organizations, and individuals improve their performance by honoring relationships in every context, always with an eye toward high-tech for human touch. She was named one of Marshall Goldsmith's Top 100 Coaches in 2020, as well as one of *Business Insider's* most innovative coaches of 2020. Her first book, *Bring Your Human to Work: 10 Sure-Fire Ways to Design a Workplace That's Good for People, Great for Business, and Just Might Change the World* was published in 2018 by McGraw Hill. Her second book, *Rituals Roadmap: The Human Way to Transform Everyday Routines Into Workplace Magic* was published by McGraw Hill in January 2021. Both books debuted as *Wall Street Journal* bestsellers. You can learn more about her on her website: [ericakeswin.com](http://ericakeswin.com)

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