

Understanding the Importance of Rituals

By Justin W. Carter



A graduation ceremony marks the culmination of a lot of hard work and determination by the students of that University. This ritual or a rite of passage is deep-seated in tradition and symbolism. From the tassels to the staves, each shows a distinction between participants and their importance. Most people who have taken part in such an event know the emotions that come with it. Most can think back and recall in explicit detail how they felt and who was around them. It was this single event that connects alumni from every year and every department together. It is the accomplishment of graduating that is the foundation, but all the emotions, excitement, and relief all come together and are heightened by the *ritual* known as graduation. This event joins together everyone involved, all those who have taken part in the past, and all those who will walk in their footsteps in the future.

There is little argument towards the fact that rituals bring with them great emotions and a sense of connection between participants. The very things they accomplish are often every leader's greatest concerns. The ability to create cohesiveness, project a vision, generate synergy, increase motivation, and influence the ethics of staff are all things rituals can help with. Yet there is very little research in the business context about them.

There is a large law firm in Birmingham, Alabama that Carter & Associates LLC has been working with over the years. They have really embraced the concept of rituals and symbolism in their everyday work environment with tremendous success. The initiation of new partners in the firm generates a feeling of belonging and a connection that each partner shares that is special only to that particular group. There is one large conference room dedicated to brainstorming and debriefing that is referred to poetically as the *War Room*. This room is sectioned off away from all other offices and conference rooms and only a select group is allowed inside. This creates such strong emotions

towards this room. Everyone in the office knows that once inside you are to be at your best, most professional, most alert state possible. Just the thought of the room instantly changes an employee's tone and appearance.

Another organization implemented a leadership retreat that has drastically increased the success rate of new managers. The retreat was developed as a right-of-passage for new managers before they were allowed to officially take the title of manager. These retreats consist of several smaller rituals that are designed to teach the five principles of the organization. At the end of the retreat, the employee is allowed to spend ten minutes with each executive and manager present to ask questions and exchange contact information. At the end of the meetings all participants join together, vote on the student's performance, and announce their decision. The retreat in all takes less than 24 hours but the benefits can still be seen today. Many participants have commented that the retreat really made them feel connected to the organization and gained an appreciation for the executives and managers they now work with.

One of the most important roles a leader has in an organization is to uphold and convey the vision of the company. Thousands of dollars and hours are spent developing vision and mission statements that are revised a hundred times over until they really convey where the organization is headed. Yet one of the biggest challenges all leaders face is how to get buy-in from the employees; not only buy-in, but also ownership of the vision. One way this was accomplished with a young sales staff that had the vision of changing lives was to create a sign in the front of the office that read "I will change one life today." As employees entered the office they tapped the sign with their hand before walking in. This helped really drive home the importance of that statement and each person was instantly reminded walking in why they came to work that day.

It is not my suggestion that organizations start lighting candles, wearing robes, and holding elaborate initiations into the office. What I am suggesting is a realistic and professional understanding of the importance of rituals and symbolism in business. Every organization has rituals already. From morning meetings, to new employee orientations, rituals are already found in almost all businesses. Yet little thought is actually given to them. Just as a graduate would not be as connected to the University when their diploma arrived in the mail vs. taking part in a graduation ceremony, the lawyer would not be as focused simply walking into a conference room vs. the *War Room*, a new manager would not feel as prepared vs. symbolically gaining the acceptance of their peers, and a staff member would not be as aware of the company's vision walking into an empty hallway vs. tapping a sign that outlines their mission. Each company that is not utilizing rituals is missing out on a serious leadership tool that has literally shaped our society into what it is today. A live example we can all witness would be the upcoming Presidential election. From democrats and republicans, debates, primaries, straw-

polls, and the electoral votes, all assist the different candidates in conveying their vision, creating a connection between staff members and supporters, and potentially winning the right to take on the highest leadership position possible.

This might appear at first to be a little cloak and dagger, but you may recall that most major life events are marked with rituals. From weddings, baptisms, bar mitzvah, graduations, and all major holidays each one is marked by symbolism and rituals that we all take part in. All social and fraternal organizations have rituals that bond members together. All religions have rituals and symbolism that teach morals and bond members together. Why is it that something so deeply rooted in society is not embraced by more leaders today?

About the author:

Justin W. Carter is a graduate of the University of North Alabama where he was a student athlete and member of the fraternity of Phi Gamma Delta. Justin founded Carter & Associates LLC so he could coach and consult businesses full-time. You can find out more about Justin at justinwcarter.com

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