

Article

Towards Understanding the Potential Functions of Rituals and Ritual-like Activities in the Workplace

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Abstract

This study investigates the potential functions of rituals in organizational and leadership settings, demonstrating that purposefully designed group rituals can foster feelings of togetherness, joy, and energy. However, the implementation of such rituals may encounter challenges, including feelings of awkwardness, which can hinder acceptance and diminish their positive effects. While rituals have likely played an important role in human survival and development, empirical research on their role in workplace settings is still in its early stages, often limited to laboratory experiments. This study employs a combination of qualitative questionnaires and group interviews and is guided by the hypothesis that workplace rituals significantly influence organizational culture and individual well-being, with potential positive and negative ethical implications for employee experience and organizational outcomes. In this article, rituals are examined longitudinally through a four-month-long experiment involving two groups of experienced leaders in a leadership program. The study found that a simple, predefined group ritual enhanced feelings of inner peace, readiness, and togetherness, whereas higher-arousal feelings of joy and energy were associated with a self-created ritual. The success of these rituals was contingent on the involvement of a “master of the ritual” and the avoidance of perceived awkwardness in the early stages. Finally, this study suggests that the effects of ritual-like activities may be comparable to those of rituals.

Keywords: rituals; leadership; organizational development; organizational culture; ethics**JEL:** L25, L29, M14

1. Introduction

Rituals play a significant role in the social behaviors of most animal species, and the pervasiveness of rituals in human life reflects ancient biological programming that enables members to communicate and coordinate (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin, 2022). It seems that the most intelligent animals, including humans, are the ones with the richest repertoire of rituals. Rituals may help us deal with some of the challenges that come with having a complex psychology, such as pair bonding, coping with loss and anxiety, and achieving cooperation and social organization (Xygalatas, 2022). Collective rituals can excite, elevate and unite individuals into cohesive units. However, applying rituals is not inherently good or positive; as a social technology they can be used for better or for worse (ibid.). Ritual can be a powerful didactic and socializing tool, and a better understanding of the workings of ritual gives us a choice in our response to the rituals that permeate our daily lives (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin, 2022).

Adopting a ritual perspective on life in contemporary organizations may reveal numerous ways and settings in which rituals are integrated into our daily work life. This perspective was notably illustrated by Xygalatas, a Greek ritual researcher, during his time working in Denmark. As a researcher he observed that most workplaces in Denmark

engage in highly ritualized work meetings, and that daily breaks and eating lunch together function as social events. He also noted that the celebration of individual milestones such as childbirth, promotion or retirement is conducted in the form of rituals. Additionally, Christmas Parties are marked by ceremonial speeches, games, rounds of toasting accompanied by hurrahs chanted in chorus, etc. According to Xygalatas these collective activities effectively harness the power of ritual to solidify relationships and boost team cohesion (Xygalatas, 2022).

Rituals are found in all types of performance domains, from high-stakes athletics and the military to the daily morning preparations of the working family. Yet despite their ubiquity and widespread importance for humans, we know very little about rituals’ causal basis and how (if at all) they facilitate goal-directed performance (Hobson et al, 2018). In relation to understanding the importance and potential of rituals for leadership and organizational development, empirical data and knowledge from the workplace are still in an emerging stage. Only a few studies (Koschmann and McDonald, 2015; Ozenk and Hagan, 2019) have investigated rituals in real-life settings, and, to our knowledge, no studies have explicitly compared rituals and ritual-like activities in organizational contexts. While these activities share similarities, they differ in aspects such as sequence, symbolism and purpose. For instance, routine



team-building exercises or daily check-in meetings may resemble rituals, but often lack symbolic meaning or a prescribed structure.

Except for research on elite sports, research focused on rituals in an organizational context has to our knowledge so far been based primarily on literature reviews or controlled experiments in which the participants in most cases have performed rituals or ritual-like activities only once (Kim et al, 2021).

In this study, group rituals and ritual-like activities are examined longitudinally through a four-month-long real-life experiment with two groups of experienced leaders in a leadership training program. The study is guided by a hypothesis that workplace rituals significantly influence organizational culture and individual well-being, with potential positive and negative ethical implications for employee experience and organizational outcomes.

The research question of this study is: What are the potential functions of rituals and ritual-like activities in the workplace? The results indicate that different rituals may result in different outcomes, and that many of the outcomes were also found as a result of ritual-like activities. The positive outcomes appear to be contingent upon the guidance of a designated “Master of the ritual”, and on the rituals not being experienced as too awkward or meaningless in the beginning. Based in these findings, this study contributes new knowledge relevant for future design, implementation and maintenance of rituals and ritual-like activities in the workplace in everyday situations such as work meetings, daily breaks, onboarding, celebrations, town hall meetings, etc.

2. Theoretical Background—State of the Art

Referring to the classical works of Durkheim (1915, 1961), Van Gennep (1909, 1960) and Turner (1969), Islam and Zyphur (2009) explain that the study of rituals has its origins in sociology and anthropology. They identify Trice and Beyer (1984) as being the first scholars to suggest rites and ceremonies as a window into cultural knowledge in an organizational context.

Across social scientific disciplines, convergent developments provide evidence that ritual is a psychologically prepared and culturally inherited behavioral trademark of our species (Watson-Jones and Legare, 2016). Among other things, rituals have helped us to identify members of a group, demonstrate commitment to the group’s values, and support cooperation and coherent energy in the group (ibid.). The pervasiveness of rituals in human life reflects ancient biological programming, allowing communication and coordination through behavioral symbols (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin, 2022). Rituals seem to fulfill primal human needs that are central to our personal and social existence (Xygalatas, 2022).

From an economic perspective, rituals are also significant as they may reduce transaction costs by communicat-

ing valuable information about one’s identity as trustworthy and cooperative (Coyne and Mathers, 2011). Many scholars have suggested that rituals are ubiquitous because they are central to the functioning of large-scale cooperative groups, forming the basis of contemporary society (Hobson et al, 2018).

2.1 Defining Ritual

There are many different definitions of rituals in the literature, but there does not seem to be one single definition on which there is agreement in studies published thus far (see for example Kim et al, 2021). However, it seems that a number of parameters are consistent in the various definitions. Rituals are defined as having a beginning and an end, consisting of repetitious actions with a fixed and predefined structure, and containing non-functional elements and symbols. Furthermore, rituals may contain extraordinary actions, or employ ordinary actions in unusual ways (Islam and Zyphur, 2009; Smith and Stewart, 2011; Wu, 2018; Ozenk and Hagan, 2019; Hobson et al, 2018).

In this article, various definitions and perspectives regarding rituals are presented as it is expected that such a presentation will contribute to both questioning and clarifying the boundaries between a ritual and ritual-like activities, as well as distinguishing routines, habits, traditions, etc. from rituals. In this context, ritual-like activities are understood as actions in an organization that do not meet all the criteria of the definition of a ritual, e.g., actions that are not performed in exactly the same way, or actions that lack symbolism. This understanding follows Smith and Stewart’s (2011) suggestion that rituals operate on a spectrum from full ritual to ritual-like activities, as well as Kim et al.’s (2021) suggestion that, rather than defining minimum criteria for rituals, ritualistic activities can be perceived as existing along a continuum.

In their work teaching students at Stanford University and helping workplaces to design and implement new rituals, Ozenk and Hagan (2019) came up with four principles for defining rituals. Their definition includes that rituals have a magic “je ne sais quoi”-factor, are performed with intentionality, and that they involve participants being “tuned in” to the ritual being a special moment. Furthermore, that a ritual carries a symbolic value, giving a sense of purpose beyond the practical, and that a ritual evolves over time, to better suit the people and the situation involved.

From a psychological perspective, the individual’s experience of a ritual changes with increasing repetitions, thus becoming more and more familiar (Hobson et al, 2018). Elements of repetition, whether in content, form, or occasion, and rituals being planned and highly organized rather than being spontaneous acts, are fundamental in the definition of rituals used by Islam and Zyphur (2009) based on earlier studies of rituals and ceremonies. Their definition also includes that rituals contain collective behavior that is out of the ordinary, use ordinary behavior in special ways, or

overtly draw attention away from mundane uses of behaviors; and that rituals use evocative presentation to draw and hold attention.

Smith and Stewart (2011), similar to Islam and Zyphur (2009), examined rituals in an organizational context. They define rituals as standardized, rule-bound, predictable and repetitive actions with explicit expectations for the performance of these actions. They also point out that rituals are permeated by meaning, through both their formality and their innate symbolism.

All the above-mentioned definitions were developed by researchers focusing on rituals in an organizational context. In summary, these definitions suggest that rituals can be defined as repetitive actions within a fixed and previously defined structure, carried out by one or more persons in a defined context or on a specified occasion. However, this definition could also be applied to routines, habits and traditions.

What distinguishes rituals from routines and habits is that rituals, similar to some traditions, often contain non-functional and mood-evoking elements, as well as symbols. Another important feature that may define rituals is what Ozenk and Hagan (2019) term intentionality. When we, as participants, are aware of our participation in rituals, we expect a special moment, which contributes to our remembering our participation in rituals better than we remember our habits and routines. In addition, rituals are more attention-getting than non-ritual actions (Beyer and Liénard, and Nielbo and Sørensen in Hobson et al, 2018).

The use of the various definitions and perspectives in this study leads to the following more synthesized conceptualization of rituals: Rituals are intentional, repeated actions embedded in a structured framework, often marked by symbolic significance and/or separated from practical or instrumental purposes. They are typically performed with formality and evoke a sense of specialness or heightened awareness, often involving participants' emotional engagement. Distinct from routines or habits, rituals contain elements that capture attention, foster a sense of meaning, and reinforce a shared or individual experience. Rituals range from fully ritualized acts to ritual-like activities, and may adapt over time to align with evolving contexts and participants.

Based on the above conceptualization, the present study employs the definition provided by Hobson et al. (2018): ...we define ritual as (a) predefined sequences characterized by rigidity, formality, and repetition that are (b) embedded in a larger system of symbolism and meaning, but (c) contain elements that lack direct instrumental purpose.

This definition is simple, at the same time as it includes most of the core elements in the previously mentioned definitions. However, it may also be challenging from an organizational perspective as the inclusion of symbolic actions and a lack of instrumental purpose may con-

flict with the idea of an organization and work life being goal-oriented and efficient. The definition implies that rituals can be construed as procedural and event-based phenomena in the context of analyzing the data collected in this study.

2.2 *The Many Functions of Rituals*

Rituals have probably been a part of the life and society of humanity for so long that they have contributed to ensuring our survival and development as a species. This longstanding presence highlights the importance of examining the functions and needs that rituals can and should fill in contemporary organizations and workplaces.

Among other aspects, rituals in organizations are interesting from a leadership perspective, as they can function as both communication and learning systems. Rituals help us to focus on something important, such as values and virtues, and they contribute to an increased awareness of our thoughts, feelings and behavior. In addition, rituals can both support and challenge an organization's culture, thus its values and its basic assumptions (Smith and Stewart, 2011).

Smith and Stewart (2011) identified several key functions of rituals, including providing meaning, managing anxiety, exemplifying and reinforcing social order, communicating important values, enhancing group solidarity, including and excluding members, signalling commitment, managing work structures, and reinforcing significant events. Ozenk and Hagan (2019) expanded on these insights, suggesting that rituals can also help individuals cope with negative transitions, enhance creativity, and increase feelings of control. However, it is important to note that some of these findings are based on limited experimental evidence, and thus, they should be viewed as inspirational rather than definitive.

Islam and Zyphur (2009) argue that rituals offer a broad spectrum of organizational advantages at both the group and individual levels. They also emphasize that rituals can originate from employees (bottom-up) or be initiated by leaders (top-down).

From a leadership perspective, rituals are multifunctional and sometimes non-instrumental, as there may not be a direct relationship between the ritual's form and content and the participants' individual or collective benefit. Nonetheless the existing literature supports that rituals in an organizational context may serve as tools for fostering cohesion, maintaining cultural continuity, and navigating change. They may operate as a means of reinforcing organizational identity and values, while also providing a structured way to manage uncertainty and stress. At the same time, rituals in the workplace have a potential to create environments that not only enhance performance but also contribute to the well-being and satisfaction of employees. Ultimately, the strategic use of rituals may help organizations cultivate a sense of purpose, belonging and resilience.

2.3 Ethics and Rituals—A Question of Practical Wisdom?

Rituals can excite, elevate, and unite individuals into cohesive units, but as a social technology, they can be used for better or for worse (Xygalatas, 2022). Rituals can also be seen as a powerful didactic and socializing tool; understanding how rituals work provides us with a choice in our response to the rituals that permeate our daily lives (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin, 2022).

Naturally, from an ethical point of view it is important that both leaders and employees have some understanding of the way rituals work and the possibility of rituals either promoting or hindering well-being and development in the workplace. Therefore, from a leadership perspective, it is important that an organization possesses ethical judgment and psychological safety to enable both leaders and employees to relate critically to workplace rituals. This is a prerequisite for being able to promote rituals that encourage well-being and development, and avoid rituals that have negative effects on the individuals and the culture within an organization. In their work with designing rituals in organizations, Ozenk and Hagan (2019) state explicitly that security and freedom are essential prerequisites for employees to consciously and freely develop rituals in the organization.

However, understanding the inner workings of ritual and ethical judgment alone is probably not enough. These should be combined with the ethical power of action, making it possible in practice for leaders to carry out any necessary leadership decisions and actions that contribute to the support and development of good rituals, while unsuitable rituals are adjusted, discontinued, or replaced by new ones. This specific aspect of leaders' personal leadership is termed practical wisdom (phronesis) in philosophy (Aristotle, 2000). It may be especially important in relation to rituals, as there is a risk of rituals manipulating us without our awareness. As a form of knowledge, phronesis is prescriptive, as it tells us what we should do and should not do; furthermore, it is a form of knowledge that cannot be forgotten. Phronesis is not something that a person either has or doesn't have. It is a particular form of wisdom that includes a situation-specific readiness to act, and that prepares people to act well and positively. Phronesis is learned from experiences in practice and is not something that can be instructed or taught by others. The Austrian philosopher Michael Noah Weiss explains that phronesis is learnable but not teachable (Weiss, 2018).

Working more consciously with rituals may be a way for leaders to develop a more humanistically informed leadership as well as enhancing their practical wisdom and thereby fostering even more virtuous leadership. As Low (2012) suggests, *rituals keep us in touch with our humanness*.

3. Methods

In this study, group rituals are examined through a longitudinal experiment with two groups of experienced

leaders in a four-month-long leadership training program guided by the research question: "What are the potential functions of rituals and ritual-like activities in the workplace?" During the eight teaching days (one every two weeks), one group practiced the same simple predefined group ritual every morning as well as a self-made group ritual when working in groups during the day. The other group practiced different predefined check-in exercises in the morning which can be characterized as ritual-like activities, but they did not practice any rituals or ritual-like activities for the rest of the day. After the four-month period, data were collected in both groups through individual qualitative questionnaires with open-ended questions regarding the perceived outcomes. Subsequently, collective qualitative interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) were held and recorded by the researcher in each group, followed by a full transcription of the interviews. The collected data were then analyzed by a process of open coding (Langly, 1999) and phenomenologically-based meaning condensation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

Method and theory in this study are, as Langly (1999) suggests, understood as inextricably intertwined. In consequence, no analysis strategy will produce theory without an uncodifiable leap, in that process data are "messy" and making sense of them is a constant challenge.

Process data collected in organizations are difficult to analyze, as they mainly deal with sequences of events. Furthermore, the boundaries of the levels and units of analysis are ambiguous; their embeddedness often varies in terms of precision, duration and relevance; and process data tend to be eclectic, drawing in phenomena such as challenging relationships, thoughts, feelings and interpretations (ibid.).

Langly (1999) (ibid.) emphasizes that understanding patterns in events is key to developing theory. But the passage from raw data to synthetic model is far from simple, and raw process data usually do not come neatly sliced and packaged. The complexity of process data is, as Langly explains, a reflection of the complexity of the organizational phenomena we are attempting to understand.

Rituals as a phenomenon in organizations are, as indicated by the definition used in this study, understood as events and processes as well as a complex organizational phenomenon. This means that all the challenges mentioned above are relevant and should therefore be taken into consideration regarding both data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Study and Participants

The experimental design of this study involved two teaching groups of twenty-three experienced leaders each, participating in a postgraduate leadership development course. The specific course lasted four months, constituting the first part of a two-year-long publicly approved leadership education (Diploma in Leadership) in Denmark. The Diploma in Leadership has a 20-year-long history in Denmark and is offered by university colleges all over the country.

The participants had all signed up for the same course and went through exactly the same teaching program in two different teaching groups (a Ritual group and a Ritual-like group) in the same classroom with the same teacher, but on different weekdays. The program focusing on personal leadership competencies consisted of 8 whole days of teaching plus reading assigned texts, and doing exercises between the days of instruction.

3.2 Procedures and Ritual Manipulation

The group referred to as the “Ritual-like group” participated in a standard leadership course without any modifications made to the structure or content of the course. However, as part of the standard format, a distinct check-in exercise was conducted at the beginning of each teaching day. In this study, this check-in exercise is considered a ritual-like activity based on the definitions outlined in the theory section above. The specific distinctions between the two groups are further detailed in the following.

In the Ritual-like group (Wednesdays), the teacher as usual called the beginning of the day “a check-in exercise”. These exercises were all different during the 8 days of the course, and they consisted of elements such as taking deep breaths together, being quiet together, writing down personal expectations relevant for the program of the day, saying out loud in a circle how you are feeling, etc.

In the Ritual group (Mondays), the participants on the first day of the course were instructed how to perform a collective check-in ritual that was carried out in the exact same way each morning during the course. The participants were also instructed on how to design their own group rituals in their study groups (4–5 participants). The self-made group ritual was meant to be used at the beginning of each group work session in the study groups during the course. That is, the participants in the Ritual group had both a collective morning ritual instructed by the teacher which was carried out every morning of the course, and a study group ritual which was carried out by themselves when they were working in their study groups, often several times each day.

The collective check-in ritual carried out in the Ritual group was designed as follows:

1. On a clean page in your notebook: write down what is in your mind right now
2. Tear out the page
3. Fold the page 3 times and stick it in the back of your notebook
4. Put one of your hands on your heart and the other hand on your stomach
5. Take 7 deep and slow breaths following the teacher’s count

The rituals developed in the study groups varied, but included, e.g., “Giving high fives including eye contact” and “Citing a specific quote together out loud”.

Due to the ethical perspectives of the study, the participants in the Ritual group were informed that working with

rituals during the course was part of a research study focusing on rituals in a leadership and organizational context, and that they would be asked to answer a questionnaire and would be invited to a qualitative group interview at the end of the course.

3.3 Data Collection

On the eighth and final day of the course, 17 participants in the Ritual-like group and 19 participants in the Ritual group (of the originally 23 participants in each group) were present and filled out a qualitative questionnaire consisting of the following questions:

Think back on the time during the course and describe in your own words:

How are you feeling in your body? – What do you typically sense and register:

- In connection with the check-in exercise/ritual in the morning?
- During the teaching throughout the day?
- After the teaching?

Answer (without thinking too much) the following three questions:

- What has it meant to you personally, to begin the course day with a check-in exercise/ritual?
- What has it meant to the group, to begin the course day with a check-in exercise/ritual?
- What good advice do you have for others who would like to work with check-in exercises/rituals in their workplace?

The questionnaire was followed by a qualitative interview (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) beginning with the researcher asking what experiences the participants were willing to share regarding the check-in exercises/rituals they had been carrying out during the course. In the Ritual group, special attention was given to the participants’ experiences with their self-made rituals. The interviews were recorded for subsequent transcription.

3.4 Data Analysis

Taking into account the complexity of rituals as a phenomenon in organizations and the opaqueness of the definitions, and thus the multiple understandings of rituals as well as the relatively open definition used in this article, the analysis of the data collected in this study is inspired by grounded theory (see, e.g., Glaser and Strauss, 2017).

In a grounded theory perspective, such analysis involves *the systematic comparison of small units of data and the gradual construction of a system of “categories” that describe the phenomena being observed. The categories may have several “subcategories” and associated “dimensions” and “properties”, which are gradually elaborated and refined as specific incidents are examined, systematically coded, and compared (Langly, 1999).*

The qualitative interviews were transcribed by the researcher, as the transcription *structures the interview con-*

versations in a form amenable to closer analysis and is in itself an initial analysis process (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

Both the written answers to the questions on the questionnaires, and the subsequent transcription of the recorded interviews that followed were analyzed using a process of open coding (Langly, 1999) and phenomenologically-based meaning condensation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). In the analyzing process, all sentences in the transcriptions were examined for coding by identifying key words that relate to functions and effects of the rituals performed. Thereafter, all the key words were, as Langly (1999) suggests, used to construct relevant categories, which were supplemented by subcategories when appropriate.

This resulted in a limited number of categories based on quotes from both the questionnaires and the interviews. For example, to illustrate the coding process: the category "Togetherness/Being a team" was based on quotes like the following, in which the key words are highlighted: *"Simple and small recognizable rituals can create a sense of togetherness;" "It helps creating a community especially if you are new to a place;" "The experience of being a team with the same focus – all moving towards the same goal;" "When I left the first day I thought, this is not for me...underway it has given a feeling of togetherness...it is about being a community, that does this when we meet...what it gives is a common room...but in the beginning I thought this is too awkward to me".*

After the open coding and categorizing, the body of theory presented in this article served as a background for understanding and qualifying the categorizing of the data collected, as well as challenging existing theory. Thus, a combination of an inductive and deductive research strategy is used in an attempt to strengthen the results of the study. Even though not all data are visible here, they form the basis of this article. The visible quotes in the Results section have been carefully selected in order to illustrate the essential themes and be representative of the data collected in this study.

4. Results

In the analysis of the data gathered from the questionnaires in the Ritual group, several distinct categories were identified. These categories can be organized into three main themes: Outcomes of the rituals, which include the four categories: Peace of Mind and Body, Togetherness, Joy and Energy, Awkwardness; Prerequisites for a ritual, comprising the category Structure and a Master of the Ritual; Variety in effects, consisting of the category Different Rituals have Different Effects.

Given the experimental design of this study, the data on the rituals were compared to the data on the ritual-like activities. This comparison was made within each of the six categories, allowing for a detailed examination of similarities and differences between the Ritual group and the

Ritual-like group. Subsequently, the key differences between the Ritual group and the Ritual-like group were summarized.

When appropriate, supplementary statements from the interview responses were incorporated to explain and emphasize the mostly brief answers found in the questionnaires. Some of the answers from the questionnaires and interviews supported more than one theme. This is an expected consequence of using open qualitative questions, and may indicate that the themes found in this study are somewhat intertwined.

4.1 Peace of Mind and Body

The data from this study indicate that the morning ritual significantly contributed to a sense of peace in both mind and body among the leaders. This ritual facilitated a slowing down process, which many participants found essential for beginning their day with a sense of calm and focus. Several leaders highlighted that the ritual enabled their bodies to "tune in", fostering an inner peace that extended into the other activities of the day.

One participant noted, "A calm feeling in the body and I become ready to learn. The ritual makes me feel safe", underscoring the ritual's role in preparing the mind and body for learning. Another reflection emphasized that "It has made a difference when I compare to other courses I have taken. My body and my thoughts have been more at rest", suggesting that the ritual's impact went beyond the immediate experience, offering a deeper sense of restfulness that was distinct from other experiences.

The concept of "calmness" recurred in many responses, with one leader stating, "A calmness in my body and head", and another describing it as "a good ritual which gives peace in body and soul". Furthermore, the sense of being "tuned in" to the day's activities was a common theme, as illustrated by the comment, "The body is tuned in to the day and it gives an inner peace". This dual focus on both physical and mental tranquility and tuning in highlights the potential holistic benefits of the ritual practice.

The data also revealed that the ritual enhanced participants' ability to be present and focus on their tasks. As one leader expressed, "It has given a chance of being present and focusing on the task. Peace in my stomach". This quote illustrates how the ritual facilitated a deeper focus and physical grounding.

In summary, the morning ritual not only provided the leaders with a sense of peace and calm but also enhanced their ability to be present and focused after performing the ritual. This practice seems to have a potential to contribute to a holistic sense of well-being, grounding the leaders both mentally and physically and preparing them for the challenges ahead.

Comparison With the Ritual-like Activities

In the Ritual-like group, peace of mind/body, focus, being present and being ready are mentioned in the same ways and with the same frequency as in the Ritual group. Typical statements from participants in the check-in exercise included: “An extra sense of calm and greater focus for the rest of the day”, “It gives me calm and directs my focus toward what is going to happen”, “I feel a sense of calm in my body”, and “I find peace within myself, and I become more present”.

4.2 Togetherness

The data suggest that most leaders experienced a sense of togetherness and a feeling of being part of a community as a result of participating in the rituals. However, this sense of unity was not immediately felt by everyone at the beginning of the course, particularly when the ritual was unfamiliar to them. Some leaders indicated that the ritual initially seemed inefficient or lacked meaning, but over time, it became more significant.

One participant highlighted the simplicity and recognizability of the rituals, noting that “Simple and small recognizable rituals can create a sense of togetherness”. This underscores how even minor, consistent practices can foster a sense of unity within a group. Another leader emphasized the role of rituals in community building, especially for newcomers: “It helps creating a community especially if you are new to a place”, suggesting that rituals can serve as a bridge for integration into a new environment.

The collective focus that rituals brought to the group was also noted, with one participant sharing, “The experience of being a team with the same focus—all moving towards the same goal”. This quote illustrates how rituals can align individual efforts towards a common objective, reinforcing a sense of teamwork and shared purpose.

Some participants described an evolving relationship with the ritual. One leader admitted, “When I left the first day I thought, this is not for me...underway it has given a feeling of togetherness...it is about being a community, that does this when we meet...what it gives is a common room...but in the beginning I thought this is too awkward to me”. This narrative reveals initial discomfort and skepticism, which gradually transformed into an appreciation for the communal space that the ritual created.

In summary, while initial reactions to the rituals varied, the data suggest that over time, these practices played a significant role in fostering a sense of togetherness and community among the leaders. The rituals thus may have a potential to align the group towards common goals, facilitate the integration of new members, and deepen interpersonal connections within the team.

Comparison With the Ritual-like Activities

In the Ritual-like group, togetherness appears to be much less significant. Some participants mentioned that

it's relevant: “It is highly relevant, as I can get a sense of connection with my fellow students”, “... more attentive and curious about what the others in the community contribute”, “We are all part of the team, and we share the teaching/learning experience”, and “It holds greater significance now that we are starting together. It can be compared to a meal, where everyone has something on their plate and begins with a ‘toas’”. However, other participants stated: “It's not that significant”, “I don't feel anything or notice any changes”, “In my opinion, it doesn't make a difference or contribute to the sense of community”. Statements like the latter, showing no effect of the check-in exercise on the feeling of togetherness, were not found in the data from the Ritual group. This indicates a difference in the outcome of Ritual and Ritual-like activities regarding togetherness.

4.3 Joy and Energy

A prominent outcome of practicing a self-made group ritual, as reported by participants, is the immediate experience of joy and energy. One of the study groups mentioned that laughter often accompanied their ritual practice, indicating the lighthearted and uplifting nature of the activity.

Participants shared various reflections on this experience. For instance, one noted, “We have laughed over it—when we either forgot or did it half-heartedly”, suggesting that even when the ritual was not performed with full intent, it still fostered a sense of camaraderie and amusement. This quote illustrates how rituals, even in their imperfect execution, can contribute to a joyful atmosphere.

The rituals also provided a structured way to generate energy, as one participant explained: “It gives energy and a good and well-known structure, in which you (after a couple of times) know exactly which feeling you can expect in the end”. This highlights the predictability and reliability of the ritual in delivering a consistent emotional uplift, reinforcing its role as a dependable source of energy.

Another participant vividly described the physical impact of the ritual, stating, “I feel that the ‘batteries’ of my body are charged to 112%”, which metaphorically underscores the significant boost in energy levels that the ritual provided. This quote emphasizes the ritual's powerful effect on physical and mental readiness.

While the rituals were not practiced consistently, their impact was still noticeable whenever they were performed. As one participant noted, “We do not use it always, but the times we did it, the feeling is that it gives energy and focus on the task”. This reflection suggests that even sporadic engagement with the ritual could enhance concentration and invigorate the participants.

The transition from ritual to work was also marked by a noticeable shift in mood and energy, as described by a leader who said, “We become very, very joyful...it gives us a transition...now we are ready...not just coffee in the cup...”. This statement captures the role of the ritual in preparing the group not just mentally, but also emotionally,

creating a clear demarcation between casual social time and focused work time.

In summary, the data indicate that the rituals served as a significant source of joy and energy for the participants. Whether through laughter, structured energy boosts, or transitions into work mode, the rituals played a crucial role in enhancing the emotional and physical preparedness of the leaders.

Comparison With the Ritual-like Activities

No indications of outcomes regarding joy and energy were found in the data from the Ritual-like group. This aligns with the data from the Ritual group, as joy and energy were primarily connected to the high-arousal study group ritual and not the low-arousal morning ritual in the Ritual group.

4.4 Awkwardness

A prevalent theme among the leaders was the initial sense of awkwardness when performing the rituals. However, the data suggest that this feeling diminishes or even disappears as the ritual becomes more familiar. Several leaders indicated that the awkwardness might stem from the ritual feeling artificial or contrived, rather than natural. This points to a possible correlation between the perceived naturalness of a ritual and its effectiveness or purpose as experienced by the participants. Additionally, it was noted that despite the initial discomfort, the ritual often served as a meaningful transition into subsequent activities.

One leader expressed this transition, stating, “The first 2–3 times it is extremely awkward, but now it gives a feeling of togetherness, joy, and now we are ready to start”, highlighting the evolution from discomfort to a sense of readiness and cohesion within the group. Another participant reflected, “The first 1–2 times I thought it was a bit foolish, but there is a feeling of rest/tranquility in my body”, indicating that despite initial scepticism, the ritual eventually brought about a sense of calm. The shift from feeling weird to finding the ritual helpful in focusing on the day was also noted: “In the beginning I thought it was weird. But now it has become natural and helps in focusing on the day”. This evolution underscores the importance of persistence with rituals, even when they initially feel awkward or contrived.

The need for rituals to feel natural was emphasized by participants. One leader noted, “It has to be natural and not too artificial, otherwise it will seem foolish”, suggesting that the authenticity of the ritual plays a crucial role in its acceptance and effectiveness. Another remarked, “Give it a chance, even though it feels unnatural in the beginning”, encouraging perseverance despite initial discomfort.

However, not all rituals were successful. As one participant observed, “The ritual in the study group was quickly dropped. It was experienced as ‘artificial’”, indicating that when a ritual feels too forced or lacks meaning,

it may fail to take hold. The necessity for rituals to be accepted by all participants was also mentioned: “It has to be accepted by all, which means not being too ‘awkward’, and it must have a sense of purpose. Here it was to give peace of mind and to mark a beginning”. This highlights the importance of collective buy-in and clear purpose in the successful implementation of new rituals.

Some leaders noted the challenge of starting with a new ritual: “It is hard to get started with, the first 3 times it felt really awkward, but when we first got started...now it is a part of our group”. This suggests that initial resistance may be overcome with time and continued practice.

Reflecting on the personal impact, one leader mentioned, “It was strange in the beginning, but I feel that you are much more yourself when we begin, you tune in...I have started using it at home as well”, demonstrating how rituals can transcend the workplace and become integrated into personal life once the initial awkwardness is overcome.

In summary, while awkwardness is a common initial response to new rituals, the data show that this discomfort often decreases with familiarity. The success of a ritual depends, e.g., on its perceived naturalness, collective acceptance, and clear purpose.

Comparison With the Ritual-like Activities

In the Ritual-like group, the feeling of awkwardness is not mentioned at all in the answers from the participants. Awkwardness is thus solely connected with carrying out the collective morning ritual and/or the different self-made rituals in the study groups of the Ritual group. However, some statements from the interviews in the Ritual-like group indicate awkward feelings connected to the check-in exercise, as the following expressions may indicate: “*too spiritual*”, “*a bit too zen-like*” or even “*a waste of time*”. As found in the Ritual group, the morning exercises over time became a habit. Several participants indicate that they initially had a feeling of wasting time. One leader in the Ritual-like group interview stated: “In the beginning I thought it was a waste of time, let’s rather begin, but it quickly became a habit, and I felt that at the end I had an expectation of something and that I needed it, and it helped letting go of my thoughts and notice, ‘Am I here mentally?’ - it helped me relax”.

4.5 Structure and a Master of the Ritual

In line with the definition utilized in this article, a ritual is characterized by its inherent structure and rigidity. This structural element was also recognized by the leaders, some of whom emphasized the importance of having a “Master of the ritual” to ensure that the ritual is performed consistently and correctly, preventing lapses in execution.

One leader expressed appreciation for the predictability that structure provides, stating, “The recognizability does something good to me”. This highlights the value of routine and familiarity in rituals, which can contribute to a sense of comfort and stability. The importance of repetition

was also underscored with the remark, "...repetitions are important...", indicating that consistent practice reinforces the ritual's effectiveness.

Participants stressed the need for simplicity in rituals, as one noted, "Rituals have to be simple and not take many seconds". This suggests that for a ritual to be sustainable and integrated into daily practice, it must be straightforward and concise. The structure of the ritual also played a relevant role, as one leader observed: "I sense that there is a peacefulness in the room, it is important that it is 7 breaths and not just 3, you get forced into it... In the beginning I thought, 'well'... I think that many of us had that feeling...it is something that we are obliged to do...so it is actually nice...". This quote reflects the initial resistance to structured rituals, which over time gives way to an appreciation of their benefits once the practice becomes ingrained.

Finally, the need for a "Master of the ritual" was articulated clearly by one participant: "There has to be a 'Master of the ritual', who ensures it until it is 'automated'". This underscores the role of leadership in ritual practice, ensuring that the ritual is consistently performed until it becomes a natural and well-integrated part of the group's routine.

In summary, the data highlight the importance of structure in rituals, which provides consistency and predictability. The role of a "Master of the ritual" is crucial in maintaining this structure, ensuring that the ritual is performed correctly and regularly until it becomes an integral part of the group's practice.

Comparison With the Ritual-like Activities

The check-in exercises were predefined, structured and led by the teacher, and in the Ritual-like group, no statements refer to the structure or leadership of the check-in exercise, nor do they indicate that this was a relevant theme for the participants.

4.6 Different Rituals Have Different Effects

Within the Ritual group, only one out of the five study groups successfully performed their group ritual consistently throughout the four-month course. The other groups either abandoned the ritual after a short period or engaged in it only sporadically. The interview revealed that the study group which maintained their ritual consistently experienced it more positively and found it more impactful than the other groups.

One participant reflected on the varying outcomes, stating, "It becomes clear to me how different the outcomes of the different rituals are... What we are doing in the morning gives me a whole different feeling, here I become focused, ready to receive the teaching. What we do in our study group gives me energy and joy...not that I'm not focused, it is just in a very different way...it is something else. This means that the ritual in itself has a great impact...". This quote illustrates how different rituals can elicit distinct

emotional and cognitive responses, depending on the context and consistency of their practice.

In contrast, another participant from a group less successful in maintaining its ritual noted, "In the study group ritual I did not feel the same joy and energy... Maybe we did not find a ritual...". This reflection suggests that the lack of a consistently meaningful or engaging ritual can result in a diminished experience, highlighting the importance of finding a ritual that resonates with the group.

Moreover, another leader expressed a lack of connection with the ritual, stating, "I can do it, but it does not mean a lot to me and I don't feel it has done anything to me...". This indicates that even when rituals are performed, they may not always have the intended impact if they do not align with the participants' needs or if they are not practiced with intention and regularity.

In summary, the data indicate that different rituals can have varying effects on participants, depending on how they are implemented and the extent to which they resonate with the group. Consistent and meaningful rituals are more likely to produce positive outcomes, such as increased focus, energy, and a sense of joy, while sporadic or disconnected rituals may fail to achieve these effects.

Comparison With the Ritual-like Activities

In the Ritual-like group, different outcomes from the check-in exercise were identified among the participants. Some found that the exercise had a positive effect, as indicated by these statements: "It sharpened my focus and taught me to have control over my body and thoughts", "It helped me ground myself and brought calm, so I'm ready to start the day", and "Far more meaningful than I had imagined". However, for other participants, the check-in exercise seemed to have no effect, as indicated by statements like: "I don't feel it makes any difference", "No significant impact", "It could be left out". Overall, the data suggest that the outcome of a check-in exercise, even over time, varies significantly between the different participants.

4.7 Comparison of the Data in the Ritual Group and the Ritual-Like Group

In the Ritual-like group, peace of mind/body, focus, being present and being ready are mentioned in approximately the same ways and with the same frequency as in the Ritual group. There appear to be no discernible differences between the two groups with respect to these themes.

Togetherness appears to be much less significant in the Ritual-like group, as some statements indicate no effect of the check-in exercise on the feeling of togetherness. This contrasts with the data from the Ritual group. No indications of outcomes regarding joy and energy were found in the data from the Ritual-like group, which aligns with joy and energy being primarily connected to one specific study group ritual in the Ritual group.

The feeling of awkwardness is not mentioned at all in the answers from the Ritual-like group. However, words like “*too spiritual*”, “*a bit too Zen-like*” appear in the data. Awkwardness as a distinct feeling is thus solely connected with the collective morning ritual and/or the various self-made rituals in the study groups in the Ritual group. Similar feelings, however, may be related to the check-in exercise as well.

Different outcomes from both rituals and ritual-like activities were identified among the participants. Overall, the data suggest that the outcome of the check-in exercise, even over time, varies significantly between participants, whereas the outcome of the rituals are more alike among the participants over time.

Even though the morning exercises were not called a ritual, one of the leaders states that the morning exercises were experienced as a ritual: “Even though it has not been the same, it has been experienced as a ritual”. This indicates the inherent importance of rituals, and research has shown that naming activities *a ritual* may enhance their efficacy (Hobson et al, 2018) as well as their expected efficiency (Legare and Souza, 2012).

5. Discussion

In this study, rituals have been explored in two groups (a Ritual group and a Ritual-like group) of experienced leaders participating in the same leadership course. In the Ritual group, the same collective morning check-in ritual was carried out consistently, and a self-made study group ritual was carried out more or less consistently; only one of the study groups succeeded in carrying out their group ritual all the way through the four-month duration of the course. In the Ritual-like group, only various morning check-in exercises were carried out.

5.1 Rituals Versus Ritual-like Activities

The results in this study indicate that the ritual-like activities of the various morning check-in exercises may give approximately the same outcomes as performing a morning ritual.

The experience of awkwardness is mentioned only in the Ritual group; awkwardness is experienced most commonly while the ritual is new to the leaders. As the ritual becomes more and more familiar, many of the leaders experience a more positive effect. Some leaders even recommend that information about this would be good to give when beginning the performance of a ritual. Because feeling awkward, especially among unknown people in a new group, is not a positive emotion, this effect should be recognized and addressed when designing and carrying out new rituals. The results in this study indicate that it is acceptable for rituals to seem awkward initially, as long as the participants can identify the meaning or purpose of the ritual. Feeling awkward in combination with meaninglessness seems to create a tendency to feel and act foolish in a group.

Terms like “spiritual” or “Zen-like”, but not awkward, were mentioned in the Ritual-like group; that is, the check-in exercises made the leaders feel somewhat uncomfortable. These statements from the Ritual-like group may indicate that the threshold for feeling uncomfortable is lower in a check-in exercise than it is in a ritual termed a ritual and which includes symbolic acts. This may be due to several aspects of a ritual, which often include symbolic or non-functional actions or artefacts, thereby giving these sorts of expectations beforehand, as opposed to when an “exercise” is termed a ritual. Previous research (Hobson et al, 2018) found that calling a series of acts a ritual made a positive difference to their effects, compared to not calling them a ritual.

5.2 Rituals Are Not Universally Beneficial

While most of the leaders agree on the positive effects of rituals, the findings in this study also suggest that rituals may not be universally beneficial. This is evidenced by statements such as “I can do it, but it does not mean a lot to me and I don’t feel it has done anything to me...”. This may imply that rituals, contingent upon their design and implementation, etc. are not universally applicable, or that certain rituals are effective for specific individuals, indicating that a “one size fits all” approach is not applicable to their design. However, within the limitations of this study’s design, it is not possible to generate data suggesting the impact of specific rituals on different individuals.

In the Ritual group, only one out of five study groups succeeded in continuously practicing a group ritual. This group points out that having one person take the role as “Master of the ritual”, which included reminding the group to perform the ritual and do it properly, was of great importance to their success with the ritual. Another key factor to their success seemed to be that they experienced an immediate positive effect of a simple ritual in terms of joy, energy and presence with each other. Their ritual was designed in the form of giving *high fives* to each other while looking each other in the eye. Recent research documents that a simple ritualistic act, such as a handshake, can signal cooperative intent and promote deal-making (Schroeder et al, 2019), and that having eye contact when performing a ritual promotes bonding (Kim et al, 2021).

Compiling 645 rituals from 74 different cultures, Atkinson and Whitehouse (2011) suggest two basic clusters of rituals, one being a low-arousal high-frequency cluster and the other being a high-arousal low-frequency cluster. The interview data in this study indicate that the collective morning ritual seems to be a “low arousal” ritual, whereas the study group ritual (consisting of giving high fives and looking each other in the eye) is a more “high arousal” ritual. To summarize:

1. Check-in ritual (low arousal): Peace of mind/body, focus, readiness

2. High five with eye contact (high arousal): Joy, energy, focus

The other study groups, which did not succeed in practicing their self-made study group rituals consistently, mentioned the feeling of awkwardness, no felt effect, no sense of purpose, and that they simply forgot to perform their group ritual, as causes of their failure to succeed in performing their rituals consistently.

5.3 New Versus Existing Rituals

In the data, some of the leaders state that they felt the ritual becoming a habit and something they looked forward to as a safe part of the structure of the course with an expected effect, as well as something that they could feel was missing when not performed. These findings point to relevant differences between rituals that are new and purposely designed, as is the case in this study, compared to rituals that already exist or arise spontaneously. Existing rituals seem to be meaningful simply due to their nature as an already existing practice, having “earned their place” over time; whereas rituals that are designed and implemented as new ways of working may lack this meaningfulness, as well as lacking the participants’ immediate experience of purpose and outcome. One leader states: “...rituals must not be imposed...”. This may be true in some cases, but no evidence was found in the data that this is true in all cases. The registered effects of both the imposed morning ritual and the self-imposed “High-five-ritual” within one study group reveal the potential of rituals and ritual-like activities as well as a deficiency in knowledge on how leaders and organizations may ethically develop and support the use of rituals and ritual-like activities in the workplace.

6. Conclusions

In the search for a deeper understanding of rituals in the workplace, this study has been guided by the research question: “What are the potential functions of rituals and ritual-like activities in the workplace?”. The results gathered in this study indicate that simple group rituals may result in a low arousal reaction or a high arousal reaction depending on the design and performance of the ritual. A collective morning ritual resulted in a feeling of being present and ready, with an inner peace and a sense of togetherness, whereas one of the study group rituals seemingly resulted in higher arousal including a feeling of joy and energy.

In the beginning, a feeling of awkwardness and even foolishness among the leaders was common, but these feelings diminished or even disappeared as the ritual became more familiar to the participants. It was found in this study that rituals experienced as natural may have an advantage over rituals experienced as artificial, as it seems that there may be a connection between the naturalness and the experienced purpose of the ritual. Furthermore, it was found that the role of one participant in the group as “Master of the ritual” may be relevant to ensure that the ritual is carried out

as intended, as structure and rigidity are core elements of a ritual.

These findings highlight the relationship between the design, performance and intent of a ritual, underscoring the significance of ethical considerations in the application of rituals within a workplace context. Evidently, distinct rituals appear to result in varied outcomes, not all of which may be desirable.

This study also indicates that many of the effects of a ritual as found here are more or less the same as may be obtained by ritual-like activities. This makes it relevant in future research to explore the potential of both rituals and ritual-like activities in an organizational context.

Only one out of five study groups succeeded in continuously practicing their self-made group ritual over the course of the four-month experiment. This group pointed out that having one person who took the role as “Master of the ritual” was of great importance to their success with the ritual. Another critical factor to their achievement seemed to be that they experienced an immediate positive impact of their simple ritual in terms of joy, energy and heightened mutual presence, thus imbuing the ritual with meaningfulness. This specific ritual was designed in the form of giving *high fives* to each other while giving eye contact.

In summary, the study’s principal research findings are that group rituals can be designed and implemented with positive outcomes such as fostering togetherness and presence as well as eliciting feelings of joy and energy. These positive outcomes are contingent upon the guidance of a designated “Master of the ritual” and on the rituals not being experienced as too awkward and meaningless in the beginning.

7. Implications for Theory and Practice and Further Research

Most existing research seems to rely on experimental designs in which rituals or ritual-like activities are carried out only once in controlled settings. The present study contributes by providing longitudinal data through an experiment involving two groups of leaders engaging in rituals and ritual-like activities over a period of four months.

The study demonstrates that group rituals can be designed and implemented with positive outcomes such as fostering core elements of psychological safety and eliciting feelings of joy and energy. The potential of incorporating group rituals, not only in leadership courses but in workplaces as a whole, has been illustrated. Furthermore, the results suggest that ritual-like activities may result in more or less the same effects as fully ritualized activities.

7.1 Contributions to Theory

The theoretical implications of this study are expected to contribute to both organizational and leadership theory. In the context of organizational theory (Hatch, 1997), knowledge about rituals is primarily relevant for deepening

understanding of various aspects of organizational culture such as social structures, power dynamics, unified workplace culture, shared identity, sense of purpose, belonging, and overall workplace well-being. Additionally, this knowledge may provide insights into the internal dynamics of organizational decision-making, as well as processes related to organizational change and learning. As Trice and Beyer (1984) suggest, rites of passage, rites of enhancement and degradation, rites of renewal, rites of conflict reduction, and rites of integration may enrich the studies of organizational culture.

Regarding leadership theory (Yukl, 2002), the findings of this study could offer new perspectives on transformational leadership, leadership in teams, and the development of concepts of ethical leadership. Finally, insights from this study may also lead to a further understanding of the nature of virtuous leadership as described in ancient Chinese philosophy (Low, 2012) and Greek philosophy (Aristoteles, 2000), as well as in contemporary leadership (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011).

The results of this study also indicate that rituals may positively influence key elements of psychological safety, such as team members feeling secure, supported, and ready to engage fully, as described and investigated by Edmondson and Bransby (2023). Psychological safety may, in this context, be understood as both a cultural and leadership phenomenon.

7.2 Contributions to Practice

Practically, the findings from this study can serve as a source of inspiration for leaders, project managers, meeting facilitators, etc. The results highlight the diverse functions and positive outcomes of even simple rituals, as well as critical challenges that must be addressed when designing and implementing new rituals in workplace contexts. The findings suggest that ritual-like activities in the workplace can produce effects similar to traditionally-structured rituals, offering valuable insights for both practice and research. Incorporating ritual-like activities in organizational settings may provide a practical and adaptable approach to enhancing workplace culture. Unlike fully ritualized practices, which may emphasize symbolic or non-functional elements that conflict with the goal-oriented and professional nature of many organizations, ritual-like activities seem easier to implement and adjust across diverse organizational contexts. This flexibility may increase their likelihood of acceptance and sustained engagement from employees as compared to rituals.

Furthermore, ritual-like activities have the potential to cultivate a sense of belonging, shared identity, and purpose without the discomfort or “awkwardness” often associated with more formalized rituals. Their adaptability makes them an accessible tool for leaders aiming to build cohesive teams and improve employee well-being with minimal organizational disruption. Organizations may there-

fore strategically incorporate ritual-like activities into key processes such as onboarding, team-building exercises, and regular check-ins to establish and maintain a positive, unified workplace culture.

The findings of this study indicate that the benefits of introducing new rituals in the workplace may be most effectively realized by starting with ritual-like activities, e.g., in work group meetings. To mitigate potential negative emotions, such as awkwardness, a strategic approach could involve prototyping these activities, gathering feedback from participants, and iteratively refining them until desired outcomes and participant acceptance are achieved.

Additionally, the findings suggest that designating a “master” of the ritual-like activity may enhance their effectiveness. This individual would be responsible for facilitating and ensuring the proper execution of these practices. In larger organizations, it might be beneficial to provide training for these “masters” and create opportunities for networking and knowledge-sharing among them to ensure consistency and scalability.

7.3 Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. The data generated originates from a sample of two groups, each consisting of 23 participants, who attended a leadership course conducted outside their usual workplace environments. This limits the external validity of the findings, as the results cannot readily be generalized to the day-to-day life in organizations.

In the following, three key areas of consideration are addressed.

- Potential sampling biases may affect the generalizability of the study’s findings: The sample, consisting of two groups of experienced leaders, introduces limitations to the generalizability of the findings. Leaders participating in a training course may exhibit greater curiosity and motivation to experiment and develop their leadership skills compared to individuals in everyday workplace environments. Furthermore, these leaders were placed in the role of “students”, guided by a teacher in an authoritative capacity—a dynamic that diverges from typical workplace hierarchies and interactions.

Additionally, the training course was conducted within a temporary, supportive, reflective, and learning-oriented environment, markedly different from the often goal-driven and hierarchical nature of everyday organizational settings. These contextual differences may influence the applicability of the findings to real-world leadership practices, where goal orientation, established power structures, and broader organizational culture play critical roles in shaping the adoption and potential functions of rituals.

- Implications of comparing a Ritual group with a Ritual-like group rather than a Non-ritual group: Due to the original structure of the leadership course, a Ritual group was compared with a Ritual-like group rather than with a

Non-ritual group. While this design choice may weaken some comparative claims, it also provided new insights into ritual-like activities.

- Limitations to the qualitative approach used in this study: Another limitation of this study is its qualitative approach, which utilized open coding and therefore relied on the researcher's interpretation and categorization of the data. The findings might have been strengthened through further triangulation and the use of additional data sources such as observations and/or objective metrics; these could be considered in future studies. The analysis in this study is explorative and inductive, but using classical ritual-related theories including concepts such as power structures, control, identity, etc. in the analysis may be relevant in future studies to deepen our knowledge of the function of rituals in the workplace.

Despite these limitations, the results from this study provide a foundation for further practice-based research about the significance of rituals in organizations. Furthermore, the potential for focusing on group rituals not only in leadership courses but in workplaces more broadly has been indicated. Therefore, more empirical research is needed to better understand both the benefits and the risks associated with the implementation of rituals in the workplace.

7.4 Future research

The findings regarding ritual-like activities may also open for future research into the nuanced differences and overlaps between rituals and ritual-like activities in workplace settings. Exploring these distinctions further could provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that drive the positive outcomes associated with both practices, such as increased group cohesion and emotional engagement. By examining the contextual and cultural factors that influence the effectiveness of ritual versus ritual-like activities, future research could contribute to a more refined framework for organizational behavior and workplace dynamics. Since ritual-like activities are less formal and easier to integrate, they could serve as a focal point for studying organizations that may not traditionally employ ritual practices.

Future research may also intersect with studies in organizational psychology, sociology, and anthropology, providing insights into the ways informal, repeated actions contribute to social structures, power dynamics, and identity formation within workplaces.

Furthermore, future research could examine how rituals function in on-line settings, particular in virtual teams and digital workplaces. Comparing on-line and in-person rituals could offer valuable insights into their effectiveness and emotional impact.

Based on this study, it seems relevant to conduct additional experiments in real-life workplaces, with rituals and ritual-like activities in everyday situations such as work meetings, onboarding, celebrations, town hall meetings,

breaks, etc. Both prototyping during the design phase and evaluating and adjusting rituals during implementation in the workplace may also be relevant areas for further research.

Additionally, future observational studies exploring existing rituals and ritual-like activities may also be relevant to further exploring the potential and significance of rituals for workplaces as something distinct from everyday habits and routines.

Availability of Data and Materials

All data reported in this paper will be shared by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

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