Am i doing the right thing? Unpacking workplace rituals as mechanisms for strong organizational culture

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ABSTRACT

Workplace rituals are powerful learning mechanisms for core values that underpin organizational culture in restaurants. Yet, more research is needed to identify different types and how these rituals operate to reinforce core values in different organizational cultures. Drawing on ritual theory, organizational culture and hospitality research, we use 52 semi-structured interviews and 20 observations to study four restaurants representing clan, ad hoc, market, and hierarchy cultures. We identify and unpack eight employee-focused emotional, behavioral, and cognitive workplace rituals linked with owners' core values such as comradery, creativity, competition and efficiency. Finally, we discuss practical implications of workplace rituals as they relate to business identity, selection, retention and day-to-day management of employees to further strengthen said culture.

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1. Introduction

When asked, professionals often struggle with defining organizational culture and revert to the answer as 'how things are done around here' and 'what we do when nobody is looking'. Experts on the subject typically define organizational culture as a complex system of shared values that guides actions of organizational members (O'Reilly et al., 1991). Values such as camaraderie, creativity, performance and efficiency operate as underpinnings of the organization's culture that creates an identity, and sets it apart from competitors (Coffey, 2010; Denison, 1984; Sorensen, 2002). While organizational culture has received more attention in the broader hospitality management domain, generally framed around the importance of strong values of quality customer service (Davidson, 2003; Dawson et al., 2011; Clark and Wood, 1998), less attention has been paid to organizational culture and the importance of workplace rituals in restaurants—defined as symbolic social actions of core values (Miller, 1985). This is surprising as the culture, typically established by the owner (Schein, 2004), is likely to enhance a competitive edge (Barney, 1986) with supporting workplace rituals that guides employee actions to deliver

superior customer experience, generate loyal patrons, and market share.

For a value-driven restaurant to succeed, commitment and consistency to core values are important, however this is problematic given the nature of the industry marked by high stress, long hours, low skill, low employee commitment, low pay, high turnover, and high first-year failure rates (Madera et al., 2013; Parsa et al., 2005; Sparrowe, 1994). Hence, institutional learning mechanisms through which core values can be shared and reinforced seem critical to deploy (Durand et al., 2007; Rao et al., 2003) (for other conceptualizations on learning, see Erhardt et al., 2016). Our premise is that workplace rituals can serve as institutional learning mechanisms in different cultures with different core values stemming from the restaurant owner's values (Cameron and Quinn, 1999). Workplace rituals can reinforce a moral consensus of what is acceptable conduct through social action – by participating in rituals, individuals learn right from wrong and reinforce the understanding that 'I'm doing the right thing!' As such, workplace rituals in restaurants have the potential to shape and strengthen a particular culture (Woods, 1991; Stierand et al., 2014).

We draw on ritual theory (Smith and Stewart, 2011), organizational culture (Cameron and Quinn, 1999), hospitality research (e.g., Wood, 2010), and make several key contributions in this paper. First, we respond to the call for more research on workplace rituals in general (Islam and Zyphur, 2009) to examine valid rituals and refine existing types of rituals. Specifically, we offer quasi-

grounded theory of eight different rituals that we unpack within the context of four restaurants. Second, our data and analysis illustrate how different workplace rituals, geared towards employees, operate as institutional learning mechanisms to foster different organizational cultures linked with the owner's core values. Finally, we offer practical insights as to how rituals can help strengthen culture in the context of restaurants, which is essential in creating a business identity and in differentiating oneself from the competition.

The following sections leading up to our method section are organized by first discussing core values and the role of the owner in establishing these values. Next, we introduce Cameron and Quinn's (1999) cultural framework, which we used to make sense of our field data. We then ground our framing further by linking ritual types with core values, and the importance of symbolism to differentiate rituals from non-rituals in the workplace.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Owners and core values

Core values serve as an underlying foundation of a strong organizational culture (Ogbonna, 1993). Core values such as risk-taking and attention to detail, constitute collective knowledge (i.e., understanding) within an organization that is rooted in principles, code-of-conduct, beliefs or philosophy of how the organization operates. These core values are generally established by the owner (or the founder) of the restaurant. The owner's values reflect the personal vision, goals, beliefs and assumptions underlying his/her core values (Schein, 2004). These values are initially infused in the organization through careful selections based on similarities of thought, and imposed through hands-on management styles by the owner. Research on top restaurants have examined and found strong links between the organizational culture and the chef's (i.e., owner) vision and underlying values (Stierand et al., 2014).

The owner's ability to instill core values, resulting in stronger culture, is possible to the extent there is congruency between practicing values – what actually happens in organizations (i.e., action) and espoused core values (i.e., understanding) (Argyris and Schön, 1996). The stronger ties between employee action and their shared values the greater chance that culture will contribute to higher levels of performance (Saffold, 1988; Smart and John, 1996). This "strong culture" hypothesis has been argued to be perhaps the most important thing an owner can do to create and manage a successful business (Schein, 2004), which can translate into various positive organizational outcomes (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Sorensen, 2002). However, limited research has focused on how restaurants can foster strong cultures with a few exceptions. For example, Opazo's (2012) study of El Bulli restaurant highlights the relevance of the owner's discourse as a driver of a strong innovative culture in contemporary haute cuisine. Rao et al. (2003) illustrate the relationship between embracing the nouvelle cuisine movement and the development of strong core values and identity in French restaurants. Finally, Wood (2010) points toward certain management methods and practices related to the development of strong culture.

While owners play an essential role in developing and maintaining core values, values may also operate at an industry level, referred to as macro cultures (Abrahamson and Fombrun, 1994). For example, employees at hospitals presumably share core values of health and treatment and in banks core values would involve money and financial growth. Macro culture has also been noted in the hospitality and restaurant industries in certain market segments where employees' career path generally follows a series of stints within the same industry (Mulvaney et al., 2007; Woods, 1989). While macro cultures could facilitate strong culture within the business, the owner's core values and employees' core values may not necessarily square. For example, scholars have noted patterns of strong values of a "party culture" where professional and personal ties tend to blur after hours (O'Neill, 2012), which could trigger unwanted behaviors during work. Moreover, these employee-driven values (i.e., party) can exert influence on the owner, create friction and ultimately undermine service delivery and culture as a whole. Macro cultures may further complicate the owner's attempt to foster strong culture. However, little research has examined how restaurants instill and reinforce core values in order to incorporate staff, deliver a menu and customer service on a consistent basis, and foster strong culture that can create and maintain an identity that is distinct from its competition.

2.2. Four types of organizational cultures

Our premise in this paper is that different cultures exhibit different rituals for acquiring knowledge that translate into symbolic actions of core values. While organizational culture is complex and at times difficult to identify, we draw on Cameron and Quinn's (1999) taxonomy of organizational culture to ground our conceptual starting point and help guide our fieldwork. They identified four different cultures (i.e., clan, ad hoc, market, hierarchy) based on an internal/external focus and integration/differentiation, and flexibility/freedom to act, and stability and control that manifest themselves based on different sets of core values. Their framework is widely used in hospitality research (e.g. Koutroumanis et al., 2012) (for alternative value-based frameworks see Adler et al., 2008 and Cumberland and Herd, 2011). To summarize their framework, a clan culture is used, which is a family-based value system centered on friendship, loyalty, mentorship, equality and social support with little concern for external competition or hierarchy. An adhocracy culture values creativity, innovation, and employee empowerment through informal routines, with the intention of competing with the external market. Furthermore, a market culture rests on values of market competition and customer needs. Finally, a hierarchy culture, whose value system operates on high division of labor, formal protocols and chain of command, is generally internally focused with little concern for market competition.

There is inconsistent evidence as to which culture in restaurants is more effective in terms of impacting bottom line results (e.g., Cumberland and Herd, 2011; Kyriakidou and Gore 2005). Kyriakidou and Gore (2005), in their benchmarking study, suggested that characteristics of ad hoc cultures (framed as empowerment, cooperative setting of missions and strategies, and development of teamwork) show links with best-performing small- to medium-sized operations. Others suggest that a market culture, which is heavily result-focused, based on efficiency and scale, can drive sales (Øgaard et al., 2005). Moreover, although the restaurant industry is generally painted with a broad brush as a customer service oriented culture (following a macro culture argument) (Davidson, 2003), some evidence suggests that social interaction and belonging among employees (i.e., an inwardly focused culture) might be more valued, especially in independently owned restaurants (O'Neill, 2012).

2.3. Linking workplace rituals and values

Stemming from anthropological roots, rituals have been used by sociologists for decades to study and explain social order (Bell and Aslan, 1997). Durkheim (1961), triggering the functionalist school of thought (with followers such as Talcott Parson, Robert Merton), viewed rituals as a lens to understand how social order is regulated, stabilized and perpetuated. Rituals can operate to govern the inner workings of a social unit (Turner, 1967), which extends to the