



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

You can subscribe through iTunes, Google Play, Stitcher or Spotify.

Erica Keswin on the Power of Rituals | May 1, 2022 | OAS Episode 157

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I am your host, Ed Smith.

EK: *What I love about rituals is that they are highly accessible, and they literally don’t have to cost a dime.*

Ed: That was Erica Keswin, a workplace strategist who has worked for the past 20 years with some of the most iconic brands in the world as a consultant, speaker, writer, podcast host and professional dot-connector. She is my guest on the podcast. This is a special edition of “Our American States” to recognize Legislative Staff Week, an annual event to acknowledge the enormous contributions that thousands of legislative staffers make everyday in state houses across the nation. Keswin is the author of two books “Bring Your Human to Work” and “Rituals Roadmap: The Human Way to Transform Everyday Routines into Workplace Magic.” Keswin discussed workplace rituals and how they can transform any organization. She talks the about how she came to understand the role of rituals in the workplace, her definition of a ritual and how to recognize the rituals that already exist in your workplace. She also talks about the power of gratitude in saying thank you. Here is our discussion:

Erica, welcome to the podcast.

EK: Thank you so much for having me.

Ed: Well, Erica, this is legislative staff week at NCSL and we are so glad to have you here to talk to our audience of legislative staffers. And I wonder if you could start by explaining your interest in rituals and why you find them so significant?

(TM): 01:48

EK: So, I wrote my first book in 2018 which was called “Bring Your Human to Work” and it was all about designing a better workplace not only for people, but also for business and looking at it

from both perspectives. But I didn't set out to write another book right away, but one night I was out to dinner with a colleague of mine, and we happened to go to the same restaurant once a month for dinner and pretty much order the same thing and have a nice glass of red wine. I had this epiphany where when I was thinking about "Bring Your Human to Work" and all of the leaders that I had interviewed for profit, not for profit – all these different companies. What did they have in common and how did they create a more human workplace? They were all talking about different kinds of rituals in their organizations, and they didn't call it that. But I was able to really kind of look across the companies and connect the dots and I'm like wow. You know this ritual – this seems to be a thing and at that point I decided to do a deep dive into the science of rituals, and I thought it was ironic that the night that I had this epiphany I was at this ritual dinner with this colleague that we do once a month at the same place. So, all signs were pointing to doing some investigating about the impact of rituals on our lives personally and at work.

Ed: Well, I want to ask you a little bit more about your definition of rituals, but before that, I have a question about this formula you have in your book "Rituals Roadmap" that I thought was kind of intriguing. It says psychological safety plus purpose equals performance. Can you explain to me what that is?

EK: So, when I started looking into the science of rituals, you know I wanted to get an understanding of their impact on us. Again, as people and in our businesses as well. And as somebody who is in the human capital space studying what many feel is the soft stuff, my goal in my work is always to look at the business implications and that ROI because I really believe that the soft stuff is really the hard stuff and some of the important stuff. So, I am determined to share that with the world. So, what better way than to come up with a math formula to highlight the impact. The formula as you referenced, I call it the three P's that rituals give us. A sense of psychological safety. A connection to purpose. And when you add those two together, you get increased performance. So, what does that mean? There are a couple of studies that I can highlight. The first is when we are, you know, connected to others. Again, think about this in your personal life when you are out with friends or sitting with your family or having this amazing offsite with your colleagues at work. Your oxytocin, which is your feel-good hormone, goes up and your cortisol, which is your level of stress, goes down. So, when you feel more connected, there is a physiological response in your body.

From a business perspective, there are so many studies, but one that I loved highlights that when you feel that sense of connection, that sense of trust at work when you can be you, right. When you don't have to be someone else, collaboration goes up by as much as 47% and productivity goes up by 50%. And so the numbers are real and that is why I wanted to highlight why are we even talking about rituals at work which many might feel like is a bit of an oxymoron.

(TM): 05:18

Ed: Well, let's touch on that then. I think a lot of us think about rituals like a wedding or a baptism, a religious ceremony, that kind of thing. You obviously have a much more expansive notion of that. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that and how you would define a ritual?

EK: So, a ritual, my definition of a ritual has three component parts. The first is a ritual is something to which we assign a certain amount of meaning and intention. The second part of the definition is that a ritual typically has some type of regular cadence. It could be something that you know

we do every day. It could be something that we do once a week. It could be something that we do once a year. You know a friend reached out yesterday about something I had written, and she said you know I love this definition of rituals. I want to share something. She goes my ritual, one of my rituals with my family for 20 years is to watch the movie “Love Actually” on Thanksgiving, which kicks off the Christmas season. So, it can really be anything. The third part of the definition though is something that I had not considered before studying the research on rituals. And that is a ritual is something that typically goes beyond its practical purpose. So, what do I mean by that? You know I am sitting here right now. I live in New York City. I’m sitting in my home office and let’s say I light a candle because the lights go out and I can’t see anything. That’s not a ritual. But if I light a candle every Friday at 6:00 to signify the end of the workweek and the beginning of the weekend, there is no practical purpose, right. I’m not lighting that candle because I can’t see what I’m doing. I’m lighting it because there is meaning and intention for me and I’m doing it at this regular time of day. That is how I describe, you know, what a ritual is and how we can begin to think about them again both in our personal lives and at work.

Ed: So, it is something that might be relatively banal in one context becomes something that has significance because of the way that you describe it and how it gains those ritual aspects. Very interesting. One of the things you do in your book is describe how some big companies, Starbucks for example, has gone after creating these rituals. How do we do that in a nonprofit where we maybe don’t have so many resources and I’m talking of course specifically about legislative staff here. How might they approach putting together effective rituals?

EK: When I was doing the research for the book, I came up with this question. I know really think it’s a pretty magical question because even when I explained the definition of the ritual and talked about the three P’s and I would say to people again for profit, not for profit, anybody who is willing to listen. I would say so what are your rituals and sometimes they still wouldn’t know. It took me awhile, but I finally came up with this question that every time I asked it, I swear I think its like 10 times out of 10 the person would then so oh. It’s like they had this epiphany right in front of me. That’s our ritual. So, the question is when do you feel most and you fill in the blankish? You know so when do you employees listening to this podcast feel most NCSLish? You know when do people at the law firm feel most law firmish? When do people at Chipotle feel most Chipotleish? So, you know the question really cut across whether it was a for profit or not for profit. And what’s interesting about that question is you are asking people to think about when do we feel most connected? You know it could be during legislative staff week right. Maybe there are certain rituals that have always gone on that we haven’t thought about as rituals. You know maybe it’s something we do on the first day back after a holiday break. So, I would urge everybody listening to think about the answer to this question and that’s a place to start. Maybe there are rituals that we already have or maybe we can begin to think about designing rituals.

Now from a cost perspective, what I love about rituals is that they are highly accessible, and they literally don’t have to cost a dime. So, you know, there are some in the book for example at Eileen Fisher, which is a, you know, the clothing store. One of their rituals when I asked them that question “what makes them feel most connected” is that they ring a chime before all of their meetings, and it causes them to stop and take a few deep breaths and connect with each other. Other examples, many leaders have shared during this last couple of years of the pandemic, which we are still in as we know, there is an increased importance in checking in with each other. And in the beginning of the pandemic, people were spending hour-long meetings checking in and

now you know we also need to get work done. A couple of leaders have shared a ritual that again costs nothing, doesn't take a long time, where they go around the room or the Zoom or the teams or whatever it is that you use, and they all share one word that describes how they are showing up today. Or you know, another version of that is to say you know red light, green light, yellow light. Like how are you feeling in this moment? What that does is it gives people an opportunity to connect with each other. It's inclusive. Everybody shares what is going on. But as a leader, there's this other benefit, which is like wow, if somebody says red light, it gives you as a leader an opportunity to call that person later and say alright. You know what? Like what is going on? Which not only helps us connect as people, but if I really have a red-light moment going on in my house and my kids are home or somebody has Covid or who knows what, you know it gives us an opportunity to maybe get somebody else on the team to step in and help which is why these rituals are not only good for people but also good for business.

(TM): 11:25

Ed: I think it's interesting what you are saying is that a lot of these rituals they already exist in your organizations it's an issue of being able to see them there and then use them. So let me ask you legislative session can be remarkably hectic, frantic for months at a time. How does a manager kind of get everybody to say this is an important thing to do even though you feel overwhelmed, let's take the time to do this ritual?

EK: When something is a ritual, ideally, it's more of something. Again, when you ask that question, right, when do we feel most NCSLish, ideally, it's more of a pull than a push forcing someone to do it. So, you know what I would say is when you start with this moment of when we feel connected, nine times out of 10, people will not feel like it's a chore. If you have a few of these outliers, I mean rituals can come from anywhere. They can come from the top down, the bottom up, the inside out, so I would almost turn it on your staff and say, well OK, do you have ideas? You know when do you feel most connected? And the last thing that I do is I lead with the science. If I really have somebody that is pushing back, you know I say to them look. You know we are in the middle of this Great Resignation. There is turnover. You know here is some science around why you know people when they feel connected are less likely to leave or more likely to be more productive and all of that. And I find sometimes when you have these outliers, the naysayers, leading with science and some of the data around it can be really effective. And I guess one more option is if somebody is listening to this and says okay you know we are going to try a ritual. We are going to ring a chime before every meeting. That sounds interesting. You know try to keep your ego out of it because what works for one organization may not work for another. And sometimes you need to say you know this doesn't work for us. Let's try something else and try to find something that is more sticky.

Ed: Thanks Erica. We are going to take a quick break and come back with the rest of our discussion.

(TM): 13:52 Music/Advertisement

Ed: I'm back with Erica Keswin. Erica, we all know that on most teams there is a curmudgeon or two. I think I may have even been that curmudgeon on occasion. How do you get that person to join in?

EK: I mean if you see that you are doing something and you are getting really positive feedback from other people on the team, you know share those stories. Share that impact. I mean let's say you do something like the example I gave everybody goes around and shares a word or red light, green light or something like that and it seems so soft and fuzzy. You know that actually happened with a company recently where someone, you know, shared, you know, red light and the manager called afterwards and you know the person's significant other was having like kidney surgery, which they might not have known if they weren't going around and asking people to share something. And so, to me it's sharing the data and sharing the stories either on your own team or perhaps you know in other organizations saying you know what sometimes the soft stuff is the hard stuff. And at the end of the day if there is someone that is just so stubborn, you just. There's really nothing you can do. And you just have to say you know we are going to move on with this and we urge you to participate because we've gotten such great feedback from anybody else on the team. But sometimes it's almost worse to kind of force feed around a peg in a square hole because it brings everybody down and you either do it without the person or you just sort of move on and let the person sit there and watch and hope at some point you know they participate.

Ed: You mentioned the Great Resignation and that's something that has affected legislatures as well as private businesses. How can organizations use rituals to try to retain people? To try to maybe prevent some of the strain that we are seeing.

EK: There are some organizations that have rituals, and they are really doubling down and leaning into this ritual of what they call you know the Stay Interview. That you know it's almost this recommitment. You have what I call best athletes, like you have some high performers that you really don't want to lose. Make sure that you are having ongoing conversations that you know you are celebrating people that are deciding to stay. Increase the time between when you are having these kinds of conversations. Like making sure that people are happy. What are some small things that you can do to make sure they are happy? You know another ritual somebody shared recently is that they rotate. Somebody can be almost like the CEO for the day or, you know, executive director for the day and get a sense of what changes he or she would make and sometimes these very small changes can go a long way.

The last thing that I will say may sound and be a little controversial that many of us are putting so much time, energy, resources in retaining, retaining at all costs. Like when I think of retention, I almost think about you know someone sitting on somebody saying you cannot leave and holding them down at all costs. At this point, all the money in the world you may not be able to get someone to stay. And again, in a not-for-profit government situation, you don't have the luxury of those resources anyway. You know I almost feel like there is this freedom of saying we're going to do what we can do. Thinking about how we can help people develop on the job, professional development. Maybe having rituals around that can be helpful. But it almost makes some of these softer things that don't cost more of an opportunity to test them out because money is not what is making many people stay right now anyway.

Ed: My understanding has always been that the number one reason people leave their job is because of their manager if money is not a huge issue, if it's reasonable

EK: Well exactly. Money and purpose and that is a benefit that when you are working in a not for profit you know and learning more about this organization and what you do you know, it is really impactful in what this organization does does have such a strong purpose in the world that really

doubling down on articulating that purpose at a time like this you know as a bipartisan organization. Entering a time when the world is so stressful and bifurcated that could be an interesting way to highlight the purpose of what you do and thinking about rituals through that lens.

Ed: Well, I think that the legislative staff who I hope are listening to this one of the things that they have more than anything else I think I think is a tremendous sense of purpose. A tremendous sense that what they are doing is worthwhile so that's a big advantage I think for legislatures.

EK: Right. And sometimes people forget that. We all have bad days, but I also think using you know storytelling as a vehicle and again thinking about it as a ritual where once a week, once a month, whatever it is, collecting those stories about how, what you are doing does make a difference and really reminding people of that. And if you can make that a ritual where people look forward to it and anticipate it. And how do you know if something is a ritual? You really miss it when it goes away. That's a real opportunity for an organization like this.

Ed: Well, let me ask you. I don't want to let you go without asking what you think of as your favorite rituals?

EK: So, for me, you know nobody can see us right now, but you can see me. So, I'm holding up my Starbucks coffee, which is a ritual of mine. And one of the ways I think about rituals also is it's about intentionality as I said when you asked me the question of what's the definition. It's almost like back of brain, front of brain that something is not unconscious to conscious. So, a story that I will share. You know I've always been. I'm not a huge all day coffee drinker, but I really look forward to that first sip, that first cup of coffee in the morning. Probably seven or eight years ago, I went into Starbucks, and I would go in. I would get my same order that I always order, and I would sit down with my notebook and start cranking out my to do lists and feeling like a million bucks by 8 a.m. in the morning. All of a sudden, I was like oh my gosh my coffee is gone. Like and I hadn't even tasted it. And I remember being so disappointed because I really enjoy it and you know Starbucks is not cheap. And I was like oh my gosh, my coffee is gone. And I you know maybe had done six things on my to do list, but hadn't tasted the coffee and in that moment, I realized wow there is not this purpose. My purpose of my morning coffee is not about cranking through my to do list. It's about having this moment of just connecting with myself. And so that day seven years ago what was more of a habit was really transformed into something that was a ritual. And now I go in. I pick up the cup and I wait, and I feel the heat on my hands. I take a few deep breaths and just have a moment to connect with myself, with the world. That is my ritual that ahm its very conscious and very intentional.

Ed: Well, that's a great story. I think one that pretty much all of us can connect to and sort of put ourselves in that place.

The focus of this year's legislative staff week at NCSL is the power of recognition and gratitude and we all know that workplace recognition makes employees feel better and makes them feel seen. But there's other benefits for both the giver and the receiver. So, I'm wondering as we wrap up here, what are some simple, effective gratitude or recognition rituals that you think the people in our audience might be able to use in their workplace?

(TM): 22:07

EK: Well, I love that actually. In “Bring Your Human to Work,” there is a whole chapter in the book called “Say Thanks.” And so, as you refer to the science, the science is very strong both for the giver and for the receiver and so you know no surprise like let’s make saying thank you a ritual. And actually, a woman shared with me a couple of weeks ago that they started a new ritual where at the end of the week before they all go off for the weekend, she thanks someone on the team out loud and she said the impact that it has had is truly unbelievable. And again, doesn’t cost a dime. You just have to decide to make it intentional. You know other organizations might have a slack channel or if there is any type of intranet way that you bring the team together to say thank you. And so, to me where there is a will there is a way. I would say to bring that in. Like think about the cadence where your team gets together. And again, whether that’s once a week, once a month, whatever that is. If you are listening to this today and can’t figure out what your rituals are, this is where I would start because it just takes intention and the impact that you will see on yourselves and on your organization is exponential.

Ed: Well Erica. Thank you so much. This is some real useful practical information I think people will be able to put to use in their workplace very soon. Thanks so much and take care.

EK: Thank you for the conversation.

(TM): 23:41

Ed: And that concludes this episode of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate NCSL podcasts on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Pocket Casts, Stitcher or Spotify. We also encourage you to check out our other podcasts: “Legislatures: The Inside Story” and the special series “*Building Democracy*.” Thanks for listening.