

Adapting Awayday Rituals to Deliver in Difficult Times

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Abstract

Developers can stand out by making sure the impact of their workshops is not temporary or superficial but lasting and change can be made to stick. A real workshop with leaders in a media organisation shows the reader how five key concepts from anthropology can be applied to deliver transformation so that the 'after' is different than the 'before'.



Keywords

Ritual, anthropology, workshop, adaptation, embodied knowledge, change, learning, story

Introduction

If only the fittest companies will survive a recession, won't this also be true of developers? For example, many of us run awaydays and workshops, bringing people into a meeting room, spending hours talking, writing on flipcharts and making action lists. Then we go away again and what happens? Hopefully we get paid, but what for? What does the client get for their money? And how long does the benefit last? The developers who know how to create lasting bottom-line benefit will stand out from the crowd.

In this piece we set out how to make workshops produce change that sticks. We will focus on a single workshop, set against our decades-long experience with clients from diverse organisations (we can easily count 100 organisations), worldwide (at least 30 different countries).

So let us introduce ourselves. Tony is a developer: he coaches executives, runs programmes for leaders, trains people to navigate change, and he facilitates workshops. During his holiday last summer, an email invited him to run a workshop with senior leaders in a media organisation. A couple of phone calls later he was excited and said yes.

Tony then approached Chiara to co-facilitate with him. Chiara, a colleague with media experience, works mainly with marketing directors and advertising agencies as they shape their products and services for consumers. Her approach to facilitation is similar to Tony's but interestingly informed by her background in anthropology.

We gained the impression that in spite of several poor years this media organisation had tolerated commercial losses. However recent cost-cutting had been deeply painful and the senior leaders needed to recover their energy and wanted tools to help their people adapt to change.

We will describe what happened at the workshop, using this as an example to illustrate what anthropology offers to developers who need to make change stick.

David's Bowie's track "Golden Years" played loudly as 45 participants entered a large empty room with its blank white walls, and chairs scattered in clusters of threes and fours. The boss reviewed the business and landed the following message:

- *our environment is uncertain and is set to continue changing fast*
- *we will be innovating and realistically some things we try will fail*
- *the uncertainty will be difficult and we need our people to be confident, open-minded, flexible and quick to respond*
- *if you can become a leadership team, open with each other, and more confident with change, this will help. Today gives you that opportunity.*

Someone asked "but what if we do fail? " and you could sense the fear. The boss responded: "for more than 100 years, we have succeeded not because we are big, but because we are creative and we love our brands. This is what will enable us to continue and pass this company on to the next generation".

As the facilitators began to work we experienced the love these people felt for their company: the company was part of them and they were part of it. An intimacy developed amongst them as they began to discuss recent events. They were relieved their colleagues felt the same way: about the recent downsizing (betrayed, sad, guilty etc), about the strategy (unconvinced), about sharing their more positive feelings (reluctant to be disloyal to departed colleagues).

They enjoyed calling to mind their distinctive strengths (passion, adaptability, delivery, belief in people etc) and agreed what they needed to leave behind (divisions between silos, slow response, cumbersome processes etc), and what to hold onto (our unique identity and values, our social purpose, pride, openness, inclusivity etc).

After lunch participants were invited to 'rant' in small groups and many found this letting go of frustrations hugely cathartic, re-opening their awareness of things they can do (more sharing, asking views of new staff, integration between departments, define success, not repeat mistakes, celebrate success, social gatherings, just do it not ask permission, etc).

As they contemplated their "probable future without change", a silence fell over the room until they named a horrifying downward spiral of doom (we will be further downsized and smaller, less innovative, more reactive, alcohol is the answer, I won't even be here□).

Imagining different futures they wished to bring about restored their energy. They were delighted by striking similarities amongst the chosen futures from seven small groups (to be more open, engaging, a force for good, united across departments, winning awards, making money by addressing the needs of our global audience□).

We played Blur singing "It really really really could happen" while they put together a shared story of their company before, during and after the workshop. The story was 'performed' then we sat down to talk about next steps. Instead of wanting to communicate the story to their staff, the leaders were saying no, the important thing is the experience of today. Can we bring them together in mixed groups and give them what we just had?

45 leaders left the room on a high, ready to take their business forward in today's very challenging environment. The following month we trained eight facilitators who ran this workshop four more times giving a further 150 people the experience. The client is pleased but concerned about how, with more change coming, they can sustain the momentum.

While an anthropologist will go and live with a new tribe for months or years, so as developers we also immerse ourselves with clients in workshops, only much more briefly. Anthropologists use a method called "participant observation": they observe as outsiders while they also join in and participate as insiders, at the edge, neither fully inside nor outside. From our privileged and temporary position on the edge we observed participants in the media 'tribe'.

While we acknowledge that a modern business organisation is not the same as the primitive tribes usually studied by anthropologists, we will illustrate the power that a few anthropological terms and concepts can bring to the developer. We define these terms and, using our workshop as an example, demonstrate how you can use them to give your workshops a greater and more sustained impact.

1. Ritual

Definition: prescribed formal behaviour □ a sequence of activities involving gestures, words and objects performed in a sequestered (separate) place and designed to influence preternatural (exceptional) □ forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests (Turner in Deflem, 1991:5)

In other words, rituals are ways of calling up the gods when the going gets tough! Think of a war dance, or the rain dance when people gather to protect a crop from drought. There are plenty of examples of ritual-like gatherings in modern life (Glastonbury, teenage proms, stag and hen nights, flash mobs, the death of Diana, Cancun climate conference).

In business we use rituals to mark achievements (company award ceremonies) and to make plans (big annual conferences) and Tony has described elsewhere how the rituals organisations employ to develop strategy do not always achieve the outcomes required (Goodwin and Page, 2011).

The workshop is itself a ritual that fits anthropologist Victor Turner's definition above. We 'workshop' when the everyday ways are no longer working and exceptional forces need to be summoned. We go to a "sequestered place" (conference centre, hotel or meeting room). There is a "prescribed" sequence: often you get a programme so you know what to do. You mingle and grumble a bit, sit down, open a laptop, put up the PowerPoint, then join in the rough and tumble to challenge colleagues and face the hard issues. Talking brings the blood up and through eye-ball to eye-ball exchanges the truth pops into the room under the watchful eye of a boss. Clearer now the boss says what should be done, or you set out a vision and next steps while a facilitator scribbles on flipcharts and papers the walls. We might end with a formal dinner or informal drinks in the bar.

Workshops often achieve valuable outcomes that would not be accomplished if the people remained at their desks. But because in our lifetimes we have witnessed the mushrooming of the workshop habit, we believe it is healthy to question what our workshops actually deliver, so that they can have greater purpose and efficacy. How can we deliver what we've written on the label?



Figure 1: A Formal Company Dinner 1907 (Source: R Met S)

So we ask, “What is the point of a workshop?” and make a clear distinction: between workshops that intend to produce actions in the world as we currently think of it, or workshops that intend to update and refresh our mindset. For example Nokia might bring executives to focus on mobile phones (old mindset) or to focus on a new and alarming convergence of mobile computing and entertainment devices like the Apple's iPhone (towards a new mindset). When our clients are struggling with cuts we can bet that adapting mindsets is going to be important to them.

2. The adaptation ground rule

Definition: all biological systems (organisms and their social or ecological organisations) are capable of adaptive change (Bateson quoted in Visser, 2003: 275).

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson, whose life included fieldwork in Bali, psychiatric research in Palo Alto and the study of dolphins in Hawaii, developed powerful concepts to understand behaviour, learning and change. He proposed that animals and species including people will adapt and change as long as they gain feedback arising from their own trial and error. How often do our workshops offer the chance for real experimentation and feedback, rather than just talking?

Bateson distinguished a simple level of learning (e.g. how to increase performance in a set situation) from higher levels of learning needed when the context is changing, i.e. to acquire insight and learn to learn. 'Learning to learn' can be conscious and unconscious. Where the developer challenges clients to stop and think consciously producing "meta-learning". The client can be helped to work through feedback, and discern patterns. Out of this they gain new insight, re-make their mental maps, re-shape their practices and increase their capacity to adapt.

Usually in any team or organisation adaptation needs to happen in two senses: individually (I need to do my job differently) and collectively (the sum of our responses as a team needs to be different). Our workshop with the media client is a clear example of meta-learning in both senses.

The unconscious form, "deutero-learning", is how behaviour between people in a team actually takes shape over time (Visser, 2007: 665). This takes a sinister turn when a leader gives a mixed message which blocks team members from contributing. For example:

- leader says "I want you to speak up and be open" with a spoken or implied "but don't you dare depart from the party line"
- leader says "we need to move on" combined with "don't you dare mention the thing that's troubling you and preventing you from moving on".

When people are under pressure, "double binds" like these are toxic because the receiver has no choice: their survival (e.g. their salary, job, reputation. etc) depends on continuing in relationship rather than withdrawing. The bind while troubling for both parties becomes un-discussable and self-perpetuating. Notice how your workshop participants can bind one another, holding a status quo in place and preventing adaptation.

One thing we can clearly say is that every workshop should have a before, during and after. We always intend the 'after' to be different and better than 'before', and in the special kind of workshops where mindsets need to adapt we are looking for a lasting transformation with a lessened risk of falling back. Yet at least 70% of the attempts to bring about change in organisations are said to have failed, so it follows that many people in organisations have experienced failure. This failure generates 'emotional baggage' that weighs you down and makes it even harder to adapt. Our challenge as developers is to move people out of past failures and double binds into different futures where they can more confidently adapt to today's volatile markets and less stable environments.

Therefore our workshops need to create "enabling environments" where participants gain insight into their "apparently intractable problems" (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003: 26), loosening what binds them to the status quo, lightening their baggage, gaining confidence to contribute and experiment, becoming open to feedback, more secure and growing in trust, in short, to make possible their adaptation.

3. A rite of passage

Definition: rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age marked by a threefold progression:

- 1. Separation - when a person becomes separated from their fixed point in the social structure*
 - 2. Liminal - when the state of the person is ambiguous, no longer in the old state and not yet in the new state and*
 - 3. Aggregation - when the person enters a new stable state with its own rights and obligations*
- (Van Gennep reported in Defflem, 1991: 7)*

In primitive society a rite of passage marks important life events such as pregnancy, birth, puberty, marriage and death. For example girls and boys in the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea undergo an initiation rite in which their village is invaded by terrifying intruders who chase them like pigs shouting “bite bite bite”, while their parents plead with the invaders not to kill their children. The children are then herded like prey onto a platform used for cutting up meat, then bound in a blinding cape and marched to an isolated hut where they are not allowed to eat normal food or to wash or speak or to look out. In the hut they undergo bravery ordeals and learn secrets. After a considerable time in seclusion they return to the village not as prey but as hunters themselves shouting “bite, bite, bite” (Bloch, 1992: 8-10).



Figure 2: Pig Costumes in New Guinea (Source: Datec, PNG)

While anthropologists record such rites in tribes, Maurice Bloch proposes that this simple pattern applies well beyond initiation and has a much greater significance in the lives and transformations of human beings.

Similar patterns in psychology describe bereavement, life transition, addiction and attitude change in phases with associated needs: a need to let go (of what is ending), a need to mark a transition, and a need to belong (to a new identity or group) (e.g. Kubler Ross. 1973; Bridges, 1980; Prochaska *et al*, 2001). What happens when these needs are not being met in work teams? People suffer confusion and poor performance, trapped in an old mindset they lose their spark, find it difficult to communicate and collaborate with colleagues and their teams fall apart.

The media workshop offered a rite of passage that 'separated' the tribe's 'parents': in a secluded place they let go of the past and coped together with the discomfort of being 'liminal'. In fact the newer arrivals were frustrated by long-servers banging on about: "I used to be in love with this place and would not work anywhere else but now I feel disappointed – it is becoming like any old company". Both new and older members suffered together in the liminal phase, betwixt and between, not sure who they were any more. Finally towards 'aggregation' they began to develop a new identity and approach, better suited to the new challenges of their changed landscape.

The anthropologist Victor Turner, inspired by Van Gennep's rites of passage, identified a feeling called "communitas" amongst the Ndembu people (Zambia). In the liminal phase: they became "a community of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions" (Deflem, 1991: 14). He said this sentiment of "humankindness" appears "when structure does not". He observed "communitas phases" in modern society as for example in the hippie movement of the late 1960s which grew out of spontaneous "happenings" (rock concerts, experiments with drugs), but in the end inevitably there is "a decline and fall into structure and law".

We had a palpable sense of "communitas" in our workshop with the media tribe: we were giving people permission to be liminal. Baggage was being left behind, old structures and mindsets were being dissolved, shared interests and values were being re-discovered, and a new sense of identity was being forged. When as a developer your workshop has failed to dissolve old structures to produce a sense of "communitas", ask yourself how deep is the learning? Do you need to shift mindsets? How enduring will be the change?

4. Embodied knowledge

"The word fire won't burn down a house" (Kurnanko adage, Michael Jackson, 1973: 341).

The anthropologist Michael Jackson among the Kuranko in Sierra Leone asked endless questions about what their dances and festivities 'meant' but failed to get satisfying answers. Only when he began to participate and move like the locals did he start to gain insights: what he then experienced was deeply personal while also feeling fully a part of the group. His body experience could not easily be put into words and he concluded that our efforts to conceptualise may be misjudged when the body plays such an important part: "embodied knowledge" means we only find the meaning when we join in the movement.

Some of our best conversations are had when we walk. Beyond a certain point, sitting down talking just takes people round in circles. When people undergoing change move physically we notice this empowers them when previously they felt powerless. Specifically we invited the workshop participants to move in a number of different ways:

- between sitting and standing
- between small and large groups
- between a part of the room representing the past and another representing the future
- to physically cross a line on the floor thus leaving the past behind
- to sit when they are ranting and to stand when they focus on what they can do
- during performances moving forward to show support, backward to show disagreement.

This kept everyone interested and engaged while tackling very challenging and difficult questions.



Figure 3: A Tribal Dance in Benin, West Africa (Source: Paul Williams)

5. Myth and the collective story

Definition: Myth as it exists in a savage community□ in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived□ . . . Myth expresses, enhances and codifies belief.

(Malinowski, 2002: 177)

How is story relevant or useful to the developer? Tony has written elsewhere about this (Harmon and Page, 2011), so we will be brief. If myth is a kind of tacit but unseen collective story, we have discovered that myth-making is a useful way of creating new identities and sustaining change. This activity supports the “aggregation” phase and reduces the risk of falling back into old identities and habits on return to the workplace.

In the final session of the workshop three sub-groups wrote a different part of the story: the ‘before’, the ‘during’ or the ‘after’ of the workshop. When each sub-group performed their story to colleagues it was a summary of the “reality lived” in the workshop and to follow. The sub-text spoke to the significance of the concepts we have described:

- Ritual: “today has been a purposeful ritual uniting us to face certain abnormal forces”.
- Adaptation: “we can adapt and change and we will be doing what’s needed”.
- Rites of passage: “we are dissolving old structures and joining together in *communitas*”.
- Embodied knowledge: “this is personal and collective: we can feel it in our bodies, in our hearts and our hands, not just in our heads”.

In this piece we have been rethinking our workshops towards bottom-line benefit. Our challenge is to enable our clients to adapt to their difficult times. Our central point is that workshops need to make our participants’ ‘after’ different than their ‘before’. This requires transformation. Rites of passage achieve transformation: men and women do not slide back to being boys and girls again. If you pay attention to the five key concepts offered here, your workshops can have a similar lasting effect:

- Bring people together in a well thought out workshop **ritual**.
- Create an enabling environment for **adaptation** with experimenting and feedback.
- Make it a **rite of passage** which dissolves old structures and creates *communitas*.
- Keep the bodies moving and active to **embody the knowledge**.
- Weave and perform the **collective story** to anchor the change.

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