Saying Farewell:
Management as a Performance Art

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Abstract

We suggest a number of propositions related to the study and performance of organizational exit rites and ceremonials based on multi-disciplinary literature. Effective rites and ceremonials should incorporate all three phases of a rite of passage: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation. Rites of separation will be unique to each individual and exit motive whereas transition rites, ceremonials, and rites of incorporation will be experienced universally within an organization regardless of the motive to exit. In addition, we examine a number of characteristics that affect the exiting and surviving employees including the formality of the ceremonial, degree of participation by stakeholders, and fulfillment of the exiting employee’s goals. Lastly, implications for management and future research are suggested.

Introduction

If managers are recognized as agents of image formation and impression management in organizations (Weick, 1979), then their role in making rites and ceremonials a positive and significant experience for the exiting employee and the surviving employees is an important skill that should be recognized (Beyer & Trice, 1987; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Rites and ceremonials strengthen culture and it would seem logical that poorly managed events could lead to unintended negative consequences (Trice & Beyer, 1984). As Brockner, Chen, Manniz, Leung, and Skarlicki state, “the effects of what you do depend on how you do it” (2000, p. 138). However, the advantages and consequences of “best exit practices” are largely unknown due to a lack of study in this area.
In this paper, we examine the extant literature from a multi-disciplinary perspective as a way of accumulating what has been documented by researchers with regard to exit rites and ceremonials. We propose that the motive to exit (i.e., voluntary exits, retirement, downsizing) is not a categorizing variable that significantly affects that nature of a successful exit ceremonial by itself. Rather, managerial decisions influencing the formality of the event, the degree of participation by stakeholders, and the fulfillment of the exiting employee’s goals will be more influential as to the success or failure of this form of managerial performance.

Organizational Rites and Ceremonials

The study of rites and rituals has a long history in social sciences, but have also found a toe-hold in the organizational literature. Van Gennep’s (1960/1908) book on rites of passage is an often-cited beginning of the modern study of different types of ceremonials that people participate in to mark particular passages of life. Attention was brought to organizational rites of passage with work done by Trice and colleagues as the field of organizational behavior became established (Trice, Belsaco, & Alluto, 1969). However, this area of interest did not set off a flurry of research until it was linked with organizational culture in the 1980s. At that time, the topic became revived when Deal and Kennedy (1982) identified rites and ceremonials as ‘culture in action’.

Rites are the planned set of activities that have both practical and expressive consequences (Beyer & Trice, 1987), whereas ceremonials are specific events marking a transition. Deal and Kennedy provide another distinction between rituals, which they defined as habitual and a “serious part of the day-to-day operations” (1982, p. 62, e.g., policies and procedures), and ceremonials that help companies celebrate the extraordinary: heroes, myths, and sacred symbols (e.g., special events). Each serves a function for both the individual that is
primarily experiencing the transition and also to those belonging to the immediate society to which that individual belonged. Rites and ceremonials also reduce the harmful effects that may occur by the change in condition in the society and the individual. Further, the rites of departure or separation were seen by van Gennep (1960/1908) as an intention to make the break caused by an exit gradual instead of abrupt.

Van Gennep delineated three phases or “three distinct consecutive subsets” (Beyer & Trice, 1987, p. 9) of rites of passage: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation or integration. Exit rites and ceremonials are considered a rite of passage incorporating all three phases (rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation), which is consistent with other types of organizational rites. For example, rites of enhancement, rites of renewal, rites of conflict reduction, rites of degradation, and rites of integration are also common rites acknowledged by organizational scholars that include all three phases of rites of passage (Beyer & Trice, 1987; Trice & Beyer, 1984).

In the case of exits, the rites of separation incorporate the employee’s psychological withdrawal from the organization. For employees who have more fully integrated their identities with organizational norms and values (Cude & Jablin, 1992) and those who report high personal job involvement (Gee & Baillie, 1999), the transition to an ex-employee may be more difficult and can be aided by rites of separation. For voluntary exits, the ‘Unfolding Model’ aptly describes a number of alternative separation rites that employees engage in prior to making their exit announcement (Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Lee, Mitchell, Holtom, McDaniel, & Hill, 1999; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996; Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). For retirees, the rites of separation would include employee assistance or human resource management led programs that would address identity changes (Avery & Jablin, 1988; Cude & Jablin, 1992; Gee
& Baillie, 1999; Siegal & Rees, 1992), financial planning, and lifestyle changes, perhaps even including the spouse in these sessions (Levinson & Wofford, 2000). Finally, involuntary terminated employees are provided with rites of separation with warning mechanisms such as probationary performance appraisals or disciplinary reports when inadequate performance or inappropriate work behavior is exhibited (Brockner, 1988). In the case of downsizing, employees may be given signals through the federally mandated WARN act (Mathis & Jackson, 2000), news reports, or organizational communications that would be considered rites of separation.

The transition and incorporation rites are part of an exit process. The transition rites are illustrated during farewell gatherings in which coworkers, managers, customers, and family pay tribute to the exiting employee for their contributions to past and present work (e.g., Graversen’s ‘Organizational Release’, 1998 or Kramer’s ‘Loosening Phase’, 1989, 1993). Specific characteristics of transition and incorporation ceremonials will be discussed more fully in following sections of this paper. Finally, the rites of incorporation occur in two forms. First, there is a point at which the exiting employee is required to surrender passcodes, keys, identifying badges, computer access is revoked and the like such that they are no longer distinguished as a member of the organization. Second, the exiting employee is provided the opportunity during their “Lame Duck” period from announcement of their exit to their final day to share their thoughts and plans for their future with coworkers and others present at the farewell ceremonial. These rites of incorporation will continue to occur through post-exit contacts and during fixation of the ex-role in which the exited employee is no longer part of their former group, but instead is expected to recognize their new role as an ex-employee (e.g., Ashforth (2001) and Ebaugh’s (1988) ‘Creating an Ex-Role’). Thus, we propose that an
effective exit process should be guided by managers so that all three phases of the rites of passage are performed.

Proposition 1: Exit rites and ceremonials that address all three phases of rites of passage will lead to more effective separation and exit by the exiting employee.

Motive to Exit

We recognize and agree with recent calls to examine turnover and other forms of leaving organizations (i.e., death, illness, retirement) more clearly based on separate motives to exit (Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1998). However, the traditional typology of retirement, voluntary, and involuntary exits will be utilized here to illustrate that the motive to exit does not seem to be a distinguishing factor in determining the exit rites and ceremonials that take place. Virtually all field research that has been conducted has specifically examined exit rites and ceremonials within a single specific motive to exit and to our knowledge, this is one of the first attempts at proposing characteristics of exit rites and ceremonials across the various motives to exit.

Scholars have examined only retirement rites and ceremonials within their fields such as management (e.g., Adams & Beehr, 1998; Feldman, 1994; Siegal & Rees, 1992), organizational communication (e.g., Avery & Jablin, 1988; Cude & Jablin, 1992), sociology (e.g., Atchley, 1977; August, 1997; Sum & Fogg, 1990), psychology (e.g., Taylor & Shore, 1995), and gerontology (Atchley, 1991; Elman, 1999; Gee & Baillie, 1999; George, Fillenbaum, & Palmore, 1984). Voluntary exits might include job transfers (Brett, 1980; Jablin, 2001; Kirschenbaum, 1991; Kramer, 1989, 1993) or employee-based decisions to seek employment outside of their existing organization due to issues of satisfaction (Bluedorn, 1982; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Lee et al., 1996, 1999; Mobley, 1977), organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Lee,
Ashford, Walsh, & Mowday, 1992; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982), psychological contract violations (Lee & Mowday, 1987; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Sheridan, 1985) or even non-work factors such as family issues of dual-income homes and children (Lee & Maurer, 1999; Stephens & Sommers, 1996; Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1996). Involuntary exits are primarily studied in downsizing studies (e.g., Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1993, 1996; Brockner, Grover, Reed, & DeWitt, 1992; Brockner, Grover, Reed, DeWitt, & O’Malley, 1987) or early retirement incentive plans which tend to be considered involuntary forms of exit by employees that qualify for these programs (e.g., Hardy & Hazelrigg, 1999; Hardy, Quadagno, & Hazelrigg, 1996; Isaksson & Johannson, 2000).

Rites of separation. At this point, it is helpful to revisit the stages of the exit rite of passage: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation (van Gennep, 1960/1908). Rites of separation are typically a psychological process leading to withdrawal. Thus, individual dispositions and situational characteristics uniquely come together to the time where the announcement of an impending exit is made. Lee and colleagues (Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Lee et al., 1996, 1999) illustrate a pattern wherein some employees experience a “shock” and appear to suddenly and unexpectedly quit, others experience a cumulative effect and quit, and others engage in an active job search and may exit or merely readjust their expectations and remain within the organization. Likewise, Steel (2002) suggests a evolutionary search model of employee turnover which takes into account personality, advancement opportunity, personal mobility, nonwork alternatives, labor market information, costs/benefits of job seeking, and subjective norms.

For involuntary exiters, a period of dissonance is likely to occur if performance or behavioral correction warnings or potential downsizing alerts are issued by managers. If heeded,
these employees may experience some of the same processes as described by the voluntary turnover models related to job search and cumulative effects, but that is largely proposed based on anecdotal evidence. Unlike other forms of exit, involuntary exiters experience their rites of separation after the actual exit as the departure tends to be abbreviated. Sometimes, this form of exit is with only a few minutes notice as was the case recently by large and well-known computer corporation. Selected employees were told to report to a nearby hotel meeting room and were told that they were being downsized, escorted directly to their homes, and their personal belongings mailed to them separately (Boyle, 2001).

Thus, one of the key foci of research of involuntary exiters has been on coping mechanisms that can be utilized by these former employees (e.g., Latack & Dozier, 1986; Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995; Payne, 1990). The phases of the unemployment transition have been suggested to be akin to that of grief and bereavement with shock, disorganization, optimism, pessimism, fatalism, and readjustment all potentially occurring in no particular order and without empirical evidence to support their occurrence (Payne, 1990). However, in a qualitative dissertation of organizational exits involving both involuntary and voluntary terminations, Van Steenberg (1988) suggested that the separation processes are similar for both groups in terms of responses, but with a different focus and outcome in managing the post-exit situation. Coping strategies and emotional responses of fear, depression, hurt, and anger were common for both involuntary and voluntary exiters. Involuntary exiters focused their emotions (e.g., abandonment) on their losses after the exit compared to what they had put into their relationship with the organization when employed. Voluntary exiters also spoke of abandonment of the organization, but the abandonment led to their decision to voluntarily find another organization for employment.
For retirees, the timing of retirement exit is now largely in the hands of the individual employee and their assessment of costs and benefits related to exiting an organization. According to Atchley (1977), the “retirement process begins when individuals recognize that some day they will retire” (p. 146). This anticipation phase is specific in that it is typically of a pull nature (rather than a push) and starts well before the actual departure (Ekerdt, Kosloski, & DeViney, 2000; Reitzes, Mutran, & Fernandez, 1998). During this time period, retirees increasingly express discontent with their work and organization, and often boast of their “better” post-employment life, perhaps as a means of justifying their impending withdrawal (Ekerdt & DeViney, 1993). Further complicating the rites of separation among retirees is the recent phenomenon of “bridge employment” (Feldman, 1994; Kim & Feldman, 2000) that is also evident anecdotally among voluntary exiters and by downsized employees in which exiters are rehired on a contract, part-time, or even full-time employment by the former employer.

What seems to be evident in examining the rites of separation and motives to exit is that there are common stages of intersection in the process of separation but that these stages are experienced distinctly by each individual given a particular organization, time, place, and motive to exit. Thus, we propose that the rites of separation are largely based on a combination of individual and situational characteristics and are likely to be significantly impacted by the motive to exit.

Proposition 2: Rites of separation will be uniquely related to the individual and their motive to exit the organization.

Transition rites and rites of incorporation. Transition rites and ceremonials and rites of incorporation into an “ex-employee” role are experienced from the point of announcement of an impending departure. For retirees and voluntary exiters, these rites are commonly triggered by
the organizational policy of providing two weeks (or appropriate) notice of intent to leave. Many consistencies emerge in the exit process regardless of the motive to exit leading us to posit that organizational mechanisms either stated by policy or culturally practiced are performed without regard for the individual and their dispositional characteristics (i.e., age, personality, gender, race, etc.), the situation influences such as changing organizational structure (downsizing), inadequate performance (individual involuntary terminations), retirement, or voluntary reasons related to “greener pastures” within the organization or with another company.

During the “Loosening Phase” Kramer (1989, 1993) describes a period where internal job transfer related exiters experience a decrease in communication as projects and clients are shifted to replacement employees, are excluded from decision making, and are no longer consulted on workplace issues. This phase is similarly identified by Nicholson (1987, 1990) in his adjustment phase of transitions in general and Graversen’s (1998) “organizational release” of both voluntary and involuntary exiters. Retirement preparation programs, alternative work schedules, and mentoring programs have also been suggested to be a beneficial buffer to keep the soon-to-be retirees productive while new employees can be trained and oriented to the functions the retiree previously performed on a regular basis (Avery & Jablin, 1988; Eastman, 1993; Siegel & Rees, 1992).

Ceremonials serve to “stabilize and perpetuate the structure and functioning” (Trice et al., 1969, p. 40) of all social systems. As with any society, exit from an organization triggers a process with particular events such as ceremonial send-off parties (van Gennep, 1960/1908). A rite of passage serves as a “signaling device, publicly signifying to the wider social group that a role transformation is occurring” (Trice & Morand, 1989, p. 398). In terms of the primary exit ceremonial, the “farewell party”, the similarities of the event itself regardless of the motive to
exit are staggering. Evidence of ceremonials exists in all three main motives to exit (retirement, voluntary, and involuntary). Providing exit rituals is one social mechanism to provide disengagement, particularly for those who are highly involved in the organization (Cude & Jablin, 1992). For the retiree, some have suggested that the retirement party is the biggest fear in the process of retiring as “the farewell is so final” (Lo & Brown, 1999, p. 32). In addition, Beyer and Trice suggested that the ceremonial serves notice to both the retiree and coworkers that exiting employees “no longer have the powers of the old status” (1988, p. 146), but we would suggest that message is true of all exiting employees regardless of the motive to exit.

With the increased use of rank systems with an up-or-out system or a forced distribution process of firing the bottom 10% of performers being described in popular press literature (i.e., Greenwald, 2001; Hymowitz, 2000), involuntary ceremonials may become more prevalent and less stigmatized. Deal and Kennedy (1982) provide evidence of an organization where extremely demanding performance standards ended with an abundance of forced involuntary exits at certain career stages. Exit ceremonials informally developed to meet the transition needs of both the exited and surviving coworkers. Lunches are planned and discussions involve survivors speaking of their eventual demise as well. In this company, ex-employees exit “gracefully” (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 74) and have formed their own alumni group, continuing to value their experience in that organization. In the most extreme form of involuntary exit, that of organizational death in which all members of the organization are terminated simultaneously, parting ceremonies provide “settings in which participants can reaffirm their commitment to each other beyond the bounds imposed on an organization” (Harris & Sutton, 1986, p. 18).
Exit ceremonials are useful to recognize the accomplishments of the exiting employee and reinforce corporate values by telling stories, making speeches, and presenting gifts (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). First, there is an advanced announcement of the party. A brief speech is provided by a supervisor or senior personnel who typically highlight the exiting employee’s past successes (Atchley, 1977, 1991). A gift, plaque, or certificate is given to the exiting employee to commemorate their service to the organization. Finally, a toast occurs as all engage in a meal or snack. However, the extent to which the future life after the exit occurs varies from being a focal point (Jacobson, 1996) to rarely discussing the terms of exit from work or “the obligations of retirement” (i.e., the roles and expectations of a retired individual; Atchley, 1977, p. 151).

Regardless of the motive to exit, organizational members appear to engage in a scripted process of transition and rites of incorporation. An exit ceremonial takes place that is universally structured, although in the following sections differences within the ceremonial itself will be examined in more detail. Further, as a security measure, the transition to “ex-employee” has been standardized in many organizations to the extent that the ritual of turning in keys, emptying lockers, and finding computer access revoked will result in the valued employee of forty years and the fired-for-cause employee being treated similarly as one of their final organizational interactions. Thus we propose,

**Proposition 3:** Exit ceremonials, transition rites, and rites of incorporation (into the “ex-role”) will not be significantly different depending on the exiting employee’s motive to exit.

### Formality of the ceremonial

Formality of the ceremonial has been a categorizing mechanism for numerous researchers (i.e., Harris & Sutton, 1986; Jacobson, 1996; McCarl, 1984). Informal rites, created by intimates and somewhat spontaneously planned (Jacobson, 1996), rather than formal rites, organized by
supervisors or by human resource professionals (Trice et al., 1969), have been found to be more desirable to the exiting employees and helpful to making a successful transition to retirement (Savishinsky, 1995). Formalized send-off partieis tend to be arranged by management when the exiting employee is disliked and employees are unwilling to engage in voluntary celebrations (Narvaez, 1990).

On the other hand, acknowledging contributions of a colleague via a serious speech punctuated by a sense of spontaneity, goodwill, and humor by a master of ceremonies or emcee is more effective and informal (Narvaez, 1990). In a study of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) reporters, a good luck card was a consistent exit artifact, but whether it was handmade (informal) or store-bought (formal) served as an indication of the exiting employee’s standing with colleagues. As one anonymous subject noted, “you can measure how well liked you are by the card and the number of signatures on it” (Narvaez, 1990, p. 347). A well-deserved promotion such as a rookie firefighter transferring from training status to a permanent worksite will likely involve two celebrations: one with old coworkers and the chief that is more formal, and a second informal event with family, friends, and a few close coworkers (McCarl, 1984). In a study of 27 individuals experiencing a job transfer, 74% reported that they had experienced a farewell event at work and 74% experienced a farewell event outside of work (Kramer, 1993).

Another indication of formality is the presence or absence of gifts. Thirty-seven percent of Kramer’s (1993) job transfer subjects reported receiving a gift. A formal presence would be a departmental secretary being assigned the role of donation collector and even decision-maker of the official gift versus a colleague who volunteers to collect funds and ideas from other coworkers to commemorate the occasion. Whether the focus during the ceremonial is on the past
(formal) rather than the future (indicating more informal banter; Savishinsky, 1995), and if a meal is provided indicating a closer informal relationship versus merely a snack (formal; Harris & Sutton, 1986; McCarl, 1984) are two other indicators of formality. Thus we propose,

**Proposition 4: The degree of formality of the exit ceremonial will be inversely related to the degree of satisfaction of the exit ceremonial by the exited employee.**

**Degree of Participation by Stakeholders**

Two main issues are related to the degree of participation by stakeholders. First, the degree of participation by stakeholders (based on involvement and not necessarily by the number of attendees) is directly related to the satisfaction experienced by the exiting employee. Second, degree of participation is also related to the surviving coworkers as their social network and cohort group experience a loss, restructure, and re-emergence as a new group without the exiting employee. Each of these issues will be addressed separately below.

**Satisfaction of the exiting employee.** While the evidence described here is largely based on retirement experiences, it would not be unreasonable to propose attachments of meaning and satisfaction to other types of exit motives. Problems with the retirement ceremonial stem from the social nature of the event. The group of individuals that come together to toast the retiree often only represent a small, and likely the later and less significant, portion of the retiree’s career (Savishinsky, 1995). Retirement parties that appear to be more meaningful to both the retiree and coworkers are those in which the personality and reputation of the individual retiree are taken into account, and parties are customized to make jokes, tell stories, and express appreciation of competence (McCarl, 1984). In fact, one problem of retirement ceremonials is a bureaucratic tendency to host an ensemble retirement party coinciding with organizational cycles such as the end of a semester or season in which all retirees during that period of time are
brought together for one generic and impersonal send-off party. Often there is no collective identity to bind retirees together, providing even less significance for those who are exiting (Savishinsky, 1995).

Poor attendance and superficial verbal interaction or silence are likely indicators that a promotion (leading to an exit from a workgroup of a voluntary nature) may have been unearned and not supported by colleagues (McCarl, 1984). A well deserved promotion may mean a new office or furnishings and well-wishers who stop by and acknowledge the new status may be provided cigars or candy (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Thus we propose,

\textit{Proposition 5: The degree of participation by stakeholders in the exit ceremonial will be directly related to the degree of satisfaction of the exit ceremonial by the exited employee.}

\textbf{Influencing surviving coworkers.} Clearly the rite of passage is a process for the exiting individual. However, van Gennep noted that funerals serve as a “transitional period for the survivors, and they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of reintegration into society…” (1960/1908, p. 147). Play, ritual, and ceremony serve as culture builders that symbolize the beliefs, values, and attitudes that are respected in organizations, integrate work and play in ceremony (Dandridge, 1988), and “let people know where they stand, reinforce an individual’s identity within the company, and set the tone for the way in which people relate to one another” (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 64). The exit ceremonial can be used to restate group unity and emphasize the continuity of the organizational entity (Dandridge, 1988) as the “most significant function [of the send-off party] is to ease group anxieties over a member’s anticipated disappearance through emphasizing the continuing of social bonds” (Narvaez, 1990, p. 346).
Further evidence exists that retirement ceremonials serve multiple purposes for those remaining in the organization. One purpose is the reinforcement of survivors’ commitment as presenters at the retirement ceremonial have an opportunity to recognize the entire work group verbally and collectively with flattering comments about recent work product. In addition, because of the group setting bringing managers and subordinates together, these gatherings may serve as conflict reducers as managers attempt to be less distant and more friendly to workers. There is also opportunity to share information about corporate developments, news, and it was noted that at one retirement party, the human resource professionals in attendance took the opportunity to provide booklets on site regarding the organization’s policies and practices related to pre-retirement programs (Narvaez, 1990). Exit rites and ceremonials serve the function of maintaining and promoting individual well-being, group cohesion, task performance, and positive relations with external stakeholders (Harris & Sutton, 1986). In the case of firings or forced retirement, transition rituals are often inappropriately stages or absent. This absence causes uncertainty and confusion about what the company believes in, particularly if the exit is seen as arbitrary and unfair (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Ogawa, 1991). Finally, it has been suggested that the handling of exiting employees serves as one element of an organization’s reputation in the community and its ability to attract a dedicated workforce, build favorable impressions with clients and customers as well as other stakeholders (Avery & Jablin, 1988; Harris & Sutton, 1986; Narvaez, 1990).

Proposition 6: The degree of participation by stakeholders in the exit ceremonial will be directly related to the degree of influence of the exit ceremonial on the surviving employees.
Fulfillment of the Exiting Employee’s Goals

The goals of the retiree in celebrating their impending retirement and transition to retirement life are often overlooked and serve as a source of conflict contributing to the lack of effectiveness that is apparent. For retirees, these rituals provide them with an essential support mechanism or coping resource (Jacobson, 1996). Retirees identify their goals as validation of past accomplishment, an acknowledgement of the uncertainty of the new phase of life, a proclamation of their claim to the status of retiree, and a gift of reassurance and self-worth (Savishinsky, 1995). In one poignant example, Savishinsky (1995) tells of an identity conflict and a forced early retiree’s inability to claim his status as a retiree due to a bureaucratic regulation that retirement could only be officially endowed at a certain age. Finally, retirees have identified their relative inability to completely express themselves with what they feel is their final platform for sharing their beliefs and opinions about management, the organization, and other events that may have been silenced during their careers (Savishinsky, 1995).

Proposition 7: Exit ceremonials that take into account the exiting employee’s past, present, and future activities will be seen as more effective functions by all stakeholders.

Implications for Management and Future Research

Organizational rites are interesting because they utilize other cultural forms such as language, gestures, and artifacts consistent with an understanding that is shared by a group of individuals. Rites are also generally accessible and visible to researchers (Beyer & Trice, 1987). Organizational rites have four distinguishing characteristics: 1) they are relatively elaborate and include a planned set of activities, 2) they are carried out through social interactions, 3) they are usually for the benefit of an audience, and 4) they have multiple social consequences (Trice & Beyer, 1984). However, the importance of this form of expression in organizational life is often
under appreciated by managers and/or human resource professionals, who may view an exit event as an obligation without a sense of the meanings and experiences the exiting employee and surviving coworkers experience. Just as employees take away a sense of a manager’s beliefs and values when terminating a single employee (Stybel, 1978), organizational rites are “interpreted by employees and other as reflecting what management believes in, values, and finds acceptable” (Beyer & Trice, 1987, p. 8).

Almost twenty years has passed since Trice and Beyer’s acknowledgement that “it is not clear how widespread such rites are in modern organizations because no research has systematically addressed this question” (1984, p. 658). Methodologically, in order to determine the actual contribution of rites and ceremonials, it has been suggested that three perspectives be considered: 1) that of the individual directly participating in or being celebrated, 2) that of related role performers within the organizational setting (i.e., managers and coworkers), and 3) that of outside observers such as family members (Trice et al., 1969). However, we were unable to locate any studies that examined the experiences of outside observers other than to mention in passing that family were invited (McCarl, 1984).

Organizational rites have both practical and expressive social consequences (Beyer & Trice, 1987; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Studies involving organizational rites will also likely have a place in the domain of organizational literature involving emotions and emotional expression at work (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). In careers where emotional-neutrality and objectivity is paramount such as journalism, there is evidence that exit parties for relocating colleagues serve as the most elaborate form of emotional expression available to employees. These ceremonials often carry expectations of robust joking, kidding, partying, games, and artifacts to aid in the promotion of relationships and emotional communication of mutual support (Narvaez, 1990).
The existing body of literature involving exit rites and ceremonials comes largely from researchers outside of management, yet these activities fall within the responsibility of managers either explicitly or implicitly in most organizations. Thus, we would like to renew the original calls by Beyer and Trice (1984, 1987) to continue their work on the importance of this type of managerial performance. Further, we suggest that a theoretical framework is available to study these rites and ceremonials in a way that moves beyond the largely descriptive examinations that are published thus far in studies outside of management (i.e., Jacobson, 1996; Kramer, 1989, 1993; McCarl, 1984; Narvaez, 1990; Ogawa, 1991; Savishinsky, 1995). There also appears to be interest in this field of work at an international level (i.e., Australia: Lo & Brown, 1999; Israel: Jacobson, 1996), and we suggest that researchers interested in this area network to engage in cross-cultural studies involving managerial responsibilities and the rites and ceremonials associated with exits. Finally, we suggest future research be conducted to examine the purpose of exit ceremonials within organizations (i.e., influencing the “survivors” to remain, reinforcing corporate values by statements made during ceremonials).

Conclusion

In summary, of the available organizational rites and ceremonials literature, the focus has been on establishing a framework of different types of rites that can be found within organizational life (e.g., Beyer & Trice, 1987; Trice & Beyer, 1984). However, little organizational research has been done on events that are performed exit rites and ceremonials. Similarities emerge in exit transitions, rites, and ceremonials when descriptive studies are examined and we suggest that this existing work provides excellent groundwork on which to propose theoretical relationships that can be studied systematically in future research.
References


