

turning
people
into
teams



**Rituals and Routines
That Redesign How We Work**

DAVID & MARY SHERWIN

Praise for *Turning People into Teams*

“Bringing together people with different perspectives and areas of expertise is always a challenge. In *Turning People into Teams*, the Sherwins equip teams with the context and exercises needed to help them understand each other, break down barriers, and align on long-term goals. Using these exercises with my company’s cross-disciplinary teams of designers, engineers, product managers, and data scientists has already led to several breakthroughs in how we identify goals, share feedback, and work together.”

—Patrick Weiss, Director of Product Design, Omada Health

“In *Turning People into Teams*, the Sherwins share practical rituals, routines, and activities that help teams understand what it means to exhibit ownership, values, and integrity as individual contributors to a collective effort. Curating best practices from corporations, nonprofits, and academia, this book has insights into building effective teams and transforming how they work.”

—Ratna Desai, Director of Product Design, Netflix

“When working on teams, you might not always get to choose whom you work with—but you should definitely choose to read this book. *Turning People into Teams* enlightens the reader with an inspiring, common-sense approach on how to turn a group of individuals into a team that functions on multiple levels. The Sherwins practice what they preach, and this book gets rid of the fluff and provides a practical mindset and corresponding tools to evaluate your team’s rituals, behaviors, and values. They prove that it’s possible for almost anyone to learn the etiquette of collaboration.”

—Alie Rose and Simona Maschi, cofounders of the Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design

“In a world with so much written about team processes for greater development speed and effectiveness, *Turning People into Teams* provides immediately usable tools for any kind of team to work better together. For anyone leading a multidisciplinary team, this book provides simple frameworks for getting at the hard challenges of team dynamics and a common format for engaging your team that can be experimented with and freely adapted to work within any context.

“Many changemakers and writers focus on the initial stages of ensuring a team is aligned to a shared goal. While this is critical, in my work helping organizations transform to be more innovative, I find the true test of change to be how it plays out over time. The Sherwins provide not only effective methods for framing the problem to be solved but also tools for completing a team’s efforts and learning from what has been done. Written in a tone that invites readers to craft their own solutions, this book offers a way of approaching teamwork that you and your team can own and adapt to your needs.”

—Turi McKinley, Executive Director, Org Activation, frog

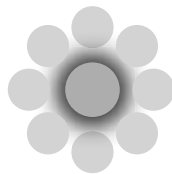
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*For Maryrose,
who brought this team together*

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PREFACE

Checked out. That's how you could describe your new team. Here you are, in another meeting with the right people, at the right place, at the right time, and yet...when you look around the room, it's a sea of blank, disengaged stares. *This isn't a team*, you think. *But maybe, this time, it will be different.*

Teams take the ingredients available to them and transform them into exceptional outcomes. They craft software applications, from early ideas to compiled software. They create plans for social services and urban centers and Michelin-starred meals and bring them to life. These teams bring the best effort of each individual into their collective work. They debate and align on critical decisions, pursuing a common purpose. They solve problems for the benefit of others and take ownership of what they produce. Most important, they thrive under a shared vision of success.

When we put it that way, don't you want to be on a team, all of the time? Sure you do! Except that teams are made up of people. And people are messy and complicated, even when they're trying to

be logical about making decisions and solving problems. They—we, you, all of us—confound each other, even on the best of days.

This is the central contradiction of work: team ideals versus people reality. We're thrown into a room with a bunch of strangers and asked to do the seemingly impossible. And to manage the impossible, we need a way to get things done with some semblance of order. We never have enough time to do any of this, and sometimes we make distressing compromises to deliver. All to sell and ship and innovate and save lives and change the world.

Today's teams strive to serve their customers with the highest-quality products, services, and experiences they can create. And while their attention is focused on creating great project outcomes, we've seen that the quality of teams' experiences—how they work together—often falls by the wayside. Even worse, organizations are putting less care into sustaining and retaining teams over time. The dominant, unspoken assumption is that people will be at their jobs for only a few years, so there's little motivation to create the right conditions for teams to flourish. Many organizations struggle to define how their employees will be successful at teamwork over the long-term.

Which brings us to you.

No one picks up a book on teams or management, or really anything in the business section, because things are going well. You know things could be better. *Everything's pretty top-notch, thanks* is probably not what you were thinking when you opened this book. *Turning People into Teams* is about how teams can choose to work better together. We've found that short, focused rituals can greatly improve day-to-day working environments, and this book shows you how to do these rituals with your team.

Before we get started, perhaps you have some questions, such as:

What do you mean by “choose”?

By “choose” we don’t mean that you get to pick the people you work with. And even if you could, it wouldn’t mean that the people you work with would magically walk out after a project kickoff meeting and announce: “Ta-dah! Now we’re a team.” A team is a choice. Every day, every meeting, every deadline, individuals make the choice to be a team. We don’t just make the choice once during a presentation or an offsite. We choose and choose, and then we choose again, at each point during the life of a project.

You keep saying “you.” Who do you think we are? Who is this book for?

You are on a project team. Your nonprofit is launching a new service. You’re with a software company. You’re a designer, a programmer, a developer, an engineer, a content strategist, and you also do interaction design, UX/UI, packaging, and finance. You aren’t C-suite, but you might be some day. It’s your first week. You’ve just been made the team lead. You’re the project manager, the product manager, and the program manager. You’re on your first team. You’ve been here for years.

All of you want the same thing: to have a better overall team experience that helps everyone get things done. This book is for you.

Who are you?

We’re a lot like you. We’ve been with design teams, collaborating with other disciplines in making products and services. We’ve each had our own careers, and now we have our own business. The two of us have traveled all over the world and talked with thousands of people about how their teams work. We’ve lost count of how many teams we’ve trained. Most of these teams work in what’s called

innovation or R&D or product development or nonprofit program design. No matter the labels, these teams are thrown big messy problems that need to be solved with an experimental approach. They are multidisciplinary, with people from diverse cultural backgrounds and unique training, skills, and important letters after their names. They are focused on crafting a great customer experience (CX) or user experience (UX) or service experience (SX) or a plethora of other acronyms.

Why did you write this book?

Throughout all of our time working with teams, several patterns emerged. Teams wanted more alignment, better decision-making, and of course, a sense of agency and ownership. This book is a collection of the best rituals we've given to teams to help with those things. The book reflects our ultimate goal: to build teams that capture the strengths of each individual.

Why did you really write this book?

Honestly? Because we believe that teams should have the power to shape the processes and systems that affect their day-to-day work. Teams are tired of waiting for the entire company to change in order for them to improve their jobs. Teams should not have to wait for a special initiative, for budget approval, or for a distant executive to issue mandates. Teams should be able to start making things right—today, not tomorrow.

My company does FILL IN THE BLANK methodology. We also use the FILL IN THE BLANK framework. And everyone is supposed to follow FILL IN THE BLANK rules. Can my team still use this book?

Yes. This book isn't meant to subvert the authority of the company. Instead, every ritual is meant to enhance and support the teams

that allow the company to function. Although many of our experiences have come from working on innovation teams, what we're sharing here doesn't require working in any particular process or methodology. The rituals are about aligning teams, not breaking things apart. The team gets to choose what to adapt and how. You may even find that certain rituals square nicely with practices that your team already has.

How is this book organized?

This book is structured by project timeline, in three parts. Part 1, "Better Beginnings," is useful for projects that are just starting. If you're at the beginning, that's great! If not, that's fine, too. You might go directly to Part 2, "We're Stuck, Now What?" It's a popular starting point. The rituals in Part 3, "Sprinting to the Finish," are intended to help wrap up a project. When your team finishes a project and begins the next one, then jump back to the beginning.

Is it okay to skip around?

Of course! People don't read business books like normal books. They mostly skip to the parts that are relevant, read those, and ignore the rest. That's perfectly fine.

You might be searching for something specific for your team. We want to state clearly that there are a few things you will *not* find in our book: "inspirational" but essentially useless stories masquerading as case studies; jargon or weird acronyms; arguments about methodology or dogma; quotes from or about Steve Jobs.

At the end of the book, we'll provide information about the Turning People into Teams digital toolkit we built. It contains digital versions of the diagrams for the rituals described throughout this book, along with instructions.

Before you hop to the section that's most relevant for you, how-

ever, let us explain a little more about the rituals you'll find here and how they've been designed to help you and the people on your team make better choices together. Stay with us until the end of the introduction, "Shared Rituals and Routines Turn People into Teams."

Anything else?

Investigate. Explore. Experiment. Make choices as a team. Together. After all, like we said, this book is for you.

INTRODUCTION

Shared Rituals and Routines Turn People into Teams

Great teams aren't built person by person. They're built behavior by behavior.

Leaders know that improved teamwork—and the behaviors that surround it—is a critical factor in employee engagement, retention, inclusion, and empowerment. They've read the results from Google's Project Aristotle, which encourages the modeling of behaviors with workplace teams to create increased psychological safety, dependability, structure, and clarity. IBM Smarter Workforce Institute puts it another way: Leaders should be offering their employees opportunities to participate in decision-making and trust them with the autonomy to find the best paths to achieving success.

But when we talk directly with leaders and their teams, no one asks us about any of that. Everyone knows the benefits of things like clarity, dependability, teamwork, and collaboration. It's the specifics that aren't clear, leading teams to ask us: *How* do we get those things?

Our answer is always the same. Create a culture where coworkers are designing and building the team experience they want. Create shared rituals.

Why rituals? Rituals cultivate behaviors that help team leaders

and members be successful *and* create positive working experiences for their talent. Just as teams change and grow, so do the rituals that bind them together. Cueing the appropriate ritual with a struggling team can transform their work. Teams regularly evaluate whether their rituals are helping them achieve shared goals, and if they aren't, they redesign the rituals. Over time, the behaviors modeled in the rituals become part of their routines.

Rituals and routines are integral to how work gets done on high-performance teams. And we're not talking about fluffy team-building activities. Instead, we're talking about rituals that ask for input from each individual and shape it into a shared point of view. We're talking about routines that support inclusion, grow accountability, and foster a deeper sense of ownership. We're talking about every team having the ability to transform their day-to-day experience of working together.

What Are Workplace Rituals?

Rituals are group activities during which people go through a series of behaviors in a specific order. Some of these behaviors are established, while others may be new. Teams create rituals for two reasons: to support the behaviors they want to see from each other, and to respond to the needs of their organization.

Rituals can be expressions of an organization, and they can signal the values of their unique culture. Some rituals are small and specific, such as the sounding of a gong before a meeting or a monthly lunch-and-learn. Other rituals are part of larger, more complex systems, ranging from a week-long onboarding process for new team members to the one-on-one meetings that prepare employees for their yearly performance reviews.

Every ritual reinforces behaviors that happen as part of the

What Rituals Have Been Effective for Your Teams?

Write a list of the different rituals your previous teams have had, then answer these questions:

- 1 Which of these rituals supported the teams in accomplishing their goals? Why? What qualities did you appreciate?
- 2 Which of these rituals slowed down progress or were counterproductive? Why? What do you wish you could have replaced them with?
- 3 Did the teams discuss the intention behind their rituals? If so, how did that translate into team success? If not, why not?

Ask a teammate to answer the same questions and compare your responses. Which rituals work well and support your teams' goals? Which rituals might need to be changed?

workplace, whether team members recognize it or not. Some rituals may have been created or enforced by other teams. They may be part of work processes that feel dogmatic or beyond dispute. The reasons why these rituals are necessary and must be preserved aren't always clear to new team members, and sometimes not even to those who have been around for years. Some "that's just how we do it here" rituals benefit certain job functions—or even some team members—more than others. If this sounds familiar, try the activity in the sidebar to investigate these rituals.

What Are Routines?

Routines are a series of rituals. They govern the overall flow of how collaborative work gets done on a team, just as much as how teams