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WORKERS RITES: RITUAL MEDIATIONS AND THE TENSIONS OF NEW MANAGEMENT

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WORKERS' RITES: RITUAL MEDIATIONS AND THE TENSIONS OF NEW MANAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

Scholarship has highlighted tensions arising from the “new management ideology”, an attempt to infuse formal organizations with community, informality and equality. Proposals to “liberate” companies have been received with a mix of skepticism and hope for their emancipatory possibilities. While the tensions arising from such proposals are known, less work examines the practices by which they are mediated in the workplace. Taking a ritual perspective, we argue that rituals’ unique capacity to mediate oppositions makes it a powerful tool in the new management toolbox. Examining a liberated enterprise initiative in a French multinational company, we analyze how rituals structure, disavow, segment or maintain organizational tensions. While rituals constituted neo-normative controls, we also discuss the emancipatory possibilities for rituals in holding open unreconciled tensions and preventing closure. We discuss the implications for understanding neo-normative control through rituals, outlining a future research agenda for the study of rituals in new management.

Keywords: Keywords: Organizational Ritual, Liberated Company, New Management, Organizational Control, Tensions

“The reason that all rituals, however routinized, always carry an element of anxiety is that every ritual performance undertakes...the effort to produce wholes...out of inherently unstable, volatile, and contingent elements” (Appadurai, 2016, p.117)

Contemporary organizations are replete with practices and discourses emphasizing employee self-realization, participation, empowerment and individual expression (Daudigeos et al., 2021; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017), a heady mix of empowerment narratives that has been termed the “new management ideology” (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). In fact, new management ideology points to a much broader range of organizational practices, from what have been termed “neo-normative” (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), “high-involvement” (Ekman, 2014), and “enchanted” (Endrissat et al., 2015; Korczynski and Ott, 2004) practices, among others. These diverse expressions of new management are symptomatic of a “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) that emphasizes cultural participation, self-development and employee expression. Scholars have struggled to understand how new management ideology, in its different forms, shapes organizational domination, mobilizing discourses of positivity and well-being to give cover to new forms of control (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Picard and Islam, 2020). Such controls extend beyond traditional bureaucratic forms (cf., Morris, Farrel and Reed, 2016; Reed, 2011) and are referred to as “neo-normative” because of their displacement of normative demands onto the subjective desires of employees (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011).

Scholarship from diverse traditions has tracked evolving managerial discourses exhorting employees to “be themselves” (e.g., Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2014; Ekman, 2013; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011). Humanistic discourses are flourishing in management, framing work as a source of empowerment, self-expression, happiness, fun, inclusion, and harmony (Fleming, 2014; Land and Taylor, 2010; Maravelias, 2016). Critical perspectives on this development have characterized it as neo-normative control, defined as: “an emergent approach to managing employees which emphasises ‘being yourself’ through the expression of fun, individuality and difference” (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, p. 569). Neo-normative discourses promote work both as the empire of self-expression and as a tool of reconciliation between one’s private and professional life (Ekman, 2013; Fleming, 2009; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017).

Understanding how the new management ideology promotes neo-normative control has stimulated a rapidly growing theoretical and empirical literature as scholars try to assess the

“positive” aspects of promoting well-being against the specters of co-optation and instrumentalization for profit (e.g., Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). Such scholarship, caught between critiquing neo-normative control and recognizing (sometimes begrudgingly) its emancipatory potentials, led researchers to interrogate how participants themselves experience and enact the tensions of new management (e.g., Endrissat et al., 2015). This “sociology of critique” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) approach uses empirical work to explore the ambivalences (Picard and Islam, 2020), tensions (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Kinnie et al., 2000) and contradictions (Deery et al., 2002) of new management in practice.

Of such practices, ritual practices are a particularly promising, if understudied, way to understanding the constitution of normative orders and subjective experience (De Waal Malefyt and Morais, 2010). As discrete practices oriented toward mediating tensions (Turner, 1969), organizational rituals mediate order and change, formality and informality (Islam, 2015; van den Ende and van Marrewijk, 2019). This aspect makes ritual central to the production of organizational cultures and employee adherence to the organization (Kunda, 1992). However, as Dacin et al. (2010) highlight, rituals’ effectiveness in ensuring conformity may mask employees’ will to resist their identity roles. Given the erosion of formal rules within new management (cf., Morris et al, 2019; Picard and Islam, 2020), communal practices such as rituals are likely to be particularly important coordination devices. That said, we know little about how ritual practices shape neo-normative control within the new management paradigm.

In this paper, we argue that organizational rituals allow organizations to manage the tensions arising from the new management ideology. Specifically, we ask: what are the roles of organizational rituals in mediating the tensions of new management, and what are the implications for neo-normative control and employee subjectivity?

We examine this question through a qualitative study of a French multinational company, KingFish¹, in the midst of its campaign to become a “liberated” enterprise (Carney and Getz, 2015). This process involved considerable internal tensions, and rituals played an important role in framing these tensions. By studying these rituals, we contribute to the literature on neo-normative control by showing the mechanisms by which tensions are mediated, while nuancing critical perspectives on ritual that often focus on unity rather than tension (cf., Islam et al., 2019).

NEW MANAGEMENT AND THE LIBERATED ENTERPRISE

Discourses of humanism and employee engagement have appeared periodically throughout the history of management (Barley and Kunda, 1992), and have described the ambivalence of identification and resistance that such discourses invoke (e.g., Kunda, 1992). Yet the mainstreaming of humanistic discourses of self-expression and participation as organizational control mechanisms took new energy in response to critiques around the alienating and dehumanizing aspects of contemporary work (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), and in relation to the de-skilling of work as described by labour process theorists (Braverman, 1974). The resulting normative exaltation of work as emancipatory and participative (Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Toraldo et al., 2019) involved proliferating workplace attempts to promote aesthetic (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009) and affective (Hochschild, 1983) cover for workplace power relations.

These discourses have been described as “new management ideology” (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002, p. 186), which offers an “ideology that justifies people’s commitment to capitalism, and which renders this commitment attractive”. While Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) theorized the emergence of new management in the wake of the post 1960’s counter-culture, a diverse mix of approaches evolved from the 1980’s organizational culture movement (Trice and Beyer, 1993) to more identity-focused managerial styles emphasizing authenticity and self-expression (cf., Fleming, 2009). Almost from the outset, critical perspectives noted the ideological aspects of such developments, from earlier critiques of cultures of control (Kunda, 1992), to the management of emotional life (Hochschild, 1983; O’Brien and Linehan, 2014) and the “hidden costs” of humanistic management (Ross, 2004). These ideologies could support new forms of control that were “post-” (Reed, 2011) or “neo” (Morris et al., 2016) bureaucratic. Such controls mobilized subjective desire and identity-based regulation (e.g., Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Fleming and Spicer, 2007) to leverage employees’ own normative expectations of who they should be or want to be (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). The infusion of managerial control with seemingly emancipatory discourses blurred the meanings of worker expression, making it difficult to judge whether participation, expression, and even critique, were not themselves forms of “neo-normative” control (Daudigeos et al., 2021).

New management emphasizes the expression of spontaneous and creative impulses (Fleming, 2009), as well as employee discretion (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017). For instance, employees are encouraged to be themselves and to have fun, even amid materially demanding and precarious conditions (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Kinnie et al., 2000). Human resources practices

oriented towards conformity have given way to a reviewed focus on “life” at work (Endrissat et al, 2015), in parallel with the expansion of project works and precarious employments (Ekman, 2014). The new management ideology stresses employees’ freedom to take actions on their own and without coercion (Sferrazzo and Ruffini, 2019), and to participate in decision-making to increase performance and work satisfaction (Kim, 2002). The result is a more “friendly environment” (Kinnie et al., 2000), emphasizing creativity (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011) and employee satisfaction (D’Cruz, 2007).

A more recent development within the broader scope of new management ideologies, the “liberated enterprise” was formulated by Getz (2009; Carney and Getz, 2015) as a transformative leadership movement based on humanistic and egalitarian practices. Liberated management is defined by Getz (2009, p. 34) as one where employees have “complete liberty and responsibility”. Getz (2011, p.8) notes the 1960’s humanistic management tradition as inspiring his theorizing of the liberated enterprise, to “nourish employees’ universal needs of intrinsic equality, growth, and self-direction”.

Although literature on liberated enterprises remains small and mostly appears in French contexts (e.g., Arnaud et al., 2016; Landivar and Trouvé, 2017), several aspects align liberated enterprises with the new management ideology (cf., Picard and Islam, 2020). First, liberated enterprises suppress formal procedures and controls such as time clocks, but also make deep cuts into middle management and radically restructure organizational hierarchies (Gilbert et al., 2014). Emphasizing radical equality, liberated companies mix deliberation with disciplinary action, emphasizing paradox management (Getz, 2009). Liberated enterprises emphasize leaders as “culture keepers” (Getz, 2009, p. 41) rather than hierarchical figures. These elements of liberated enterprises, along with their geneological provenance from the 1960’s counter-cultural ethos and critique of traditional bureaucracy (cf., Reed, 2011), make liberating leadership a contemporary prototype of the new managerial ideology.

NEW MANAGEMENT AND RITUAL PRACTICES

As noted, the humanistic discourses of new management generate multiple tensions within organizations (Kinnie et al., 2000) and ambivalences about what “liberation” means in such contexts (Picard and Islam, 2020). Attempts to encourage employee initiative and creativity coexist with managerial control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), along with work precarization and the persistence of discipline, which may take violent forms (Picard and Islam, 2020). Promoting

worker freedom within the restrictions inherited from the sediments of post-bureaucracy can generate a tension between self-realization and organizational demands (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Kinnie et al., 2000). New management tends to involve the whole person into the productive process of work (Endrissat et al., 2015). Accordingly, the private sphere of life and the work arena result in conflation, allowing organization control to extend beyond work to leisure and social activities (Land and Taylor, 2010; Maravelias, 2016). Literature examining such tensions often focus on control and power processes (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), where minimizing formal structure leads managers, for instance, to manipulate the hearts and minds of employees (Kunda, 1992). Attempts to provide fun and meaning can mask subjective control (Endrissat et al., 2015; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), resulting in suffering (Picard and Islam, 2020), emotional burn-out (Deery et al., 2002), high levels of stress and pressure (Kinnie et al., 2000).

The resulting mix of emancipatory promise and neo-normative control make it difficult to diagnose the critical and emancipatory possibilities of new management practices (Daudigeos et al., 2021; De Cock and Nyberg, 2016). Searching for interpretive possibilities, scholarship turns to empirical fields to examine how actors themselves deal with and mediate tensions arising from conflictual situations (Azambuja and Islam, 2019). Presuming that actors themselves are reflexive agents who search for solutions (Boltanski, 2011), such research focuses on bottom-up experiences to stimulate theorizing, as well as to understand how critique is foreclosed or captured (e.g., Daudigeos et al., 2021).

Most critical literature in this area has examined how neo-normative controls operate (e.g., Müller, 2017), how they result in heterogenous work attitudes (Toraldó et al., 2019) or conflicting subjective positions (Ekman, 2014). Less common are how material practices are mobilized to work through the tensions produced in such situations (cf., Sturdy et al., 2016). This is unfortunate, given the importance of concrete practices in mediating between ideological/normative structure and the experienced worlds of actors (Marcus, 1986), on the one hand, and between social fragmentation and order, on the other.

Rituals as Mediating Practices

Ritual practices may be particularly important to understanding how the new management ideology is realized in organizations (cf., Smith and Stewart, 2011). Rituals may be defined as discrete enactments, with beginnings and ends, that give voice to collective beliefs or values

(Islam and Zyphur, 2009; Trice and Beyer, 1984). As Sillince and Barker (2012) note, ritual practices are particularly important for bridging the symbolic and material aspects of organization, addressing theoretical concerns around the materializations of ideological and normative structures. Put simply, rituals are key practices for dealing with various kinds of social tensions (Rosati, 2010).

Organizational rituals have been studied in a variety of forms, from “full” or “capital R” rituals comprising rare, major events to “ritual-like” or “small r” activities involving everyday activities that have symbolic, repetitive features (Senft and Basso, 2009; Smith and Stewart, 2011). The differences between large-scale and everyday rituals, as well as differences between traditionally-established versus “modern”, ad hoc and emergent organizational rituals (Islam and Zyphur, 2009), matter conceptually and empirically. However, as a first step in theory development, we consider the breadth of “ritual-like” practices in their relation to the tensions of new management.

Rituals have often been studied as culture-congealing devices, providing “organizational moment[s] in which communal energies can be mobilized and directed” (Islam, 2015, p. 546). According to Deal and Kennedy (1982), “rituals provide the place and script with which employees can experience meaning; they bring order to chaos” (p. 62). Dacin et al. (2010), in their study of a formal dining at Cambridge colleges, acknowledged the effects of organizational rituals for institutional maintenance and their connection with social and cultural processes. Rituals are used to resolve conflicts (Ren and Gray, 2009), confront changes (De Waal Malefyt and Morais, 2010), reinforce membership (Lawrence, 2004), and support institutional maintenance (Dacin et al., 2010). Rituals have also been associated with attempts to increase performance and establish professional autonomy (Brooks and Brown, 2002), even as they work toward a sense of community (Massa et al., 2017). Furthermore, rituals have the power to transform people’s identities and senses of self, and “their perceptions of their images in the eyes of others” (Dacin et al., 2010, p. 1394). From these perspectives, as collective meaning-making devices, rituals have often been studied in their unifying capacity by organizational scholars (Trice and Beyer, 1984).

However, a closer look at the ritual literature makes clear that these operate at points of tension and ambivalence arising between subjective experience and normative control (cf., Islam, 2015; Rosati, 2010). Since Durkheim (1915/1961), ritual scholars have situated ritual as a mediator between individual experience and social norms. While some ritual scholars (Lévi-Strauss, 1945; Sahlins, 1976) treat rituals as supports for social order, others (Turner, 1969) note

that rituals, while structuring the normative order, always contain a moment of “anti-structure” or liminality, where control is suspended and radical change is possible. In short, ritual practices are dual-faced, and can be read, “as rupture or as repetition, the latter, conservative of social structures, the former transformative” (Islam, 2015, p. 546).

In the context of new management ideologies broadly, and liberating leadership specifically, there is ample indirect evidence for the prevalence of ritual-like practices. For instance, music and artistic events at work (Endrissat et al., 2015), moments of communal festivity (Toraldò et al., 2019) and performing one’s phobias in a social setting (Ekman, 2015) all have ritual-like elements that obscure underlying power asymmetries and conflicts, although they are not described as rituals by the studies’ authors. A common thread among such studies is that the “positive” aspects of organizing are enacted through self- or group-affirming practices, allowing the group to deal with potential clashes (Kunda, 1992). Described from a ritual lens, however, such practices take on new meaning as devices through which unity and difference are mediated and channeled in diverse ways.

In sum, rituals can maintain or transform normative orders because of their deep embedding in tensions, such as those between stability and change, individual and group, freedom and work. This aspect of rituals makes them an ideal analytical lens to study the tensions of new management, with its own ambivalent mix of order and freedom. In this context, we return to our research question about the roles of ritual in mediating the tensions of new management, which we study in the context of a French company with pretensions to transform itself into a “liberating enterprise”.

METHODS

Background of Case Study and Data Collection

The current case study focuses on a home improvement and gardening retail firm, “KingFish”, with headquarters in France and serving several countries in Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa. Its business involves DIY, building, gardening, sanitary equipment, renewable energy, and interior decoration. As highlighted in its website, KingFish claims a human resource strategy based on putting “people first”, referring to collaborators and clients. The study took place during a period in which the company was attempting to adopt a “liberating” management style, as explained in our initial interview with the Italian HR Director. Subsequent interviews repeatedly highlighted this transition, which was at the forefront of

managerial concerns, as focused on promoting interaction and job involvement as a source of “agility”, as noted by Alberto, a Store Leader:

If before we worked in silos, today we work by networks with the possibility of involving more actors and streamlining the process for greater agility. So we have eliminated silos and worked more on defining the actors responsible for a working group that then must involve others.

KingFish’s move toward a “liberated enterprise” model aligned it with our research interest on new management ideologies and liberated enterprises. Specifically, our initial interest around how new management practices were implemented in such organizations led us to explore core issues, techniques and results of new management policies. The management’s concern with the liberating transition served as a backdrop through which we could explore how such a managerial form was interpreted, shaped and put into practice.

Our initial contact for the study was the HR director for the Italian branch of KingFish. Based on this contact, the first author was granted access to conduct an empirical investigation in the Italian branch services and stores. The Italian stores include around 7,000 employees and are present in almost every Italian region. Upon request, the Italian HR Director initially provided a list of employees, managers and leaders at different hierarchical levels and roles who would be well-placed to understand possible tensions around the transition. We selected between one and seven interviewees belonging to each of the different hierarchical levels and roles (store leaders, HR store managers, internal communication, customer relationship and services manager, sector leaders, supply chain director, cashiers, risk specialist audit, HR Director, CSR manager, supply chain manager), to contact for further data collection. This snowball method allowed us to build a sample based across different levels, although it carried limitations which we discuss below.

In this initial wave, we conducted *in vivo* 21 semi-structured interviews, which we recorded and transcribed (see Table I). The interviews were conducted in the subjects’ offices, between January and April 2019, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Subsequently, as our focus on rituals and tensions became clearer, we conducted an additional 6 interviews to ask more specifically about these dynamics. Initially, we were interested in discovering how organizational tensions arose in KingFish’s attempt to generate a liberated management style. In the interview with the HR director, he mentioned the centrality of “company rituals”, which raised questions for us about the role of rituals in the company strategy. As explained by the HR director, KingFish already had a history of company rituals (which he called their “daily bread”) involving ongoing

interactive moments based on a “sharing” culture. However, an increasingly turbulent market atmosphere in recent years required a more conscious and deliberate deployment of ritual, according to the HR director. Noting that the participative and relational atmosphere of KingFish had not always been conducive to productivity, a more targeted culture strategy would be needed.

This conversation suggested to us that the rituals would be a central part of an ongoing set of changes, drawing our attention to their functioning and developing this through the other interviews. By “functioning” we refer to the orientation or intended effects, rather than actual outcomes, as we do not take the success of the rituals for granted. Our search for theoretical saturation in the interviews, that is, when information began to repeat, thus took the form of seeing the same kinds of tensions (e.g., hierarchy versus equality) and the invocation of rituals in similar ways (e.g., segmenting of tensions, denying of tensions). Sometimes, to go more in-depth with the interviewees’ answers, we asked the interviewees to send us materials connected to what they said during the interview process. In each interview, we collected an informed consent to guarantee the confidentiality of responses. Some subjects were interviewed more than once, to deepen some specific elements of interviews, and the second wave of interviews also served to focus precisely on specific aspects of rituals.

----- Insert Table I about here -----

Data Analysis

In terms of our analytical strategy, we followed an abductive approach, consisting in a back and forth movement between emerging codes and data (Charmaz, 2006). Our initial coding began generally by focusing on tensions and ambivalences generated by the new management. We organized our data around semiotic clusters (Feldman, 1995), by using: a) first-order concepts, emerging from interviewees’ own language; b) second-order themes resulting from our data interpretation; c) aggregate theoretical dimensions, deriving from our effort to take data to a higher degree of conceptual analysis. The initial focus on new management led us to highlight the presence of specific tensions during the interviews’ process, i.e., hierarchy vs. equality and profit vs. flourishing. KingFish, indeed, in the attempt to become a liberated company is struggling with these specific internal tensions arising from the transformational process. We identified these oppositions as our second-order themes to finally arrive to elaborate the aggregate dimensions.

Next, based on the initial emphasis on rituals by the HR director, we began to look for moments in the interviews that were organized as rituals (defined as “discrete enactments that

have a beginning and an end and give expression to a culture's values and beliefs" [Islam and Zyphur, 2009, p. 115]). Our data contained many ritual-like practices as the managers described their implementation of "liberation", and were often described specifically as "rituals" (perhaps echoing the language of the HR director). For instance, Camilla (Internal Communication) noted how the transitions occurred in "ritual terms", highlighting in particular, the increasing number of physical meeting (replacing, for example, newsletters and emails). Sensitized to the existence of the rituals and the presence of tensions in the organization, our attention was drawn to if and how a ritual was described in the context of background tensions, and in what way (for example, to "overcome", "express", or "order" tensions, among other possibilities).

Thus, taking Trice and Beyer's (1984) ritual framework as a starting point for an abductive consideration of this data, we noted a key difference from their approach, namely, where they described rituals as having intrinsic functions, we considered these functions in relation to ongoing tensions. Given that ritual theorizing notes the tension-mediating role (cf., Islam, 2015), we turned to the categories in their treatment of tensions and ambivalences. Specifically, we noted how the rituals had distinct approaches toward these tensions. First, the interviewees described how rituals addressed tensions by ordering priorities and creating value hierarchies, which we called a "subordination mechanism". Second, participants described how rituals revealed how apparent tensions were "really" resolvable into unities, which we labelled a "disavowal mechanism". Third, we noticed the emphasis, in the interviewees' statements, on separating the tensions; we defined this attitude as a "segmentation mechanism". Finally, the interviewees described rituals that neither hierarchically resolved nor denied tensions, but enabled coping in the midst of continued tensions, which we called an "agonistic mechanism". Starting from this observation, we elaborated four aggregate theoretical dimensions, which are connected to the way in which rituals cope with the aforementioned oppositions, i.e., the subordination, disavowal, segmentation and agonistic dimensions. The resulting ritual functions build on Trice and Beyer's (1984) ritual types to adapt these in the context of mediation of tensions.

In Figure 1 we illustrate our first-order concepts, second-order themes and overarching theoretical dimensions. Whereas, in Table II, we provide illustrative examples derived from our data.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

----- Insert Table II about here -----

FINDINGS

Tensions of New Management

KingFish's self-described movement towards liberated management gave rise to tensions, of which we identified two overarching forms: a hierarchy-equality tension around issues of participation, sharing, and informal climate, and a profit-flourishing tension around the productivity and well-being implications of the new management style. These tensions set the stage for ritual performances, upon which rituals operated as mediating devices.

Hierarchy vs. Equality. The first tension we observed was between the need to maintain hierarchical roles while and promoting equality. KingFish actively promoted employee involvement in decision-making processes, a participative dimension geared toward collective equality, and encoded in practices and policy aspects, as noted by Marta (HR Store Manager), *In KingFish there is a training path called "wesion," rather than "vision." This represents the concept of "we," because in the word "wesion" there is the "we" and the final part read backwards is "noi" (we, in Italian). This example represents us as a company that wants to involve the employees at all levels for any type of decision.*

The "wesion" neologism expressed a desire for collectivity in decision making, also observed in efforts to promote informal moments through which members could share ideas, proposals, or celebration. As Davide (HR Store Manager) explained: *"There are the games room, the break room, the dining room. There are moments where employees can be together, confront each other. We put round tables in the store where new ideas can arise."* Such informal spaces for "confrontation" signaled a mixture of leisure and productive tension, a sentiment explicitly linked with equality by Kevin, a Sector Leader, who described the atmosphere of informality as a backdrop of KingFish's stores, expressed through casual dress across hierarchical levels and a first-name basis among members:

We all are on first name terms with everyone. In this way, we don't notice much the hierarchy. Even the Store Leader is a person that I consider horizontally. It is interesting to see the Store Leader entering the store with the KingFish polo shirt and not in a jacket and tie, therefore already on our same level.

Despite these signals of equality, real tensions continued around horizontality and the hierarchy which continued to structure operations. Lorenzo, a Store Leader, highlighted the increasing difficulty of speaking personally with the KingFish General Director, and signs of differentiation continued to mark hierarchical positions. As Lorenzo noted:

Some time ago, I was going around the store with the General Director, and there was a piece of paper on the floor – I picked it up. I never saw them do this kind of thing, but my collaborators in the shop had developed such habits as an automatic gesture. Today it is increasingly rare for the General Director to wear all the uniform, to wear safety shoes, to come and say goodbye, to sit at the table at the canteen, and so on.

Thus, even at the level of material symbols, hierarchical differences persisted. Despite managerial claims to promote sharing, differences in power remained operative, centered around knowledge, information, and the sharing of subjective experiences. Enrico, a Store Leader, underlines this hierarchical factor as a personal attitude, emphasizing delegation as an issue of authority and shared control, *“I usually delegate things to my collaborators. Obviously, to do so, your employees must be competent and know their job well. So, for me the delegation is important, but it is important to control the delegated activities as well.”*

By implicitly questioning collaborators’ competence and job-based knowledge, while assuming his own ability to understand and delegate, Enrico recuperates a principle of hierarchy even while promoting delegation. Similarly, Store Leader Anna’s description of her leadership style likewise prioritizes decision control, *“My leadership style varies depending on the situation. Sure, I am one who works together with others. But when there is a decision to be made, certainly, I consider the advice that others give, but the final decision must be mine.”* Once again, equality (e.g., “working together”) is claimed as a value but then immediately circumscribed by the need for centralized control (“the final decision”).

Thus, while management at KingFish was avowedly egalitarian, its claim to equality stood in tension with hierarchical controls that were considered necessary for “competence” or “decision-making”. This ongoing tension demanded practices of mediation to reconcile the apparent contradiction between hierarchy and equality.

Profit vs. Flourishing. A second core tension at KingFish involved the focus on profit in relation to liberated management’s emphasis on employee flourishing. In some instances, flourishing was

linked to employee development, such as when Alessandro (Store Leader) emphasized the collaborative strategy of integrating employees' skills within the company to foster well-being:

Usually when you take staff to work in a shop the person has to learn. Instead we tend to ask this person to bring us the skill he has acquired over time in other companies and then we compare it with ours. We always integrate the skills...to make [employees] feel well within a new organization.

Here, new skill "integration" provides economic value, but is framed as wellness, rather than human capital or excellence. At other times, however, the two appear in tension. For example, Carla (Customer Relationship and Services Manager) explained her everyday struggles to simultaneously achieve both:

In everyday life, struggles emerge in relation to schedules and time management that affect leisure time. We do business, so you have to work on Sundays, holidays, you have to ensure your presence, since we are open from 7am to 8h30pm and this can generate tension. Leaders, good managers, compensate by trying to maintain criteria of fairness and meritocracy in some way and respect people's needs, and obviously there is always the necessity of being profitable and results-oriented.

Carla describes the tension between "respecting people's needs" and the "obvious" need for profit. In such cases, the relationship between profit and flourishing was less clearly prioritized, as during the coaching activity at KingFish. Coaching was described as oriented towards well-being, while simultaneously increasing performance. For example, Giulia (HR Store Manager) stressed,

My motto is 'people make companies,' therefore, I put them first. So I take care of people. I choose them, of course. First, I choose them, then I look after them, which means training, motivation, accompaniment. I allow them to talk with me when they want and about what they want in a totally informal way. They are open books in talking with me.

Similar to Alessandro's observation, "people" come first, although this is justified by their value to the company ("people make companies"). Yet after this brief and indirect reference to performance, Giulia extends a perspective of caring ("I look after them") and understanding ("open books").

Yet as we delved into the question of coaching, the centrality of performance became increasingly evident, and although welfare was a goal, the leaders' themselves were evaluated according to economic outcomes, as Alice (HR Store Manager) observes:

The role of Sector Leaders, they are both managers, and determinants of commercial programs, business planning and business strategies. At the same time, they are guarantors of achieving of economic goals. Therefore, they must be coaches and stimulators of the performance of their teams.

The dual presence of these goals was not altogether simple, and managers searched for ways to make the two coincide. Performance pressure was, in practice, persistent during coaching, for instance, in practices like sending letters explaining annual economic goals. Lorenzo (Store Leader) explains one such letter, where his manager “*communicates a lot, for better or for worse and when we meet, he tells you openly the things that are good, above all thanks to his contribution. Every year he gives us a note [...] especially stating the new economic goals to reach for the new year.*” The subtle sarcastic jab at his regional manager (“above all thanks to his contribution”) reveals the underlying tension between the ubiquitous open positivity and the underlying demand for economic performance, where communication also acts as a form of control with a hint of self-aggrandizement.

Similar to coaching, other activities related to “liberating” management, such as team or leisure activities, revealed profit goals upon further examination, with an often-ambiguous relation between profit and flourishing. For example, Kevin, a Sector Leader, describes the importance of leaving work and taking holidays:

I always invite my collaborators to completely leave work when they are on holiday, by telling them ‘Get some rest, go on vacation, you're on vacation, I'll see you when you get back.’ In this way, on their return, they can be more productive and lucid in dealing with working days.

As Kevin notes somewhat cynically, the productivity and “lucidity” gained while away acted as vehicles for increased productivity upon return.

In sum, as with the hierarchy/equality tension, performance and flourishing principles coexisted in tension at KingFish, with a persistent sense that both were priorities but with a complex set of rhetorical and practical maneuvers to relate, order, or otherwise explain their coherent coexistence in practice.

Rituals as Mediators of Tension

With these tensions in mind, we were struck by the frequency with which people spoke about rituals throughout the company and the importance they gave to ritual moments. For instance, Paola (Cashier) explained an event in which the team designed and printed t-shirts together, and the resulting “pride for the job done”. Although not related to the specific job role, *“that t-shirt was a symbol both of pride and of company belonging. There was a high level of enthusiasm from each collaborator for that co-creation.”* Similarly, Costanzo (Store Leader) noted diverse planned moments, both at the store level, and in everyday management, *“We have rituals which differ in their nature and dimension [...] store meetings, reunions with the directive committee, de-briefing moments, or when collaborators at the top level present the annual strategy.”*

Yet beyond simple enthusiasm and organizing devices, tension-mediation was bound up in such events. Carla, for instance, specifically linked the ongoing tensions with collective moments of celebration, explaining that *“I believe that the rite greatly eases tensions [from performance demands], because a moment of celebration is, after all, celebration”*. She went on to describe the scheduled rituals as “10-15%” results oriented and “80-85%” enjoyment.

From the diversity of events and their functions, we began to explore the different rituals in the interviews, asking managers to elaborate on the rituals. We used Trice and Beyer’s (1984) foundational work to initially categorize the rituals, allowing us to identify “rites of renewal” and “rites of integration” within the data. Given that Trice and Beyer’s (1984) taxonomy had never been empirically established or tested, however, it is not surprising that our own empirical exploration modified this existing framework. Specifically, one other of their categories – “rites of enhancement” - was evoked much more specifically in our site as organizational contests, similar to Anand and Watson’s (2004) “tournament rituals” but at a more micro-interactional level. We labelled these “rites of valuation”.

Each of these rituals not only served a specific function, but also approached tensions in distinct ways. Some highlighted the possibility of working through tensions, while others occluded or ordered tensions in manageable ways.

Rites of Renewal. Rites of renewal “consist of symbolic actions that are periodically staged to reassert the dominance of certain organizational values” (Islam and Zyphur, 2009, p. 125). In

contrast to rituals establishing or defining positions, rites of renewal are recurrent and repetitive, reinforcing and recreating norms to allow organizations to maintain social bonds and remind organizational members of core values.

In KingFish, rites of renewal were identified in the store and internal services plenaries, which took the form of formal monthly meetings. In these meetings, employees were trained and took part in the organization of some company activities. Referring to these meetings, Camilla (Internal Communication) commented,

We have many plenaries [...] with various agendas. And the participation rate shows you how much more the physical channel [...] is privileged for people to talk to each other, listen, see what's new, who arrived at the company, who went out. So beyond a newsletter, the physical meeting with other people wins, wins over everything. Yes, it's an imposed ritual, but it's also a sought-after channel.

Camilla's description highlights both the functional (organize services) and social-constitutive (meet with each other) aspect of the ritual, while emphasizing the "physical meeting" at the core of the ritual. Noting that the meeting was not voluntary but "imposed", she immediately conditioned this statement by stressing its alignment with participants' desires ("sought-after"), pre-empting any counterposing of individual desire and top-down control. The "KingFish dinner" constituted another rite of renewal in which the notion of "moments" was invoked to create a feeling of community:

Next week, we will have the KingFish dinner, dedicated to all employees of the company, which is where we declare the value of the reversal of our company shares. The KingFish dinner is not compulsory but it is a moment of sharing and reinforces membership. I think it is strategic and guarantees knowledge moments for all the employees. It's a productive moment that serves to create a sense of belonging to the company. This leads us to reflect and understand why we are here and feel part of this organization (Giacomo, HR Director).

Not compulsory, but "strategic", the dinner promotes knowledge and "reinforces membership", involving the employees in a collective declaration of company values and binding them to the collective through a public declaration of financial share-valuation.

As an everyday rite of renewal, KingFish instituted a so-called "de-briefing" moment, described by Valeria (Supply Chain Manager) as follows:

Every morning -when the store opens- we make a debriefing right in front of the door and welcome the first customers. This is something that all shops do. In fact, all the people who come in and do the training experience these moments. So, every morning the team and the manager make a small point on the economic results of the day before, establish the scope of the day and welcome the customer together.

These daily moments differed from normal operational procedures by focusing on the direct relations among employees within the store and clients, bringing together manager, employee, and customer in a greeting gesture that was renewed each day.

In short, rites of renewal dramaturgically represented experiences of togetherness and renewed social bonds that linked individuals to each other and to the organization.

Rites of Integration. Rites of integration seek collective unity through increasing interaction and temporarily loosening formal norms (Trice and Beyer, 1984), thereby “work[ing] to establish an emotional unity or community bond” (Islam and Zyphur, 2009, p. 132). Yet, as highlighted by Francesca (Risk specialist audit), these rituals are also highly performance-oriented, and meant to align perspectives. Rejecting a purely emotional view of rituals, she emphasises the functionality of collective alignment:

For our team, rituals are a sort of exigency [...]. It can happen that we cannot see each other for 10 days, so the ritual is necessary for alignment. We must be aligned to transmit a common voice in all the Italian regions. Therefore, in our case, rituals are not celebration moments, but an exigency to be aligned and working well.

Despite this performance orientation, rituals of integration often mobilized informal shared moments, such as breakfast, lunch and breaks. Pulled between different orientations, rituals of integration embodied tensions between community and collective performance.

Comparing, for instance, two moments described in relation to Francesca’s previous quote, the first seems highly performance-oriented:

As soon as I arrive in the store and we all see each other or even when I look at a colleague and we understand each other, then we isolate ourselves to go and talk. It is a ritual of construction together because inside a small team if something is wrong it is 25% that is wrong.

By contrast, a moment later, she describes a second ritual, in which the affective unity of the group seems undeniable:

Then we have the little gift, the Christmas outing that as far as the company does it, we also do it. We know that when Claudio organizes the meetings, we expect brioches and cuddles[...]. We can't wait to get back so at least we'll see each other again. We have travelled so many kilometers just to see each other again. It is the pleasure of being together.

The “exigency to be aligned and working well” sits somewhat awkwardly with the expectation of “brioches and cuddles”, but integration rituals ground both motives and can occlude their possible tensions (more below).

Despite the lingering expectation of results (i.e., the “10-15%” mentioned by Carla above), rites of integration heavily emphasized affective unity. Camilla (Internal Communication) highlighted this in terms of collective co-presence in informal moments:

Every time a colleague comes back from maternity, leaves or arrives in the company, we recreate collective moments of breakfast, lunch, greetings. Sometimes we go together to have lunch, we order a sushi, we go to eat together in the canteen, we organize a picnic together, and it's all very optional. And there you can see who wants to join and who doesn't. These moments reinforce the sense of belonging to this company.

This “very optional” moment, nevertheless, permits one to “see who wants to join and who doesn't”, echoing the neo-normative focus of such events. Yet Camilla echoes the “brioches and cuddles” sentiment with her own affirmation of the affective bond, “*On those stressful days, a hug with a person or a coffee together, even if you have to cry, these moments let you live freely your emotions or tensions within the day. I believe these rituals are fundamental to manage stressful situations.*” Again, performance creeps in at the end, with a light touch, to “manage stressful situations”, a “15%” applied at the end of the social moment, while maintaining a sense of togetherness that is not (only) about work.

Rites of Valuation. Rites of valuation consist in affirming company values and establishing value hierarchies through moments of recognition or prizes. Similar to Trice and Beyer's (1984) “rites of enhancement”, which establish relative status, we broadened this category to “valuation” to

include rites that establish value without necessarily placing individuals within status hierarchies. In KingFish, valuation was associated with ceremonies conferring awards, which were often based on economic results, but also included non-economic value recognition. For instance, a ceremony recognizing sustainability practices performatively established such practices as valued. As Marco (CSR Manager) commented, *“every month we have the ceremony awarding the person who wrote the best article on sustainability. We are investing a lot on sustainable practices and we want our employees to engage in them.”*

Valuation rituals, because of the implicit or explicit gradation of the “good” involved in valuing, tended nevertheless to suggest “winners” and focus on issues of performance and economic results. For instance, Pietro, Sector Leader, notes the classing of different stores according to economic value, through “progress sessions”, *“Every four months we hold progress sessions, during which the company gives a prize to the stores based on the results compared to the previous year, and we all receive a bonus as a percentage of our salary.”*

These store-based progress sessions ritually established priorities, establishing hierarchies through prize-winning based on economic criteria.

Award ceremonies, by nature, tend to emphasize hierarchy over equality, although by framing awards at the team-level, the two aspects can co-exist. As Kevin, a Store Leader, explained, *“Last week our store won the award for the best result achieved in the last three months! We were so glad during the award ceremony and I was enthusiastic to see my collaborators so united with each other.”* Highlighting his store’s superiority over the other KingFish stores, he regained a foothold in the sense of equality by noting that his team was “so united with each other”.

Similarly, in keeping with the “liberated” enterprise theme, valuation rituals were often framed as collective “strategy” maximization or mission achievement. For instance, Davide’s (HR Store Manager) description de-briefing mixed performance and well-being motives within the event:

During de-briefing moments, I try to allocate people to those places where they should be, to reach the store's strategic aims.[...] The strength of these human de-briefings consists in locating the right person in the right place. It's very important to identify personal attitudes to assign them their right functions, both to reach store aims and for collaborators' well-being.

Here, the “human de-briefing” serves to maximize human resource allocation while giving each person a place in the team, not making absolute value judgments yet retaining a social structure based on maximum performance. Reinforcing this relative valuation through de-briefing legitimizes this allocation as a “team” activity and frames the performance principle as well-being oriented.

Resolving/Maintaining Tensions

As described above, rituals appeared around specific tensions within new management, addressing these tensions in diverse ways. While organizational ritual scholarship has noted the social-constitutive functions of ritual (Trice and Beyer, 1984), involving mediating organizational change and stability (Islam, 2015), it has not addressed how specific rituals address tensions in diverse ways empirically. These ritual “functions” do not assume that rituals always *successfully* address tensions, but that they are oriented toward tensions in a certain way (cf., Islam and Zyphur, 2009). We identified four broad functions around tensions – subordination, disavowal, segmentation and agonism – that were distributed unevenly across different ritual forms.

Subordination. When two aspects of new management came into tension – for instance, profit and desire for well-being – one way to deal with that tension was to hierarchically order those aspects, prioritizing and giving primacy to one over the other. Rituals acted as mechanisms for subordinating tensions by structuring goals and practices to position one principle in the service of the other, or to give more attention to one over the other.

For example, during formal meetings, such as the plenary sessions, a hierarchical dimension enacted through an authoritative style adopted by leaders. However, listening to workers’ suggestions across hierarchical levels suggested a practice of equality. In these rites, the hierarchical dimension prevailed over equality because the strategic final decision rested with the leader, at least for the duration of the ritual. As Gabriele (Store Leader) noted,

During the store plenaries, I adopt a participative leadership style, although I lead people to do what really is my main idea, I can also be contaminated by the decisions of others. I am an authoritative person, but it depends on the situation, because if you are not authoritative in certain situations, you risk losing your pulse and the group no longer sees you as a point of reference.

Acknowledging participation's goal of leading others to "what is really my main idea", Gabriele structures the interaction to subordinate equality to hierarchy, to not be "contaminated" by subordinates. Even the in-depth rituals of integration, involving days outside the store and in communal activities, reveal the subordination of equality to hierarchy:

When I organize weekends with my collaborators, we go out of the stores and I invent creative activities when they can really express themselves. However, I provide them with the initial orientation, otherwise, what is the role of bosses if we cannot orient people with specific guidelines? (Anna, Store Leader)

In a now familiar discursive structure, Anna's explanation begins with a collective moment of integration and then veers, a moment later, into a reaffirmation of the "role of the boss".

Nevertheless, there were moments in which the subordination of equality to hierarchy was less clear, or even reversed. Regarding the strategic management workshops, Alessandro (Store Leader) noted:

More and more we are creating workshops to involve people in decision-making, listening to their ideas and suggestions. We want to include people with strategic roles and skills, but that are strategic for the theme we are dealing with and that we will deal with. In this way, employees feel valued and listened to. The employees really feel at the centre.

Compared to Gabriele's statement, in which the "authoritative" principle provided employees' "point of reference," here, placing employees in the "centre" and making "strategy for" seems to turn the tables. In both examples, however, one pole of the tension is framed as primary, resolving the tension through subordinating one to the other. In short, the ritual structures within KingFish vacillated in which aspects they privileged, but in their subordination function, these were ordered, even if provisionally, to stabilize a culture in the face of ongoing tensions.

Disavowal. While subordination structured tensions by acknowledging and ordering their terms, disavowal worked to obscure tensions, emphasizing synthesis or unity. This "both-and" approach framed the idea of opposition as lacking managerial imagination and stressed that with an enlightened view, it was possible to have it all. We termed this function "disavowal" because it downplayed conflict and tended to negate, rather than confront, tensions.

During interviews, leaders often stressed both hierarchy and equality, putting them on the same level during some rites, e.g., the accompaniment process. As emphasized by Lorenzo, a Store Leader:

During the accompaniment process, I like to have fun with my workers. I consider myself one of them. I make jokes, play foosball, clown around with them. I think this is the correct way to motivate them in the workplace, by emphasizing the fact of being on their same level, in spite of my role of boss.

Here, Lorenzo speaks about his leadership role and discusses motivating his workers, placing him in a hierarchical position, while simultaneously considering himself “one of them”. Rather than “well-being *for* performance”, as in subordination, disavowal thus took the form of “well-being *as/with* performance”, discursively occulting a tension.

In terms of the profit vs. flourishing tension, still with reference to the accompaniment process, the profit dimension was often mingled with flourishing. As Eugenio, the Supply-Chain Director, noted, “*In KingFish we don’t care for results, instead, we take care of people! However, by doing so, results come, and the economic goals are achieved.*” Again, the “A and B” structure appears, without a clear subordination.

Rituals that obscured tensions occurred during other rites of renewal, for instance, during the coaching process. With reference to this process, Giulia (HR Store Manager) noted,

During the progress and development day, my boss told me 'imagine the day that for you is the best one for our shop, for our committee, you have total carte blanche'. I made him some proposals that were quite innovative saying pros and cons of this proposal and he, while obviously deepening my reasoning, said 'if for you it is linear and consistent with all the talk we are making about Pescara for me it's ok!'. I implemented the day as I imagined it, just as it was for me, so it was for our store.

Giulia’s idea to reimagine the store according to her plan was given “total carte blanche”, although her boss “obviously deepen[ed]” her reasoning afterwards. In such cases, disavowal worked by building a sense of unity in which tensions were not openly acknowledged, or if acknowledge, were mentioned only to immediately diffuse them, by denying contradiction or rationalizing the tension as masking an underlying unity.

Segmentation. Although subordinating and disavowing differed in their recognition of and approach to tensions, they both focused on the disappearance of tensions, by ordering their terms (subordination) or by negating difference (disavowal). By contrast, in segmentation strategies, the persistence of different spheres was acknowledged without subsuming them into a superordinate system, causal explanation or ordering of priorities. The result was a differentiated space where each term constituted a semi-autonomous sphere.

For instance, the night before a new branch opening, a party was organized, inviting employees' families and not only the professional team. This set the stage for the opening, involving a symbolic transition, as Camilla (Internal Communication) explains:

When we open a new shop we organize an internal party, during which we also invite relatives and have a party the night before the opening, so the director invites the family and relatives to preview the store before it opens to the public. Then every morning at the opening the ribbon is cut by the first customer who enters the store.

Here, the duality of personal and professional is represented by the dual-structure of the ritual, where the "internal party" consecrates the site before the routine ribbon-cutting which represents the market opening. Here, the ongoing co-presence of the performance- and human-centered aspects are dramatized by the structure of the ritual, without resolving these principles hierarchically.

The profit vs. flourishing tension was segmented during moments of conviviality, in which work-related issues were avoided, as Alice (HR Store Manager) explained: "*During food time or coffee breaks we talk about dishes, about wine, because among us there are many wine fans. So we present ourselves as people and not roles, this helps solve relational tensions, which could negatively impact people's performance.*" Solving internal conflicts is fundamental to not "negatively impact people's performance." However, the ritual sections off a time where "roles" are bracketed in informal moments, for example "during food time or coffee breaks".

In segmentation approaches, therefore, the two sides of the tension are maintained, although their tension is reduced by spatially or temporally segmenting their expression. For example, in relation to the hierarchy vs. equality tension, several interviewees stressed the importance of relaxing time out of work, such as remaining together 10 minutes after closing to talk about extra-work topics:

It's my habit to go down with the guys on Saturday or Sunday evenings when I'm closing 8.20/25 p.m. but not to talk about work. I ask them 'What are you doing tomorrow? Sunday?' Maybe you also laugh at an episode that happened and you don't talk about during the work day. [...] I think that those 10 minutes are necessary to make sure that people after a day of work release for a moment that tension they have accumulated and that they team up with each other. These things that go beyond work have a positive impact on people (Pietro, Sector Leader)

In this case, the hierarchical factor emerges by manager-led initiative, by closing the store “to go down with the guys.” However, by avoiding talking about work, Pietro allows employees to relate on more equal terms outside of store closure. The two spheres remain separate, and specific practices are directed to each.

Agonism. Similar to segmentation, what we term “agonism” involved maintaining and recognizing diverse discourses and values. However, rather than relegating the terms to different action spheres, agonism functioned to maintain and affirm tensions as a constitutive part of the organization itself. We use the term “agonism” here because this strategy resonates with recent scholarship around the organizational functions of ongoing discursive struggle (cf., Rhodes et al., 2020). Sensing that this approach was qualitatively different from the others and had implications for the tension-mediating functions of rituals more generally, we moved from a “tension-reduction” concept of rituals, dominant in the literature (Islam and Zyphur, 2009), to a more general “tension-mediation” view, which was made possible by the concept of ritual agonism.

In some cases, opposing aspects of management were openly acknowledged as an ongoing issue, without the need to resolve the tension or to disavow it. The resulting impasse is felt as a dilemma by actors, as exemplified by Dario, a Sector Leader:

I strongly believe in promoting people's well-being during our workshops. However, I do think we cannot concentrate only on this element. Indeed, if we act in this way, we risk losing the attention towards our clients.

While Dario's separation of the economic (client-focused) and the humanistic (well-being) is reminiscent of a segmentation approach, he recognizes the contradiction inherent in maintaining a dual focus, although he does not propose a resolution to the tension. In other instances, rituals

were used to actively engage contradictions without dissolving the underlying tension, as Lorenzo, a Store Leader, described regarding a formal recognition ceremony,

Every three months there is the store evaluation related to economic results. In these formal moments, we experience convivial and ludic times. We discuss how to better work on people's well-being. We have dinner together and award the prize for the economic result reached.

During this occasion, a prize is conferred through formal ceremony. The ritual also provides a forum to discuss well-being, mingling economic and “ludic” moments and providing a back-door for social integration. In this way, the co-location of a profit-centered event and a discussion of well-being created the possibility for on-going dialogue about the social life of the organization, although this was never claimed as the goal of the ritual as such.

Stressing even more the ongoing aspect of agonism, Francesca notes that “*our rituals are important because they give space for confrontation, we invent them to unravel that thing so we leave with something co-constructed by everyone, to take away the embarrassment with the boss and fear of talking openly*”. In such moments, she continues, ritual moments are central to promoting a culture of critique:

So the really important thing for us as a team is confrontation, confrontation, confrontation. Even if we get angry at each other for that day, we say it, since it is important to break down the barriers with our own boss in that moment. It is an effort because there is a fear of retaliation. But knowing to say it in a certain way and also accept critique and grow is not easy.

Differently than in the previous tension-related strategies, acknowledging the profit motive, rather than crowding out well-being, put both issues on the table and allowed critical moments rather than easy resolution.

Such discourses seem quite different from the liberating management as described in Picard and Islam (2020), since the promises of liberation were very modest, and the process seemed ongoing and requiring patience. Deciding on “freedom margins” does not repeat the emancipatory rhetoric often seen in the literature on liberated companies (Carney and Getz, 2015), but does open a space for negotiation. Ritualizing this kind of agonistic space, while avoiding romantic ideas about community and self-expression, provided a forum for working out differences that was less evident in the previous ritualistic forms.

As such, agonism as described here should not be considered as radically democratic in itself, but can co-exist with authority structures, testing their extent. As Francesca explains, “sometimes we confront each other maybe even raising our voices. But in the end we end up making sense of the common sense of the good family man who has to come up with a solution that considers the opinions of all”. Again with the ambivalence of paternalistic hierarchy (“good family man”), the possibility of dialogue is nevertheless sought after, and sometimes struggled for, as she continues:

We do it as a company ritual but are aware that not everyone does it the same. It's a privilege for us because it allows to measure the temperature of work but also the individual, because that is what is being co-constructed with the boss [...]. Without these moments, engagement is not complete and disagreeable situations sediment, pebbles become mountains in terms of relationships.

This idea of cumulative effects of ongoing interactions does not aim at negating, but at working with, ongoing differences, and ritualizing moments of exchange across differences provides a mechanism for such work. Alberto (Store Leader) notes that de-briefing moments have such a function, delegating and decentralizing practices:

Within my store, I moved departments, created new roles, incorporated the café, invented initiatives to increase customers, invented events that translated into revenues. I did all this by collaborating with my employees. During our daily de-briefing meetings, I launched these ideas and they developed them.

In the agonistic mode, ritual moments such as “daily de-briefing meetings” activate a confrontational process that can nevertheless exist within the hierarchical order. To what extent such agonism can displace this order itself, is yet to be seen.

RITUALIZING TENSIONS: TOWARD A THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS

Based on the above findings, we constructed a theoretical framework to describe the process by which tensions become ritualized and how such ritualizations reflect distinct approaches to tensions in liberated companies. In Figure 2, we conceptually illustrate these relationships.

----- Insert Figure 2 about here -----

As outlined in Figure 2, rituals took on distinct orientations regarding tensions, sometimes structured around mediating hierarchy/equality, sometimes profit/flourishing. For example, rituals of valuation, concerned with establishing value hierarchies, were more suited to the hierarchy/equality relation, while rituals of integration, with their social inclusion orientation, were focused on creating common goals while integrating members socially. Moreover, these rituals functioned differently with regards to how they modified underlying tensions to structure, deny, or maintain tensions. We described these functions in two broad groups. First, subordination and disavowal were grouped together because of their focus on reducing tensions through unification, either through hierarchy (subordination) or negating differences (disavowal). By contrast, segmentation and agonism maintain the original tension as ongoing parts of the organization. They differ however, in their approach to maintaining tensions; while segmentation promotes a “both-and” structure where different terms coexist, agonism maintains tension while encouraging ongoing dialogue or debate. We summarize the forms of ritual mediation of tension in Figure 3 below.

----- Insert Figure 3 about here -----

While the above framework is an initial step in understanding the role of rituals in mediating tensions in new management, several theoretical consequences are already evident from laying out the terms in this way, producing new questions around the practices used to mediate managerial tensions. We elaborate on these consequences and questions below.

DISCUSSION

Our study used a ritual lens to understand the tensions arising from new management ideology, asking how ritual’s role as a mediator of tensions can inform ongoing attempts to understand the normative stakes of new management (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). Control at KingFish was largely “neo-normative”, in as much as it worked through promoting the self-expression of employees (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011) and the promise of community (Toraldó et al., 2019). Yet the “liberated enterprise” project generated tensions, ambivalences and contradictions similar to those in other neo-normative contexts (e.g., Deery et al., 2002; Kinnie et al., 2000); in our case, the persistence of hierarchical status differences problematized the push for equality, and the need for performance struggled to frame itself in terms of human flourishing.

Rituals intervened at moments of tension, shaping tensions to hide, structure, or maintain them to reflect the ambivalent aspects of new management. Theorizing these aspects and the related ritual processes helped us shape two broad contributions to the literature, described below.

Contribution to New Management and Liberated Enterprises

Organizational scholarship around new management has explored how new forms of control emerge from the remains of traditional organizational forms (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Morris et al, 2016; Reed, 2011). These new forms of control enroll aspects of participation (Daudigeos et al., 2021), well-being (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013), authenticity (Fleming, 2009), life/work conflation (Land and Taylor, 2010; Maravelias, 2016) and proactivity (Ekman, 2014) to create “enchanted” workplaces (Endrissat et al., 2015), giving rise to a new management ideology (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). The diverse approaches used to study this phenomenon have tied together the emancipatory promises of such workplaces with critiques of the ideological uses of such promises for neo-normative control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). Faced with the ambivalence of domination and emancipation heralded by the new management ideology, scholars have turned to emic perspective to understand the practices by which tensions are negotiated on the ground (Toraldó et al., 2019). Finding contemporary organizations to be replete with contradictions and tensions, such research has documented the resulting normative pressure, violence or confusion (Picard and Islam, 2020). On this basis, the question arises how managers implement practices to navigate such tensions during attempts to “liberate” their companies.

As KingFish shifted towards a liberated management style, associates navigated between hierarchical controls and equality promotion, attempting to balance employee flourishing with profit demands that remained present, although often implicit, across activities. Dealing with these tensions involved constructing “symbolic manipulations”, as managers tried to shape employees’ psychological, emotional, and moral orientations (Willmott, 1993). In the absence of, or reticence to use, formal controls under liberating leadership, cultural and psycho-social coordination became central to organizing (Kunda, 1992). Put simply, liberation management at KingFish mingled attempts to liberate employees with continued organizational controls. In this scenario, rituals provided a mechanism by which tensions were shaped, foreclosed or maintained.

As argued earlier, literature on neo-normative managerial control has recognized the tensions arising from such control, as expressed in an array of forms, from aesthetic and emotional worker controls (Endrissat et al., 2015; Hochschild, 1983; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009), to

employee involvement and self-expression (Ekman, 2014; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), to more fluid forms of post-bureaucratic organizing (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Morris et al., 2016). While some empirical attempts have explored how actors in practice respond to such tensions (e.g., Ekman, 2014; Land and Taylor, 2010; Toraldo et al., 2019), rituals have only been mentioned in passing in this literature (Fleming, 2009) and have not received empirical or theoretical elaboration. Nevertheless, rituals provide an important piece of this story because of their ability to “enchant” workplaces while coordinating and controlling interpretations and behavior (Endrissat et al., 2015). The current study contributes to understanding new management by examining the tension-mediating role of rituals in neo-normative control.

Specifically, ritual helps illuminate a central dilemma within new management, that of the relation between domination and emancipation and the conditions under which “liberation” supports new forms of ideological control. We noted different ritual processes by which tensions were subsumed under the aegis of control, through ordering or disavowal, or alternatively, were maintained through segmentation or agonism. While segmentation maintained separate but co-existent terms, agonism placed terms tensions into the open, reflecting “moments of dissensus and disagreement where the experience and moment of emancipation is to be found” (Huault et al., 2014, p. 33). While the theory around the emancipatory potential of rituals remains in need of development, as we call for below, we set the stage for such a development by creating criteria around which such potential could be assessed, and a framework through which ritual can be situated at the crux of organizational tensions.

Contribution to Understanding the Organizational Rituals

Our study also contributes to scholarship on organizational rituals, a field of significant longevity but whose empirical base remains relatively sparse (cf., Smith and Stewart, 2011), particularly around critical approaches to ritual (Islam et al., 2019; Zukin and Papadantonakis, 2017). Applied to new management, rituals frame tensions as a hierarchy (subordination), separation of spheres (segmentation), opportunities for confrontation (agonism) or else deny the existence of tensions (disavowal). While most empirical work around ritual has focused on the unifying effects of rituals (e.g., Dacin et al., 2010; Ren and Gray, 2009), foundational theory has focused on ritual at moments of crisis (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960[1909]), a point that has not been examined empirically in organizational scholarship. By contrast, our study took tensions as the starting point for our examination and came to rituals as a tension-mediating device. In this

way, rather than beginning with a ritual (e.g., an award ceremony [Anand and Watson, 2004]; a dining ritual [Dacin et al., 2010]) and asking what it means), we began with a situation where managers searched for ways to navigate an organization that had been loosened from traditional controls, and drew upon rituals as an explanatory tool.

A consequence of this approach is that, rather than a single ritual and its context, we were able to compare different ritual functions across a tension-filled organization, and to compare the diverse forms of mediation they provided. Doing so allowed us to compare rituals that were “conservative” in their order-maintaining function with those which were more “progressive” in their promotion of difference and dialogue. Disavowing any tensions of liberated companies, between hierarchical authority and the ideal of equality, or between profit and the well-being of team members, could be considered an ideological promotion of unity through obfuscating multivocality (De Waal Malefyt and Morais, 2010). On the other hand, subordination accepts difference as long as the terms of the difference are ritually ordered so as to fit them in a hierarchy of priorities (Islam and Keliher, 2018). Both of these strategies involve an essentially social-reproductive goal of maintaining order, with difference dismissed or demoted. Segmentation, on the other hand, appears as a “liberal” strategy in that it establishes separate value spheres -for example, work and leisure- and secures the boundaries of each to create “checks and balances” between spheres. Agonism, by contrast, seems to be the only ritual strategy that allows for a radical working through of tensions, by maintaining difference while confronting the terms with each other in practice.

While these four kinds of ritual practice are new and require further theorizing, their potential for a critical theory of organizational rituals should be evident. Faced with the question of whether rituals are dominating or emancipatory, we suggest that the answer involves the degree to which they frame constitutive tensions in ways that allow their coexistence and dialectical working through. By opening the black box of rituals beyond the broad function of “establishing unity”, our exploration revives the ritual concept so as to be more useful in a complex and differentiated organizational world, where the lines between system-maintenance and system-challenge are increasingly blurry, itself a core feature of the new management paradigm.

Current Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the present contributions, the current study has limitations that suggest future research directions. First, our sample was composed largely (although not entirely) of managers,

and despite some variation in job roles, we did not systematically compare these in terms of how they engaged with ritual. This was, in part, because the liberating leadership program discursively mingled different roles, between leadership, management, and other associates, reducing the clarity of these job distinctions. However, as noted above, the hierarchical element would often reappear abruptly, or be mentioned obliquely, suggesting that a nuanced examination of role differences in new management is warranted. Within the context of liberating leadership, such scholarship could build on Picard and Islam's (2020) problematization of the "absence" of leaders; however, understanding how hierarchy is built or obscured through ritual would be an important addition to such work.

Similarly, as a methodological point, our interviews covered a wide array of rituals, from the rare, "full" (Smith and Stewart, 2011) or "capital-R" (Senft and Basso, 2009) rituals, to micro, everyday interactional rituals, formulaic but not highly formalized, and more ad hoc. This broad survey of various kinds of rituals allowed us to delineate integration, valuation and renewal rituals, and provided a broad-brush approach that is appropriate for early stage theorizing around a heterogeneous phenomenon (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). However, ritual studies have excelled specifically in contexts of thick ethnographic description (cf., Bell, 2009), and to gain a fine-grained understanding of the mediation properties of specific rituals, such thick empirical approaches are recommended in future research.

Theoretically, based on the above contributions, we can propose a future research agenda that promotes the study of ritual practices in the context of new management generally, and liberated companies specifically. First, the nature and dynamics of tensions in contemporary organizations is complex, and rituals may be particularly suited for or operate differently across different types of tensions. For instance, some tensions may be in opposition but not radically incompatible, giving rise to possibilities for hybridization (cf., Battilana and Lee, 2014). On the other hand, some tensions may involve paradoxes (Sundaramurthy and Lewis, 2003), or other irreconcilable tensions. Still others may involve dialectical process by which resolution of a tension can be a driver for change (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Collinson, 2014). In the current case, it is uncertain whether the observed tensions result from the past traces of older managerial ideologies still present in the workplace, or whether there are inherent contradictions of managerial ideology or capitalist organization itself (Bell, 1978; Fleming, 2009). In each case, the possibility of resolution and the forms it would take would be distinct, giving rise to different ritual functions. How subordination, disavowal, segmentation and/or agonism are ritualized may

have much to do with the nature of the underlying tensions, and future research should seek understanding of this relationship.

Second, and relatedly, how different forms of ritual and ritualization practices channel tension, and with what organizational effects, remains in need of study. We begin to address this question by noting how different ritual types of renewal, integration and valuation – operate differently to mediate hierarchy/equality tensions and profit/flourishing tensions. A much broader question, however, is whether certain ritual practices emerge from certain organizational oppositions, such that one could diagnose underlying structural tensions from the kinds of ritual formations developed in response to these. While that possibility remains speculative, empirical research in this direction would be highly valuable. Similarly, finer-grained explorations of when ritual practices take on large-scale, “capital-R” forms versus the micro-practices of interaction rituals may reveal different underlying structural conditions.

Third, specifically within the context of new management ideologies and neo-normative control, such research may inform the overarching question of how the ostensibly emancipatory claims of new management co-exist with the ongoing precarity and continued hierarchy of such workplaces (cf., Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2014; Ekman, 2014; Endrissat et al., 2015; Fleming, 2009; Toraldo et al., 2019). Applying ritual to such areas problematizes earlier discussions of ritual as an expression of organizational culture (Trice and Beyer, 1984), refocusing on the dialectics of control versus transgression as ever-present in moments of ritual (Turner, 1969). This refocusing can bring the study of organizational rituals into dialogue with more critical perspectives on management. What Fleming (2009, p. 35) evocatively terms the “one-dimensional rituals of petit bourgeois life” have been critiqued in this literature, but not as rituals, and not drawing upon the resources of ritual theory. Doing so may help delineate the lines of domination and emancipation that seem to be so entwined in new management ideologies (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002), and assess the emancipatory potentials of ritual.

Such work should explore how rituals channel and mobilize, or else foreclose and discipline, the dialectical tensions that abound in such organizations. This opens a rich area for research at the interface of ritual and critical scholarship, where complex questions of practice and performance have come to the forefront of scholarly interest (Harding et al., 2017). We suggest that this critical opening in the practice literature can dovetail with critical perspective on ritual practice to provide new ways of explaining the changing nature of organizing.

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NOTES

¹Pseudonyms have been given to all individuals and organizations.

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Table I. Overview of interview data

Interviewees			Organizational level	Length (60-90 min.)
	Sex	Age		
Alberto	M	42	Store leader	60
Alessandro	M	41	Store leader	63
Alice	F	38	HR Store Manager	85
Anna	F	45	Store leader	72
Camilla	F	34	Internal Communication	82
Carla	F	39	Customer Relationship and Services Manager	65
Costanzo	M	40	Store leader	61
Dario	M	31	Sector leader	73
Davide	M	43	HR Store Manager	89
Enrico	M	46	Store leader	77
Eugenio	M	37	Supply Chain Director	64
Federico	M	28	Cashier	63
Francesca	F	50	Risk specialist audit	71
Gabriele	M	51	Store leader	74
Gaia	F	32	Sector leader	68
Giacomo (double interview)	M	53	HR Director	90 - 81
Giulia	F	30	HR Store Manager	88
Ilenia	F	31	Sector leader	67
Kevin	M	37	Sector leader	72
Lorenzo	M	44	Store leader	75
Marco	M	47	CSR Manager	65
Marta (double interview)	F	45	HR Store Manager	89 - 77
Paola	F	29	Cashier	61
Pietro	M	33	Sector leader	84
Tiziana	F	30	Cashier	72
Valentina	F	31	Cashier	63
Valeria	F	44	Supply Chain Manager	71

Table II. Examples of the overarching theoretical dimensions

<i>Theoretical dimensions</i>	<i>Conceptual Sub-Groups</i>	<i>Illustrative Examples from Data</i>
Hierarchy vs. Equality	Participation	<i>This is a company which invested a lot in 'people's participation'. Now, we have to understand how to preserve this heritage in the long term (Gabriele, Store Leader)</i>
		<i>I ask for my collaborators' help in making decisions, in as much as they live the store more than me, so they know what the clients desire. Sometimes, my collaborators are able to see things that I don't see (Giacomo, HR Director)</i>
		<i>We win where we are able to integrate all the store employees, from cashiers to store leaders, in our decision-making process (Davide, HR Store Manager)</i> *****
	Sharing	<i>Our company is endowed with this great gift of an organizational culture made of people, values and sharing (Valeria, Supply chain Manager)</i>
		<i>It is difficult to work in this type of company if you don't have this culture of listening and sharing in your DNA (Marta, HR Store Manager)</i>
		<i>Sharing is that attitude that carries on our company every day (Eugenio, Supply chain Director)</i> *****
Informal Climate	<i>Being on first name terms allows people to express themselves in a quiet way. Whether it's with the CEO or whoever you want (Federico, Cashier)</i>	
	<i>Here we dress with the same company uniform, it doesn't matter the hierarchical level we belong to. Beyond the fact that this choice strengthens equality among us, one of the advantages of the company uniform is that every day I don't have to decide what to wear! (Eugenio, Supply chain Director)</i>	
	<i>We prefer to call our employees 'collaborators,' so to not highlight the different hierarchical roles between us (Giacomo, HR Director)</i> *****	
Profit vs. Flourishing	Collaboration	<i>It is true that even before there was a collaborative style within our store, but we are becoming more and more inclined to listen to each other and grow together (Gaia, Sector Leader)</i>
		<i>It was a great gift from the boss' part to give me the time and resources to think about my own project (Camilla, Internal Communication)</i>
		<i>In KingFish you can see how people both collaborate and help with each other, for example, in substituting each other some work hours (Eugenio, Supply chain Director)</i> *****
	Coaching	<i>I always suggest to my employees, 'When you have so many things to do, don't panic! Just do the things you are able to do!' (Lorenzo, Store Leader)</i>
		<i>We change people's roles only when they are strongly prepared to cope with the new role (Alice, HR Store Manager)</i>

Rituals	Relaxing	<p><i>If some collaborators come talk to me for a particular problem, I don't solve their problems. I give them those conditions to solve the problem by themselves (Kevin, Sector Leader)</i> *****</p> <p><i>In the store, as you can see, there are canteens and small kitchens where we can spend leisure activities, for example eating together or playing foosball (Ilenia, Sector Leader)</i></p> <p><i>So being together, seeing each other in other contexts helps us to make a team, to get to know each other better, to take those 5 minutes of breath looking out, so avoiding to look exclusively at what we do, to fall into everyday life, into operations that never helps you to make long-term strategic choices, and that we must do in short (Marco, CSR Manager)</i></p> <p><i>I always tell to my collaborators that we are not superheroes. Therefore, I suggest them to valorize in the best manner both their holidays and their relaxing times. And if they are not able to work half a day nothing will happen; we don't have to save lives in our work! (Giulia, HR Store Manager)</i> *****</p>
	Rites of renewal	<p><i>We usually do the summer plenary in the evening; we create a moment of celebration, we make a barbecue in the store (Valentina, Cashier)</i></p> <p><i>Every time we have a reunion focused on goals' achievement, these moments correspond to the social moment as well (Eugenio, Supply chain Director)</i></p> <p><i>In occasion of training activities, receiving feedback and proposals from my collaborators confirms to me that the aspect of a shared learning is very strong and is experienced by all. So even during the selection process we look for profiles that are aligned with this corporate culture and these corporate values (Giacomo, HR Director)</i> *****</p>
	Rites of integration	<p><i>Well, each store finds its own rituals. We have some festive rituals where we meet, for example, during the Christmas party. Then if nobody takes care of the organization of these festive parties, you realize it and ask yourself why (Paola, Cashier)</i></p> <p><i>Meeting in the company relaxing spaces, to play foosball or ping-pong, allows us to reinforce the relationships among us (Valeria, Supply chain Manager)</i></p>
	Rites of valuation	<p><i>I observe my collaborators' work so as to give feedback to the person in occasion of informal meetings, because through the feedback you make the person grow and give him or her axes to work (Ilenia, Sector Leader)</i> *****</p> <p><i>Among the rituals we have the progress bonus, paid every 3 months to all employees and based on the turnover of the store and on two lines of marginality (Dario, Sector Leader)</i></p> <p><i>Every four months we hold progress sessions, during which the company gives a prize to the stores based on the results obtained compared to the previous year, and we all receive a bonus as a percentage of our salary (Pietro, Sector Leader)</i></p> <p><i>This year, a smartphone was given to those store's employees who achieved the best productivity level. Sometimes, the company confers special plaques to those workers who distinguished for their economic results achieved (Ilenia, Sector Leader)</i></p>

Functions	Subordination	<p>*****</p> <p><i>The internal store plenaries serve to lead workers towards the achievement of the same economic corporate goals (Valeria, Supply chain Manager)</i></p> <p><i>Behind workers' well-being that we try to foster, there are also some KPI to be reached in this company. In fact, every three months, a money prize is given to the store who achieves the best performance (Enrico, Store Leader)</i></p> <p><i>In recent years, more than focusing on rituals oriented towards the customer, we focus more on rituals oriented towards collaborators' well-being, and this has impacted all our reality (Tiziana, Cashier)</i></p> <p>*****</p>
	Disavowal	<p><i>In occasion of coaching activities, we adopt the feedback's logic, which consists in providing and receiving feedbacks in a reciprocal way. Therefore, both leaders and followers can learn from each other (Enrico, Store Leader)</i></p> <p><i>Spending informal moments together, such as having breakfast or lunch together, is not always a team habit. Sometimes, the team leader has to promote these types of habits. In this sense, I act as a guide (Ilenia, Sector Leader)</i></p> <p><i>In occasion of workshops, I share my thoughts with the group not only because my leader told me to act in this way, but to build something together as well (Paola, Cashier)</i></p> <p>*****</p>
	Segmentation	<p><i>When we want, we spontaneously decide to have lunch together, or we organize a pic-nic. And there, you can see who wants to adhere and who doesn't want. These moments help to sustain the everyday working activity (Camilla, Internal Communication)</i></p> <p><i>During the accompaniment moments, it can happen that I don't talk about work. Conversely, I make people reflect on the sense of their actions, therefore, I try to motivate them (Anna, Store Leader)</i></p> <p><i>To the KingFish dinner, all employees are invited, and their families as well. It's a sharing moment. During the last dinner, my colleague's daughter gave me a letter that really touched me (Anna, Store Leader)</i></p> <p>*****</p>
	Agonism	<p><i>Within our store, we decided to organize workshops with our collaborators, just to not make decisions alone. We thought this was the best way to obtain a more profitable solution, by involving employees in our strategic decisions. Moreover, in this way they felt surely both listened and valorized (Gabriele, Store Leader)</i></p> <p><i>When I was a Store Leader, I organized different activities with my collaborators outside of the store. I gave them the goals to achieve, by making them reproduce some store internal activities, for instance, through meals' preparation. Then, I gave them just few suggestions, in as much as they had to conduct their activities in an autonomous way (Giacomo, HR Director)</i></p> <p><i>During workshops, the store leader is our guide in making decisions. Moreover, he observes what we do. Each of us can propose what he/she wants in terms of store innovations. Then, the boss allows you to understand if the idea you propose will be profitable or not (Dario, Sector Leader)</i></p>

Figure 1. Overview of data analysis

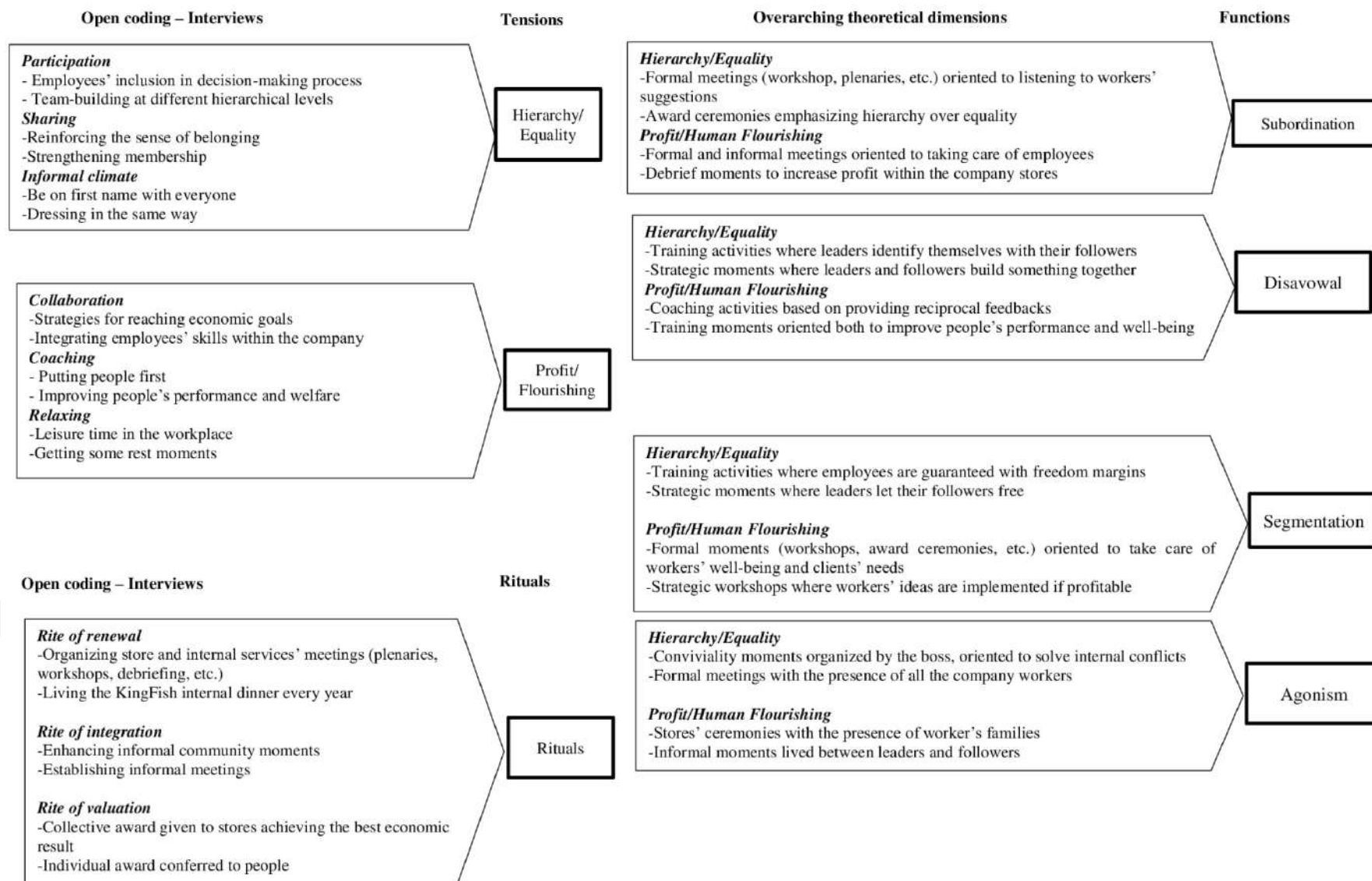


Figure 2. Conceptual illustrations of tensions and rituals' mediation

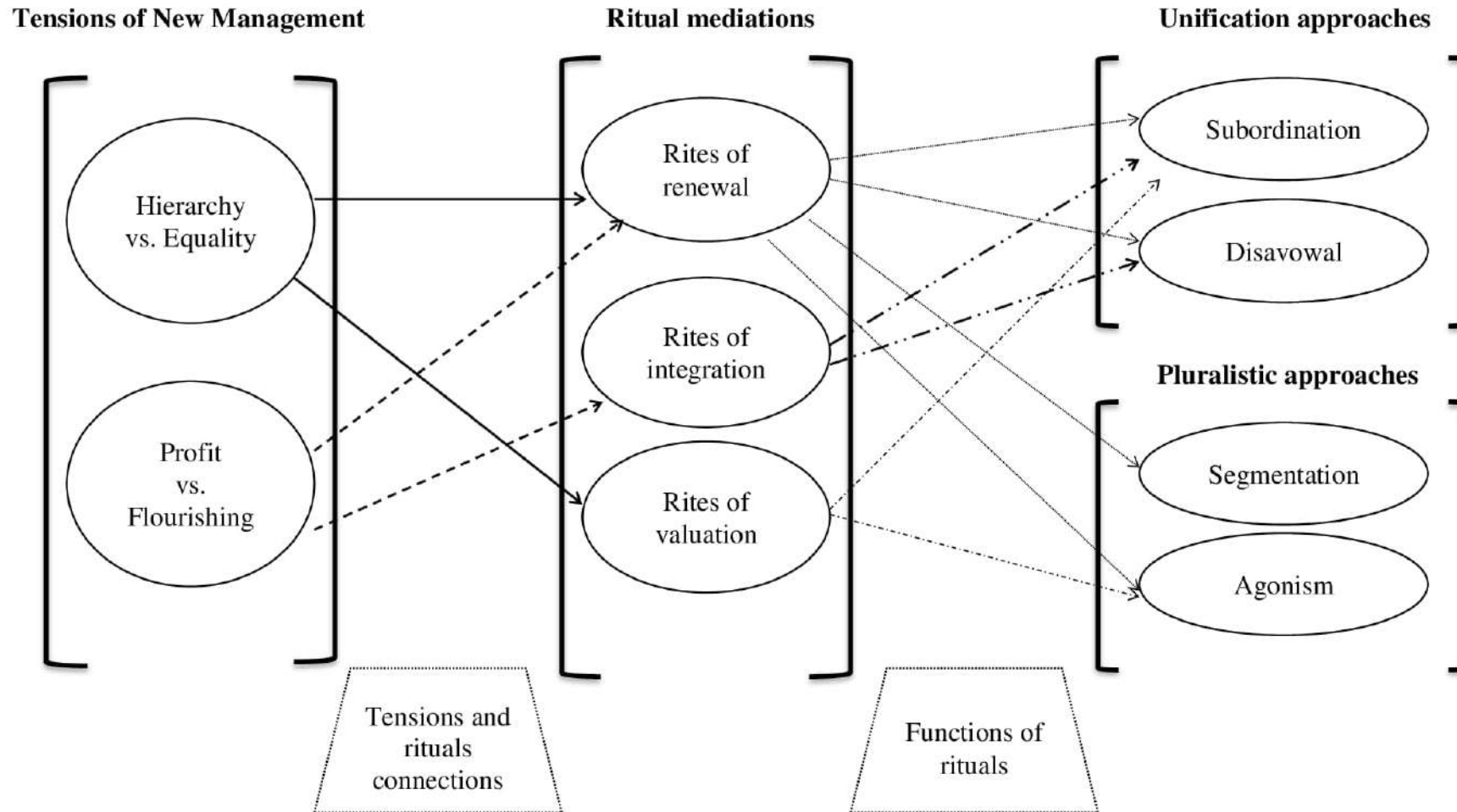


Figure 3. Ritual strategies for dealing with organizational tensions

