

Elements of Ceremony

Pattern Language

A pattern language is a method of describing and sharing successful design practices. Architect Christopher Alexander introduced the world to the idea of pattern languages in his 1977 book *A Pattern Language*. The idea has since been used in several other fields and we propose a pattern language for ceremony. The following is our definition of ceremony:

Ceremony is a purposeful ritual social interaction to complete an element of work, requiring sacrifice, and rewarding participants with positive emotional energy.

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An element of a ceremony is a technique or practice we find used again and again in many different ceremonies. For example, having everyone stand in unison is an element of a ceremony. Lighting a candle is an element of ceremony. People standing in unison or lighting a candle is seen in ceremony after ceremony over thousands of years.

Describing the element and capturing why it is used helps us describe ceremonies and helps in creating new ceremonies. When creating a new ceremony, it is nice to use elements which have been proven to work. These elements represent our ceremonial heritage.

Sounds and Silence Elements

Sounds and silence are powerful elements in a ceremony. One company we visited announced their morning Team Ceremony by playing music for the five minutes leading up to the ceremony and then striking a large gong to start the ceremony. Both could be heard across the entire floor of the building. Since this was an “all hands” meeting being heard everywhere was appropriate.

Sound is an element of ceremony when the sound conveys specific ceremonial meaning and direction. Sounds and associated applications include:

- Bell Ringing—announce the beginning and end of a ceremony, draw attention to a state change, flag a rule violation, celebrate an accomplishment.
- Clapping—signal approval, provide recognition, show appreciation.
- Drumming—build anticipation, signal support, facilitate synchronized movement.
- Music—announce ceremonies, elements, events, beginnings, endings, breaks, facilitate synchronized movement.
- Pounding—signal approval, disapproval, support.
- Stomping— signal approval, disapproval, support.
- Whistle Blowing—get attention, change focus, flag a rule violation, issue a warning.

These sounds and others provide a great deal of texture and structure to ceremony.

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Silence is the absence of sound. In an otherwise normal or noisy environment everyone become silent at once is a powerful signal. It quickly focuses or refocuses a ceremony to the next ceremonial element.

Silencing Ourselves

Silencing ourselves is a great ceremonial element to prepare for what is next. Silencing ourselves is stopping external and internal chatter. It starts by stopping talking out loud and continues by silencing our inner thoughts and focusing them on the ceremony.

Silence invites focus, contemplation, and reflection on the current ceremonial forms. It invokes individual states where the participants can be open to what is happening in the ceremony. Our brains have many different parts, some dramatically more verbose than others. Participants often need to quiet the room and themselves to be present for the ceremony.

Silencing Our Devices

Silencing devices is another powerful ceremonial element. A valuable element at the beginning of the ceremony to silence or turn off cell phones, watches, computers, and other electronic distractions which may negatively impact the participant's ability to focus on the ceremony.

If you specifically add an element to turn off devices it is nice to add a similar *Restoring Our Devices* element at the end of the ceremony, to turn them back on.

Constraining Elements

A constraining element limits an aspect of the ceremony such as how long the ceremony runs or how many people may be speaking at one time.

Boxing

Boxing is a constraining element of ceremony where a specific limit is set on the length of time spent in the ceremony or one of its elements. The activity must fit within the box.

- *Time-boxing* is limiting the ceremony by time. The ceremony is always over after a certain period has elapsed, for example: the ceremony is over after 10 minutes.
- *Result-boxing* is limiting the ceremony by a specific result. The ceremony is always over after a certain result has been achieved, for example: the ceremony is over when the work list has been put in order of highest to lowest priority.

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A box lets participants know when they are free to leave. In many organizations, you are not supposed to leave a meeting until the organizer officially declares the meeting over. If the meeting was time-boxed to 10 minutes, then participants are free to leave after 10 minutes. If the meeting is results boxed to ending when “all the tasks have been estimated,” then people are free to leave when the estimates are completed. They don’t have to wait for some other signal. People leaving is a strong signal that they have better things to do.

A time-box and results-box may be used simultaneously: the ceremony is over after “a list of tasks has been prioritized” or “30 minutes has passed.” In this case, whatever order we have after 30 minutes is the order we are using.

Talking Rule

A *talking-rule* is an element of ceremony which constrains talking. It is any rule which seeks to direct and constrain talking. In an ideation ceremony, a talking rule may be established which flags any talk which is critical of an idea. If someone starts criticizing an idea during ideation a bell is rung to end the criticism. The goal of a talking rule against criticizing ideas is to encourage maximum idea flow without fear of an idea being ridiculed, sometimes we need the crazy ideas to inspire other better ideas.

Talking Token

A *talking-token* is a visual item held by participants during a ceremony to signal they are the only ones who are permitted to speak at that moment. Nobody but the person holding the talking token speaks.

A talking token forces people to focus on one speaker at a time, prevents interruptions, and eliminates distracting side conversations. It is a powerful way to let the other party be heard during an argument or a debate.

The purpose of constraining elements to provide focus for the ceremony. They prevent ceremony from dragging on and simply filling the available time like many meetings.

Boxing is used on many regularly scheduled ceremonies.

Assembly Formations

Assembling is the first element in any ceremony, it is how a group arranges themselves physically in space as they begin the ceremony. The formation they naturally create has a strong impact on the ceremony. Listed here are six common formations. Formations should be understood and actively chosen to best support the goals of the ceremony. Most business meetings default to a sitting conference formation, which is not at all the best formation for most ceremonies.

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Circle

Circling is an element of ceremony where the participants physically arrange themselves in a circle, positioned so they can easily see the faces of all the other participants. Circling better facilitates communication on an equal footing. Pragmatically, if everyone must speak it can be easier to hear people in a circle, so circling is useful when anyone may speak or when everyone is required to speak.

Circles remove some status queues as there is no head of the table, front of the room, or obvious lead. In cooperative and leaderless ceremonies, they take focus away from a potential leader and share it evenly with all the participants.

Conference

Conference is an element of ceremony where participants physically arrange themselves around the outer edge of a table. The table surface facilitates taking notes, sharing documents, and using personal computers. This formation may focus attention on a computer screen or white board if one is used during the ceremony.

Lecture

Lecture is an element of ceremony where participants physically arrange themselves facing a focal point. Typically, it is row of participants in lines all facing one direction.

Lecture is usually focused at a single point at the front which, depending on the size of the lecture space, is close to some participants and far away from other participants.

Lecture typically inhibits group activities, group sharing, and active participation by those who are not the single point of focus.

Semi-Circling

Semi-circling is an element of ceremony where participants physically arrange themselves in a half-circle focusing on something in front of them. They gain some of the benefits of a circle because with an easy glance they may still see the faces of all the other participants. However, their attention is primarily focused on what is in front of them which may be a person, computer screen, or radiator.

Each of the previous formations is significantly altered by the participants' posture: sitting, standing, reclining, or some combination of all three. A circle where all the participants are standing feels very different from a circle where all the participants are sitting.

Reclining

Reclining is a posture where the participants are situated more horizontally, and their weight is supported across much of their body. Reclining inhibits movement and interaction and

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invites relaxation. It is an excellent position to provide participants rest. It also prompts personal or intimate conversation.

Sitting

Sitting is a posture where the participants' weight is supported by their buttocks with their back is upright. Sitting inhibits movement and interaction. It stills the participants and moves them toward being passive observers. Sitting on a hard bench, soft chair, padded recliner, things, or the ground may all differently impact participants' emotional energy.

Standing

Standing is a posture where participants have or maintain an upright position on their feet, physically erect. Standing facilitates movement and interaction. It awakens the participants and moves them toward being active participants.

If participants are brain storming around a white board which formation do you think yields better results: everyone standing in a semi-circle in front of the white board each with their own marker writing their idea, or, one person standing at the white board doing all the writing while everyone else remains seated?

Some ceremonies use standing as a technique to intentionally invite walking around and movement during the ceremony. Other ceremonies use standing to keep the ceremony short, not allowing people to get comfortable sitting around a table wasting time.

Changing body posture during a ceremony signals moving from one element of a ceremony to another element of the ceremony, everyone sits or everyone stands. *Sitting in unison or standing in unison* is a great way to signal a change in state of a ceremony.

Basic Speaking Elements

Speaking is the single most common element in most ceremonies. The following are common forms of speaking within a ceremony.

Presenting

Presenting is an element of ceremony where one person is speaking for an extended period and the others are tasked entirely with listening. The purpose of presentation is to communicate to participants specific information. Presenting is one of the more abused ceremonial forms as most ceremonies default to being mostly or entirely presentations.

Presentation is improved by preparation and speaking skills. Focus on knowing precisely what information is being communicated, why it is important, and how participants are expected to act on the information.

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Questioning and Answering

Questioning is an element of ceremony where one participant in a ceremony proposes a question to one or more other participants. The purpose of questioning and is to facilitate the feeling of a more natural conversation and to encourage additional conversation from participants on a given subject.

Reading Out Loud

Reading Out Loud is an element of ceremony where one participant in a ceremony reads a prepare text out loud to the other participants. The reading may be straight or dramatic. The purpose of reading out loud is to share with the entire group the exact words precisely as written, without interpretation.

Reporting

Reporting is an element of ceremony where one participant in a ceremony speaks out a series of prepared data elements. They are giving a report. Reporting is frequently used to communicate key measures to the other participants. It is a more structured form of presenting.

Restating

Restating is an element of ceremony where one participant in a ceremony restates the phrase, concept, or idea said by another participant in the ceremony. The purpose of restating is to confirm the original phrase, concept, or idea was properly heard. If the restatement is incorrect the person who made the original statement indicates it is incorrect. Restatement is frequently used in personal conflict ceremonies.

Summarizing

Summarizing is an element of ceremony where one participant in a ceremony reduces a larger presentation by another participant in the ceremony to a shorter statement or phrase. The purpose of summarizing is to get to the heart or essence of the presentation or idea.

Rhythmic Speaking Elements

Rhythmic speaking elements are structured speaking techniques which naturally incorporate rhythm, making them more likely to entrain multiple participants.

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Calling & Responding

Calling is an element of ceremony where a specific text is stated out loud which invites a specific response or an action. A purpose of calling is to elicit a specific response from a predetermined set of responses which may then determine subsequent actions. A common example of calling is a teacher taking attendance at school. The teacher calls out the student's name and the student responds 'here.'

Calling may invite a specific action such as joining an assembly, flipping a switch, launching a rocker, or starting and stopping work.

Responding in an element of ceremony where participant speak specifically in answer to a call. The purpose of the response is to close a communication loop with the person who did the calling.

Reciting

Repeating is an element of ceremony where a specific text is stated out loud from memory. Reciting is used to inform new participants of group values and to unite all participants around those values.

Reciting as a group creates a natural rhythm, for example students saying the "Pledge of Allegiance" together. The challenge of reciting is the who group must memorize the text.

Repeating

Repeating is an element of ceremony is where individual participants say out loud word for word what someone else has already spoken or written. Commonly heard in how vows may be spoken during a wedding.

Officiant: "Repeat after me, with this ring thee wed."

Groom: "With this ring I thee wed."

Repeating is frequently used to make an official pledge where the party making the pledge changes state (single to married, civilian to military).

Repetition emphasizes the importance of the words being repeated. Repetition emphasizes the importance of the words being repeated. Repetition emphasizes the importance of the words being repeated. You get the idea.

Singing

Singing is an element of ceremony where participants recite words musically. It is a very natural way to create rhythmic speaking. In addition, it is a powerful tool for memorizing. Very likely you know the alphabet because of a song.