Ceremonial and Disposable: A Framework for Durable Change

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ABSTRACT

This resource expands on the concepts of **ceremonial** and **disposable** introduced in _When Conflict Reveals the Work_, part of the _Stanford Social Innovation Review_ series _Holding the Tension_. Many organizational initiatives begin with visible commitment but struggle to take root in daily practice. When structures are disconnected from strategy, incentives, authority, and norms, they become ceremonial—signaling intent without reshaping core operations. When pressure mounts and benefits are unclear, those ceremonial initiatives often become disposable. Although discussed in the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), these patterns apply broadly to innovation, sustainability, governance reform, and culture change. Durable initiatives are not sustained by aspiration alone. They endure when they are intentionally aligned with strategy and reinforced through consistent operational practice.

In _When Conflict Reveals the Work_, article three of five in the Stanford Social Innovation Review in-depth series _Holding the Tension_, my co-authors and I introduce two terms— **ceremonial** and **disposable**—to describe a recurring pattern in organizational life: initiatives that are publicly embraced but structurally vulnerable.

Many leaders recognize this dynamic. A commitment is announced. Language shifts. Resources are allocated. Yet implementation stalls. Under pressure, the initiative is reduced or quietly abandoned.

This resource supplements _When Conflict Reveals the Work_ and explains:

1. The concept of "ceremonial"—when organizational structures are disconnected from core goals and activities— and its origins in the organizational sociology literature.

2. How "disposable" extends ceremonial to describe initiatives whose implementation is incongruent with operational structures and norms.

3. How the endurance of initiatives—whether diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)-focused or otherwise—is not accidental, but the product of intentional and deliberate design.

Although the SSIR article applies these concepts primarily in the context of DEI, the underlying dynamics are not unique to equity initiatives. They describe a broader pattern in organizational life that affects strategy execution, innovation, sustainability, governance reform, and any initiative that seeks to move from aspiration to durable practice.

Even well-resourced initiatives can become ceremonial when procedures substitute for substantive change.

WHAT "CEREMONIAL" MEANS

Organizational structures and initiatives that are distant from core activities have long been recognized as ceremonial. They may respond to stakeholder expectations but are not meaningfully integrated into budgeting, incentives, authority structures, daily operations, or core strategic goals. Put simply, ceremonial elements signal commitment without restructuring practice in ways that are connected to the organization's core work and, in turn, are durable.

For example, an organization may establish a task force on innovation or inclusion that produces reports and hosts events yet lacks authority over hiring, compensation, or strategic planning. The structure exists, but it does not inform or shape the organization's core work.

The recognition that organizations adopt structures for both legitimacy and performance is foundational to the organizational sociology and organizational theory literatures. The breadth and depth of this scholarship are far too great to summarize here, but three seminal works illustrate how understanding of ceremonial structures has evolved and deepened over time.

- **Philip Selznick (1948)** introduced the concept of co-optation to explain how organizations adapt to social and political pressures. Selznick (1949) would later write about the Tennessee Valley Authority, an experimental federal corporation that sought to bring electricity to rural areas in the 1930s, showing how organizations incorporate external actors and stakeholder interests into formal structures in order to secure legitimacy and stability. Over time, these adaptations can reshape organizational priorities, embedding symbolic accommodations that may or may not transform core operations.

- **John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977)** argued that formal structures often function as "myth and ceremony," adopted to conform to institutional norms and frequently loosely coupled from everyday practice. Alongside DiMaggio and Powell (1983), this work helped establish the foundation for understanding organizations not purely as rational actors pursuing stated goals, but as entities shaped by dynamics internal and external to the organization.

- **Bromley and Powell (2012)** further developed this insight, showing that decoupling can take complex forms, including compliance and reporting systems that create the

appearance of integration without altering core activity. They distinguish between traditional "policy–practice" decoupling and what they call "means–ends decoupling," in which organizations adopt elaborate managerial practices that are formally implemented yet weakly connected to intended outcomes. This work highlights how even well-resourced initiatives can become ceremonial when procedures substitute for substantive change.

Ceremonial structures are common features of organizations. They reflect the ongoing tension between performance demands and legitimacy expectations from diverse stakeholder groups whose interests may, at any given time, align or conflict.

FROM CEREMONIAL TO DISPOSABLE

The term **disposable** does not appear in the traditional organizational sociology or organizational theory literature. My co-authors and I use it as an applied extension informed by practitioner observation and experience. While it is not a formal academic concept, it captures a pattern many organizations have experienced: initiatives that are not structurally embedded are more vulnerable when conditions change.

Fundamentally, ceremonial organizational elements become disposable when the perceived costs of maintaining them exceed the perceived benefits of satisfying stakeholders who view them as important.

This dynamic helps explain why some organizations have scaled back DEI commitments in recent years. In many cases, leaders judged that external pressures outweighed perceived benefits, especially when those benefits were

not clearly linked to mission or performance outcomes. It is easier to eliminate initiatives that were ceremonial to begin with. When initiatives are loosely connected to strategy and operations, their impact is constrained by design. When implementation is shallow, outcomes are likely to be limited.

> *Ceremonial organizational elements become disposable when the perceived costs of maintaining them exceed the perceived benefits of satisfying stakeholders who view them as important.*

A non-DEI example can further clarify the distinction and relationship between ceremony and disposability.

Consider a professional services firm that makes knowledge sharing a strategic priority. It invests in centralized platforms and communities of practice, and leaders emphasize collaboration. Yet consultants continue to be evaluated primarily on billable hours and individual client performance.

Here, goals and incentives are misaligned.

Now, imagine evaluation metrics are revised to reward cross-team collaboration. Strategic alignment is present. But informal norms still reward individual expertise and quiet knowledge hoarding. Adoption varies across business lines. Asking for help carries reputational risk.

Here, incongruent norms make collaboration socially unsafe.

In both cases, intention may be sincere. But without both alignment and congruence, knowledge sharing drifts toward ceremony and becomes vulnerable under pressure.

In the SSIR article, we distinguish between:

- **Alignment:** Is the initiative tied to strategy and core goals?

- **Congruence:** Is it enacted consistently across roles, incentives, authority, and norms?

In this example, durability would, at a minimum, require:

- Incentives tied to collaboration (strategic alignment)

- Visible and decision-linked senior leader participation (strategic alignment)

- Cross-unit accountability (operational congruence)

- Norms that make knowledge exchange professionally safe (operational congruence)

Figure 1 below illustrates four potential outcomes for organizational initiatives based on their level of strategic alignment and operational congruence. Initiatives that are both strategically aligned and operationally congruent are more likely to be durable. When one or both dimensions are weak, initiatives tend to become ceremonial, contested, or unsustainable.

	LOW ALIGNMENT	**HIGH ALIGNMENT**
LOW CONGRUENCE	**Contested and Disposable** Strategically appended and context-ignorant efforts generate contestation and are easily eliminated under pressure.	**Ambitious but Ceremonial** Strategically integrated in principle but inconsistently enacted in practice, these efforts strain credibility and drift toward ceremony.
HIGH CONGRUENCE	**Impactful but Unsustainable** Deeply enacted at the implementation level but lacking strategic backing, these efforts may generate early wins but remain fragile.	**Impactful and Sustainable** Strategically prioritized and operationally reinforced, these efforts are embedded in decision-making, incentives, and culture.

Figure 1. Alignment and Congruence Matrix. This table is adapted from the original version published by *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

In reality, whether DEI or any other initiative, most initiatives operate somewhere between the two intermediate categories in Figure 1: Ambitious but Ceremonial, and Impactful but Unsustainable.

> *Initiatives endure not because they are publicly affirmed, but because they are deliberately planned with the organization's broader strategy and goals in mind and are structurally integrated across the organization.*

With DEI work, an organization in the Ambitious but Ceremonial category might elevate equity, sustainability, or collaboration in its strategic plan and public messaging, but does not revise incentives or accountability systems. The ambition may be sincere. Without reinforcement, credibility erodes. The initiative becomes symbolic rather than operational.

An organization in the Impactful but Unsustainable category might have a team that pilots an effective initiative and demonstrates measurable gains but lacks executive sponsorship or long-term funding. The work succeeds locally yet remains fragile.

Without both alignment and congruence, initiatives can easily drift into ceremony or become disposable.

CLOSING CONSIDERATIONS

Across the broader SSIR series, contributors argue that the way organizations handle disagreement shapes not only internal culture and interpersonal relationships but also reveals shortcomings in organizational strategy and implementation. This is especially true with DEI work, where conflict often reveals when an initiative has outpaced its structural integration.

Conversely, when commitments are structurally reinforced, organizations model coherence, accountability, and legitimacy.

Initiatives endure not because they are publicly affirmed, but because they are deliberately planned with the organization's broader strategy and goals in mind and are structurally integrated across the organization. They are implemented with operational congruence as a core design goal and principle.

This level of intentionality and rigor, especially for DEI work, can mean the difference between ceremonial and durable change.

Note: If you are interested in the academic sources referenced above but are unable to access them, please feel free to reach out to me directly.

Brown, A. (2026). Ceremonial and Disposable: A Framework for Durable Change. AB Performance Advisory.

Ahmmad Brown is a university faculty member and leadership advisor who works alongside senior leaders and teams navigating complexity, conflict, and institutional change. His work focuses on helping organizations design for legitimacy, pluralism, and durable impact. Drawing on organizational sociology, civic studies, and advisory practice, he translates research into practical strategies that strengthen coherence, build trust, and embed equity into everyday decision-making and practice.

Ahmmad is the Founding Principal of AB Performance Advisory, a consultancy that bridges scholarship and practice to support leaders, teams, and organizations in navigating organizational development and change.