


## Got A Mountain To Climb? Create A Ritual.



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*I'm an author and speaker, passionate about relationships at work.*

### **What hiking 50 miles with 18 strangers taught me about connection**

On a Sunday afternoon in September, 18 women and one man—mostly strangers—gathered in California to do something pretty crazy. We were technically on a “retreat,” but not the R & R/mani-pedi/soft-music-and-thick-towels type of retreat you might imagine. In fact, quite the opposite.

This was a reset retreat, and I was there to rid myself of my sugar and caffeine habits and to get in shape before the winter settles in. If you know what I mean.

For the next week, we would hike (and hike some more), do yoga and strength training, while at the same time going cold turkey on coffee, my favorite friend, and all the little handfuls of candy that make my day just a little more fun.

As we arrived, we got weighed and measured, unpacked and made awkward small talk as we toured the property. When I got back to my room after the first hike, I closed the door behind me and wondered what I'd done.

Luckily at dinner that night, Evelyn, one of our guides for the week, facilitated a simple, but impactful ritual that began to calm my nerves and gather us together into the tribe we would soon become.

She started by telling us about what we were about to do, and how every single group, just like us, begins and ends their week-long retreat in this same way. So right off the bat, we felt part of something bigger than ourselves. Next she talked about the importance of gratitude and the impact it has on our health. Since we were all there because we valued our health and wellness, that was the perfect way to start. If my past decade of work with successful companies and entrepreneurs has taught me anything, it's that our values drive us, whether we're aware of them or not.

Evelyn instructed us to close our eyes and briefly hold hands. When we opened our eyes, she asked us to go around the table and introduce ourselves, then share something we were grateful for. People talked about being grateful for their families who were holding down the fort so they could be at the retreat, grateful for their health, and grateful for this experience.

That's it!

I told you it was simple. But that simple ritual changed everything for me and for our group. And there's science that tells us why. I'll briefly summarize with one of my favorite studies of all time to give you the gist.

Ok. Imagine that you're led into a room set up with a Nintendo Wii, a microphone and a screen. An experimenter hands you the mic and says, "You will sing into this microphone. The lyrics will appear across the bottom of the screen." You feel ridiculous as you try to sing along to none other than Journey's famous anthem, one of the most downloaded songs in iTunes history, "Don't Stop Believing," while a stranger—the experimenter—sits in front of you and watches. Your face is hot, your voice shakes. Why are you doing this? You actually *don't* believe it!

Afterward, you receive a score.

The experimenters had divided the singers into two groups—one was given a very simple ritual to perform beforehand, and the other was told to sit quietly.

Guess which group sang more accurately? Yep! The group with the ritual. Why? The researchers believe it was because they were less anxious.

We've all heard (and we know first-hand) how overwhelming anxiety can be and how difficult it is to soothe. So how did a totally made-up goofy ritual like this do the trick?

*Draw a picture of how you are feeling right now. Sprinkle salt on your drawing. Count up to five out loud. Crinkle up your paper. Throw your paper in the trash.*

As the authors of the study put it, "Even simple rituals can be extremely effective."

Ok, back at [the ranch...](#)

That first-night gratitude ritual was effective in a couple ways. First, each one of us got a dose of oxytocin from recognizing our good fortune. Second, we began to get a peek into the lives of those with whom we would spend the next six days, which made us feel more comfortable. This created psychological safety and belonging—one of the most critical ingredients to a successful group.



Every morning before our hike we gathered for a group hug and to set an intention. ERICA KESWIN

Every morning, we participated in another ritual. Before the hike, we gathered in a circle, put our arms around each other, and dug our feet into the earth to ground us. We took three deep breaths, set an intention for the hike and one of our guides read a quote. One of my favorites was, “Whether you’re in first or last place, you’re still beating the guy on the couch.” Setting an intention each day for the hike, reminded me why I was there and motivated me on days when I didn’t think I could take another step. As the week went by, people opened up more and more, sharing personal stories over 50 miles of hiking (yes, you read that right – 50!) and over the 21 meals we shared around the table.

On the last night, we gathered for our last dinner in the dining room. People were glowing, and some had put on their civies instead of the sweatpants we had been wearing all week. After dinner, we moved over to the couches sitting in front of the fireplace.

Instead of a bunch of awkward strangers sitting on stiff chairs that first night, we were relaxed, comfortable, practically cuddling, sharing private jokes. We repeated the gratitude ritual, and I was struck by how much had changed in so little time.

We arrived as 18 individuals. We were leaving as 18 much stronger individuals but also a connected crew of badassery.

How did it happen?

Rituals: They're definitely not rocket science. But they can transform everyday routines—on retreat, at home, and at work—into magic.



With an intention and this overlook, it feels like I'm on top of the world! ERICA KESWIN