Budgeting as a Ritual of Engagement: Creating a System of Control

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In this paper we explore how budgeting works as a ritual of engagement that generates a robust system of control. Using qualitative data from a hotel management firm, we conceptualize budgeting as a ritualized strategic tool-in-use and suggest how key characteristics of the ritual (intense engagement, liminal space, bounded stages, annual reenactment, and quantified output) engender a multiplicity of instrumental and expressive outcomes. We find that progressing through the stages of budgeting serves to re-orient how middle managers orient to numbers, such that they engage in transforming incommensurate inputs into a quantified unequivocal budget projection and come to accept and reify that projection as a governing force. Thus, budgeting creates organizational stability by regularly and consistently enlisting individuals in creating their own instrument of control. While the governing budget number is continually maintained via benchmarking and critical operational decisions, the ritual of engagement also directs behavior though personal investment, emotional engagement, and faith in the system. This work has implications for our understanding of strategic tools-in-use and organizational control whereby control is maintained and re-affirmed through rituals of engagement even as the numbers themselves change annually.