

Understanding and Adapting to a New Organizational Culture

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What is organizational culture, and why is it important? Simply defined, it is "the set of written and unwritten rules by which people function to get their work done." If you choose to ignore organizational culture, you do so at your own peril.

Joining a new company can be like moving to a foreign country. You will encounter new customs, dress, language, ideas, and rules, and you will need to learn about all of these in order to do well.

- You will be expected to work and interact effectively in the organization.
- You will be accepted and you will fit into the organization—or not!
- You will be assessed for recognition, compensation, rewards and promotion, depending on how well you perform in the new—and perhaps very different—culture.

What makes you successful in one company may not make you successful in another company. For example, at General Electric, the organizational culture is regimented and managers are expected to use the GE processes without question. At Xerox, the organizational culture is fast-paced, and continuously changing. Managers have considerable latitude in how they get the job done. At Merck, the organizational culture is consensus driven, with a strong emphasis on data analysis. Managers need a consensus to accomplish their goals.

What kind of environment are you accustomed to? If your new employer expects people to work in a way that is different from that of your previous organization, you will be expected to adapt to the new culture.

Organizational Culture Isn't Right or Wrong: It Just Is

The unspoken rules, based on shared values and beliefs, become the reality of how the organization gets work done. Those who join the organization are expected to adapt and accomplish their work in accordance with the culture.

Here's a checklist of questions to ask:

- What it's really like to work here? What are the realities of working "our way"? What behaviors and attitudes are expected?
- How are coworkers expected to communicate and deal with each other?
- How are decisions made and problems solved?
- How are employees and customers expected to be treated?

The culture of an organization is commonly determined by the founders. It may evolve over time, but the processes and ways of working together become deeply embedded. These people exert an extraordinary influence on the company culture. It's their company and they determine:

- The beliefs and values of the workplace
- The company's focus of attention
- The decision-making and problem resolution processes
- Conduct and achievements that will be rewarded

If the founder is no longer with the company, find out about the leaders who replaced those who were present at the beginning. Who succeeded to the leadership roles, who failed, and why? How has the company culture evolved over the years?

There are usually many sources of information for your secondary research:

- Read the latest annual report to learn what is important to the company.
- Review the company Website to learn about the company's history, the founder and the current CEO. A Website presents an idealized portrait of the company; however, it provides insights into how the company wants to position itself in the marketplace.
- Dig up as many articles as you can about the company in business publications. You'll likely find a variety of materials, some with information about how the company culture is viewed. In these days of blogs very little can be hidden!
- Look and listen to the marketing messages. Ads and slogans often convey underlying beliefs about the company's identity and views about its customers.
If you start from Day One on your new job to quickly learn about the "way things are done here," that will ease your transition. How well you fit in will be established in the first few weeks, so learning the culture—as it is, up close and personal—is as important as learning policies and procedures. To be successful, comply with both formal and informal expectations.

Pay attention not only to what needs to be done but how it should be done. Every new employee knows he or she must figure out what must be done, but you may not achieve desired results if you don't also figure out how it needs to be done.

"What" needs to be done includes:

- The objectives or goals I need to accomplish
- My work priorities
- Technologies and systems used
- The information I need to accomplish my job
- The resources available to me

"How" the job needs to be done relates to the culture:

- How do people work: independently or collaboratively?
- How are decisions made?
- Who needs to be included in the decision-making process?
- What is important to senior management?

Observe:

- Who talks to whom?
 - Do people interact with others at all levels of the organization?
 - Do people primarily interact only with their manager and peers?
- What language do people use when talking about their work?
 - Do they use acronyms or terms specific to the organization? If so, learn these rapidly.
 - Do they use more easily understood terms?
- What is the preferred means of communication?
 - E-mail?
 - Telephone?
 - In person?
- What is the style of written communication, via memos and e-mail messages?
 - Are they formal?
 - Are they informal?
 - Are the messages usually brief, or are they detailed?
- Who is copied on the communications?
 - Are numerous people copied?
 - Are only people directly involved copied?
- How are meetings conducted?
 - Are they formal with agendas set prior to the meeting?

—Are they informal with agendas developed or shared in the meeting?

Learning from within: Networking

Networking and building relationships will help you to understand the nuances of how work gets done in your new workplace. Be sure to network with:

- Direct reports
- Coworkers
- Your boss
- Peers in other departments

Begin networking on your first day with the company, starting with coworkers and direct reports. They can help you to understand how work gets done in your areas, as well as in the company as a whole.

If you don't like to network, do it anyway! And become good at it if you want to understand organizational culture and build relationships that can help your career in the long run. Your networking meetings can and should be interesting. After all, you're learning about the culture when employees tell stories about people and events that have taken place in recent years or decades. And the company lore reveals a lot about what is distinct and unique about the organization.

Listen to stories about:

- The heroes and how they rose to the top of the organization
- Crises encountered and overcome
- Milestone events in the organization's history
- Anecdotes about senior management
- Management's reactions to blunders and mistakes
- The handling of firings and layoffs

Each story gives you additional insight into some aspect of the organizational culture. As you network, ask questions and listen carefully. Tell people that you are genuinely interested in finding out the insider's view of how the organization works. The answers to these questions will help you to master the subtleties of corporate culture and avoid pitfalls. Some of the questions you can ask:

- What should I know about how to act?
- How is success defined here, and how does one succeed?
- What is the biggest mistake one could make?
- What are the sacred cows that I need to be aware of?

You will have many challenges when starting a new job: Understanding your job responsibilities, learning what your new boss is really like, figuring out how best to get along with new colleagues. Make sure that learning and mastering the corporate culture is a top priority—to achieve the fit you want.

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