The Importance of Culture in Organizations

By *Harrison Barnes*

Employees' level of success and overall happiness has more to do with a particular *culture* (which is sometimes also referred to as the *personality* of an organization) than with any other factor. This article discusses (a) the importance of organizational culture, (b) why some employees do not give strong consideration to culture, (c) the reason that failure to seriously consider culture prematurely ends many careers, and (d) why making a lateral move provides the best opportunity to evaluate culture and the course of your career. Just as the work, salary, and prestige level can vary from employer to employer, the cultures within each organization can be very different. Consider the following examples:

- There are organizations in which style is definitely valued over substance.
- There are organizations in which substance is definitely valued over style.
- There are organizations in which people wander around in Birkenstocks and call each other "dude."
- There are organizations in which employees are expected to call superiors "Mister" and "Ms."
- There are organizations in which employees need to make appointments with superiors before speaking with them.
- There are organizations in which supervisors chew tobacco in the office and during meetings.
- There are organizations that value your having strong family connections more than your work ability.
- There are organizations that are extremely secretive with their employees.
- There are organizations that believe everyone who puts in a solid effort over the course of six or seven years should be promoted.
- There are organizations in which employees work around thirty hours per week, which is considered a good effort.
- There are organizations in which employees are hired and are then almost universally encouraged to leave after five or six years of service.
- There are organizations that have been collapsing for years, but that portray themselves to employees as strong and secure.

I could go on and on. Suffice it to say, however, that your success and happiness in your career may have more to do with your thoughtful and intelligent decision to join an organization that best fits you culturally. People simply want to be around people they like, and when people like each other in the workplace, both sides of the relationship benefit.

OBSERVATION:

> We all have certainly heard that Albert Einstein flunked out of grade school. Perhaps Einstein was too concerned with the theoretical rather than the practical. Whatever the reason was, Einstein simply did not experience success in the environment he was in at the time because the school and the people in it could not understand or appreciate where he was coming from intellectually.

Do the employees in your organization understand where you are coming from?

In a business environment, when the employee and the employer see eye to eye, success is far more likely than in situations where they do not.

Employees Often Fail to Give Strong Consideration to Culture When Choosing an Employer.

The problem with the way many employees manage their careers is that when choosing a job, they are motivated primarily by prestige and money, more so than by the cultures of the organizations they are considering.

When an employee instead evaluates offers based upon where she believes she fits in the best, that employee is far more likely to find happiness and success in her career. The problem, however, is that most employees simply do not think this way, the reason being that employees are competitive by nature, and "fitting in" is not nearly as easy to quantify as things like money, company cars, and other perks.

In almost all respects, it is most difficult to gain the best positions with the largest, most prestigious, and highest-paying employers. Yet, the pressure to join these organizations typically commences while an individual is in school.

The problem with this type of thinking is that it can often lead employees to make horrible career decisions. If an employee is always thinking in terms of what he can do to look best to others, he will often neglect what is best for him personally. None of this is to say that there are not numerous advantages to come from being part of a truly significant organization. Nonetheless, this should not be the only consideration on which an employee bases his career choices.

OBSERVATION:

Many people, in fact, have subordinated much of their happiness in life in pursuit of money, respect, power, and admiration from their peers. This leads many people to base their entire concept of happiness on things like having the largest house, the most expensive car, and other traditional accoutrements of the American Dream.

Failing to Consider Culture Ends Many Careers Prematurely--Careers That Could Have Otherwise Been Highly Successful.

It is easy to find out an organization's compensation structure, but this is a simple and superficial distinction to make between organizations. It is not as easy to gauge an organization's prestige level; however, it is much more difficult to evaluate a

organization's culture and whether that working in that culture will keep you happy over the course of your career.

One of the most significant mistakes employees make when evaluating competing offers from organizations is believing that money is the most important factor they should be considering. While money is certainly an important component of any analysis, it is not the most important factor. Making any career decision solely based on money can be a horrible mistake. If you properly assess all variables, including culture, and you choose the *right* organization, you may have a stable career and life. If you go to an organization just because of monetary considerations, you may wind up so disgruntled that you are eventually not working at all.

OBSERVATION:

On a day-to-day basis, in each of our offices, we speak with employees who began their careers with ultraprestigious, high-paying

law firms

. Many of these attorneys stopped practicing law two to seven years into their careers because they became disillusioned. Most of these lawyers say things like "I would never work in another law firm. I would only work as an

in-house

attorney." The résumés of these attorneys are sometimes littered with one firm job after another, where the next and then the next firm were virtually identical in terms of culture to the very first firm that the attorney joined right out of

law school

. Of course these attorneys are not happy practicing in a law firm. They have only worked for one type of law firm during their entire career. The problem is that these attorneys have worked in a firm culture that was such a bad fit for them that they never got the opportunity to experience practicing law with a group of people they like, respect, and emotionally profit from. Not all law firms are the same. Fitting in with the community of lawyers that make up a particular firm is the key to long-term success and satisfaction in law firm life. Not fitting in is often the key to failure and can even lead to one changing career paths altogether.

Consider the choice of where to live, and compare the process of making that decision with choosing to join any particular firm or organization. Some people prefer the lifestyle in New York to Los Angeles, or prefer San Francisco to Seattle. Preference for one city or neighborhood is entirely personal and individual. The considerations are whether we feel accepted and appreciated in a community and whether we see people around us who share similar goals and aspirations. Whether that community supports and enhances your lifestyle becomes a driving force in your deciding where to live. And, just as you need to feel that you can thrive in the community in which you live, you should feel that you can thrive in the environment in which you work.

You should constantly ask yourself these questions: Is this organization a place where I will feel accepted? Will I be surrounded by people with the same values and goals? Will this organization complement my lifestyle? Boiled down, *what is the culture of the organization?*

Making a Lateral Move Is Your Best Chance to Find Your Perfect Firm Culture

Many of our candidates, when preparing for an interview, want help identifying those questions that will help them unearth the true culture at a firm. In short form, the question that needs to be answered for each lawyer and every employee is simply, "Will I like it at this firm or organization?" Unfortunately, try as we might, we cannot always answer these questions as well as we would like. The culture of a firm may vary from practice group to practice group, and it is impossible to pin down with any meaningful certainty whether or not a good firm is always a good fit. Often, the only way to learn this is to actually go to the interviews and speak with the attorneys or individuals you may be working with.

It's important to remember that the interview process for a lateral move is much different from when a law student interviews for a summer clerkship. This is a plus. Unlike summer associate openings, which can sometimes number in excess of a hundred, when a law firm conducts a lateral search, many candidates are interviewing for one or possibly two available openings. In these situations, the law firm is not as concerned with competing for any one particular candidate. Conversely, when a firm is in a heightened state of competitiveness, it can sometimes be more difficult for the lawyer interviewing for the job to get a sense of whether the particular law firm is comprised of people with whom the lawyer would want to spend the rest of his or her career. *But this is the kind of firm you should be seeking.* Keep your best interests at heart, and do everything you possibly can to ensure that you find a good fit. Obviously, your task is to get the job; however, you also need to understand the firm's culture. At BCG we have identified several ways in which you can evaluate whether a particular firm is right for you.

Preparation Is the First Key to Evaluating Culture. You've gotten an interview. Before the interview, you should research as much as possible to determine the *objective factors*: How big is the office? What is the salary? In our opinion, this objective fact gathering is helpful in determining how well the firm or organization is doing financially and how it has grown over time.

Diversity. It may also be important for you to look at the firm's or organization's commitment to diversity. We don't know of any organization that doesn't have an antidiscrimination policy. However, some organizations are more proactive in this area than others. *Is it important to you that there are employees of color or of various sexual orientations?*

Location, location, location. Where is the office located? Of all these factors, we find that this tends to be the least important factor in evaluating culture. A California company known for having employees that wear Birkenstock sandals around the office might have a New York office with that same type of atmosphere. However, even in Hawaii or Miami, there are going to be radical distinctions amongst organizations. These distinctions are important. The city makes little difference in regards to the type of culture that exists within the organization. There are laid-back firms and organizations in Chicago that are down

the block from offices where you wouldn't think of entering without wearing your most formal business attire. The key is identifying and understanding the various cultures of the organizations themselves.

Governance. How an organization conducts its day-to-day business is important. Employees have to run the business of their organization, and how they choose to structure the organization can say a lot about its culture. The business model often reveals the core values of the organization. Generally, organizations are governed in one of several ways:

The democratic organization allows each employee to become involved in the decision making, regarding anything from new hires to compensation to long-term planning. For many organizations, the democracy may only include supervisors, so it is not necessarily realistic that a junior employee will be making high-level management decisions, or even weighing in with an opinion. However, many democratically run organizations do have some level of junior involvement within the organization's governance, such as on pro bono committees or with respect to summer associate entertaining and recruiting. This type of culture is entirely inclusive, although sometimes it is the result of too much administration bogging down each individual lawyer's already heavy workload. The values reflected here are participation and integration, which may come at the cost of expediency and/or consistency.

Many organizations govern using a small, centralized committee of decision makers, which results in greater consistency, in terms of vision and management. However, this culture is more exclusive in terms of firm governance, which may turn off the young attorney or employee who wants to be a part of the decision making and planning efforts of an organization. In this system of governance, it's important to find out how the leaders are chosen and the values they hold dear.

At the end of the day, however, what is more important than the method of governance is why a particular organization chooses the business model it does. Asking an organization's superiors why things are the way they are helps define an organization's culture and vision for the future. If you hear that the goals of the business match yours, you have likely found a culture in which you will succeed and be happy.

Word on the Street. You probably know the reputation of the organization where you're interviewing. Is it known around town as a sweatshop or a quality-of-life organization? BE CAREFUL! Even if a reputation is mostly on target, you could end up joining a practice area or working with a partner that is decidedly unlike the overall firm or business culture.

"Lifestyle" and "quality-of-life" are other ways the business community may refer to a certain organization. These terms have become somewhat hackneyed of late, but still have value in terms of defining a particular organization. A quality-of-life organization is fairly self-explanatory, which is to say that the organization has placed a premium on allowing associates to have lives outside of work. What does that mean? Sometimes it means a slightly lower billable-hour requirement than at other firms. Other times it may mean that the firm's or organization's management is more amenable to situations other than typical full-time associate positions, including part-time, telecommuting, flex-time, or non-partnership track. The popularity of this term has caused it to be somewhat diluted. Don't take these types of labels at face value, and investigate what that term means within a particular firm.

Again, be careful. Sometimes attorneys and job seekers interviewing for a position swing too far in terms of evaluating. Spending all of your time in this process wondering, "What can the law firm or business do for me?" will prevent you from showing a potential employer that you are a good match for it. This is a two-way street, so showing a law firm or other organization what you are made of is just as important during an interview as evaluating the organization.

Conclusions

The key to true job satisfaction is determining which organization's culture suits you and your career. Finding the right culture will allow you to find a job that won't feel like work. What is going to make the difference over time is not a $5,000 per year salary differential but whether or not you feel comfortable and appreciated in a particular environment. No matter what the reputation of the organization is, going through the process of discovering who the people are and what they think of you and your skills will be the best indicators of your potential long-term satisfaction and success.

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