

**STRATEGY PAPERS
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Organizational Culture: Not Just a Buzzword

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GPC Competencies:

Competency #2: Knowledge of Organizational Development as it Pertains to Grant Seeking

Competency #8: Knowledge of Methods and Strategies that Cultivate and Maintain Relationships between Fund-Seeking and Recipient Organizations and Funders

Abstract

Organizational culture impacts all businesses, from the largest corporation to the smallest non-profit. Four distinct internal cultures exist, and each one, or a combination, can be found within all organizations. Cultures are rigid; therefore, only top leadership with board support can change them. Organizational culture is a criterion for grant professionals to evaluate a potential employer, work place, or funder.

Introduction

In 1985, my professor introduced the term organizational culture. As an undergraduate, the term was just another theory to memorize. The concept remained dormant until 30 years later when I worked in an organization where I was continually frustrated and unhappy. Despite my high energy level, my work never advanced. Although I embraced the agency's mission, I remained discouraged and disillusioned. Eventually, I left.

What happened?

I learned corporate culture is not "just" a buzzword. According to Forbes Magazine, 89% of hiring failures are due to a poor cultural fit (Andersen, 2012, p.1). Furthermore, hiring someone who is a poor culture fit can cost an organization 50-60% of the person's annual salary in turnover (The Society for Human Resource Management 2015, as cited in Boutin, 2015, p.1).

An organization's culture is its basic personality and how it evaluates and responds to people and situations. Corporate culture is not free lunches, flex time, or even ping-pong tables — those are job perks and retention strategies. Instead, corporate culture is established over a long period and described as the organization's "comfort zone." Four dominant organizational cultures exist: (Quinn and Cameron, 2011, p.1)

1. The Clan Culture: family-like, focusing on mentoring, nurturing, and 'doing things together.'

2. The Adhocracy Culture: dynamic and entrepreneurial, focusing on risk-taking, innovation, and 'doing things first.'

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3. The Market Culture: results-oriented, focusing on competition, achievement, and 'getting the job done.'

4. The Hierarchy Culture: structured and controlled, focusing on efficiency, stability, and 'doing things right.'

In my case, I learned I was more aligned with a market-based culture. The organization I left adhered to a more restrained hierarchical culture and a more suitable climate for someone else.

Profit or Non-Profit

Organizational cultures exist in both profit and non-profit industries. Additionally, organizations may align with one culture but reflect elements of others.

Understanding culture and aligning projects to fit are critical to success. For example, clan-oriented cultures would embrace funding projects around training. Alternatively, a funded pilot project would intrigue a risk-taking adhocracy culture but could unnerve a hierarchical culture if it puts stability at risk.

Grant professionals who acknowledge the culture within every organization will avoid laboring over projects destined to fail. The practitioner should ensure a match between a proposed project and the workplace culture.

Practitioners should assess a potential funder's organizational culture also. For example, a clan-based family foundation's interests and decision-making process will vary from an adhocracy tech-based foundation.

Employees whose personality and temperament fit the culture are an inherent match; those who differ will struggle. Keep in mind that this is not about competency. People can be good at their job even if they hate the office culture, but "they will be exhausted," according to executive coach Chris Edmonds, founder of The Purposeful Culture Group (Edmonds, 2018 as cited in Buck, 2018).

Recently, there has been some stated opposition about how cultural fit can lead to discrimination against candidates and a lack of diversity. It's important to understand that hiring for culture fit doesn't mean hiring people who only reflect the culture. The values and attributes that make up an organizational culture can and should reflect in a richly diverse workforce (Boutin, 2015).

A grant professional's role is to work with people at all levels of the organization. Therefore, a proposal's success hinges on the level of cooperation, feedback, and personal accountability the grant writer receives from top leadership and subject matter experts. Maintaining a strong and positive corporate culture helps employees feel valued and motivated, leads to collaboration, increases operational efficiency, and drives revenue. As revenue drivers, grant professionals need cultures that include teamwork, communication, and accountability.

Unfortunately, an employee cannot change the organizational culture. Many experts insist that culture change by one person is virtually impossible unless that person is the boss – and even then, it is not easy.

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According to Edmonds, “an employee does not have the ability or power to change the team or company culture. Only senior leaders can change company culture — and most do not pay attention to culture, much less know how to refine a bent or broken culture.” (Edmonds 2018, as cited in Buck, 2018).

A Case Study — Ford Motor Company

When Alan Mulally took over as CEO of the Ford Motor Company in 2006, the company suffered from regionalism and fiefdoms, low-quality products, and a culture that stifled change or innovation. When asked to describe the culture at Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford’s Great-Grandson Bill Ford replied, “the Kremlin” (Mulally, 2011).

If Mulally were to point Ford Motor Company toward profitability, he needed to transform its hierarchal culture.

One of Mulally’s core principles was bringing transparency to data and projects, using charts flowing from red (incomplete), yellow (in progress), and green (completed). In the beginning, Mulally noted all the charts reflected affirmative project-completed greens and in-progress yellows, despite the company’s projected \$17 billion loss (Mulally, 2011).

Mulally needed to create an atmosphere where it was safe to make mistakes while also reversing ineffective leadership behaviors. Mulally felt achievement came when managers started turning up for meetings with evidence of failures and asking for help, rather than pretending they did not exist (Leggett, 2014, p.1.).

It was difficult; two board members likened the culture to “boy scout stuff” and departed (Vakil, 2019). Two years later, the remaining board members watched Ford Motor Company’s successful participation in the 2008 bailout hearings. The company triumphed as the only national automaker that did not require federal funding to maintain profitability.

Conclusion

An organization’s culture is its basic personality and how it evaluates and responds to people and situations. Four distinct internal cultures exist and each one, or a combination, resides within all organizations.

An organization’s culture is rigid and inflexible. Employees whose personality and temperament fit the culture are an inherent match; those who differ will struggle. The power to change organizational culture resides within the top board and executive leadership; a single employee cannot do so. The grant professional should acknowledge and understand the limitations and benefits of organizational culture; it is a presence often overlooked during program planning and proposal writing efforts.

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Biographical Information

Margaret Katona, GPC, has over 15 years of experience in grant-writing and non-profit fundraising. She has raised funds for human service, education, health care, and cultural institutions. She was a founding member of the Nebraska Grant Professional Association and its first treasurer. She also holds a certificate in Fundraising Management from the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. She can be reached at margaret.katona@douglascounty-ne.gov.