

CORPORATE CULTURE: A CRITICAL ELEMENT IN CAREER DECISIONS

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You've found a job that you and the hiring manager agree you could do well. Now ask yourself these three questions:

1. Are you comfortable with the way people at this company treat one another?
2. Would you be proud to say you work for this company?
3. Do you think you could happily stay with this company for a reasonable time period?

If you answered "Yes", this is likely to be a good cultural "fit" for you. If you answered "No", you may be entering a difficult situation. If you answered "Maybe", you have more homework to do before accepting.

Accepting a position also means accepting a "way of life" at work. Being comfortable and in alignment with the corporate culture is often a critical factor in determining your job satisfaction and your future potential within the organization. Doing your homework on company culture should be a priority, so that you can be better prepared to make the most of your networking and interviews.

Understanding the basics of how a company operates and evaluating ahead of time whether or not a specific culture is a "fit" for you are too important to leave to chance. Having a feel for how people communicate, how decisions are made and how success is defined can dramatically affect your on-boarding and overall success.

There are many avenues for obtaining information about corporate culture:

- As you develop your target company list, network with current and former employees, vendors, customers and competitors; and simply ask them to describe the company culture.
- Stay current on what the company says about itself as well as what analysts and competitors say in the media, including speeches given by executives at industry events.
- Conduct research on target companies using available research databases.
- "Read between the lines" of company annual reports or mission statements for hints about how the company sees itself and what values it holds dear.

When you visit a company for an informational meeting or an interview, be alert to the "feel" of the organization. Look at the content of signs or materials in the waiting area. Are there notices of employee events or recognition displayed in the lobby? Does the receptionist make you feel welcome? Observe the way employees interact with one another: do they seem cordial and glad to be there, or do they show signs of stress?

A healthy, sound culture has characteristics that contribute to your personal job satisfaction, your sense of affiliation and belonging, and ultimately to your success in the organization. They include the following:

- Clear values and beliefs
- Strong, inspirational leadership
- Effective internal and external communication
- Flexibility and agility especially during times of major change
- Consistent standards of performance
- A good reputation with customers, competitors and the community
- Employees who like working there
- An innovative approach to their business
- Sound economic performance as measured through sales and profits

Be on the lookout for signs of an unhealthy, troubled culture, including the following:

- A lack of clear values and beliefs
- Absence of leaders or weak leadership
- An inward or short term focus with no longer term plans
- Lack of vision or underlying philosophy
- Outdated products or services
- Morale issues or high employee turnover
- Poor financial performance

You may want to ask some of the questions below during networking or interviewing to get a better idea of company culture.

Ask Human Resources

- How did this opening occur?
- Have you offered this position to any internal candidates?
- How long has the position been vacant?
- Please describe the organization's structure.
- How would you describe the culture?
- What is the organization's mission?
- Are there explicit standards of employee behavior?
- Are there recognition/rewards programs in place?
- What is the on-boarding process for new hires?
- Is there a mentoring process or philosophy?

Ask Potential Managers

- How would you describe your management style?
- How is performance evaluated in your group?
- How do you like to communicate with your group: formal meetings, informal chats, email?
- What is your vision for this department/division?
- How does this position fit into your plans for this department/division?
- How can I be most successful in this role?
- Does this position interact with other departments?
- Is the business growing?

Ask Potential Peers/Subordinates

- What is it like to work here?
- Is this a team environment or based more on individual contributors?
- How are decisions made here?
- How will this position affect you?
- How would you describe the organizational culture?
- What types of issues does the manager consider critical?
- What do you enjoy most about your job? Enjoy least?
- How long have you been with the company?

Even if you think the culture is not ideal for you, you may still decide to accept a role with the organization. It is possible to succeed in such an environment, but be aware that you will need to manage yourself and relate to others in ways that may require greater effort, produce higher stress and deliver lower job satisfaction. For some people, succeeding in a troubled culture is a choice that can be fraught with difficulties; for others it is a personal challenge, which, when overcome, is a source of great satisfaction.

Armed with information about the culture, you will be better prepared to determine if an opportunity you are considering is likely to be a good fit for you. A good cultural fit can provide a fulfilling "way of life" at work that can help you achieve your professional goals. If you can answer "Yes" to the three culture questions and develop a plan to address a "No" or "Maybe", you will be better positioned for success in your new job.