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Professional Transitions

When You Start a New Job, Pay Attention to These 5 Aspects of Company Culture

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When you join an organization, you have a short window of time to adapt to its culture. It's the old 90-day rule. And we know too many talented individuals who have stumbled in their new company because they failed to read the cultural tea leaves. This happens because most organizations don't explain the cultural rules to newcomers, and new hires are so focused on the job and the new boss that they overlook the rules' profound influence. Yet understanding them plays a big role in your initial success. Being cognizant of not just what your colleagues do but how they work matters if you want to be effective and be perceived well.

In our work, we have noticed five dimensions of culture that require your attention. These have the greatest impact on your ability to navigate a new job:

Relationships

Companies differ in how they cultivate relationships, in how much they value collaboration, and in how much face time is required to get work done and make important decisions. In some organizations, the only way to influence others is by spending time with them in person. In others, emailing, texting, and video conferencing are preferred over in-person meetings. When you arrive in your new organization, ask insiders how you should approach relationships. For example, do you need to spend time building a relationship with someone before asking them for help or input on a project? Or is it acceptable to gather a list of "go-to" individuals whom you can simply email for assistance when you need them?

Observe where and how your colleagues get work done and make decisions. Do they spend much of their time meeting with one another, or do they tend to be at their desks or work from home? Are people friendly

and open to meeting with you? Or do they appear to be nice but repeatedly cancel “meet and greets”? You may need others to help you make the necessary connections.

Communications

When you start a new job, look at how people tend to communicate with one another. Is it through formal channels, like meetings that are always set in advance, and to which everyone comes well-prepared? Or do individuals more often communicate spontaneously with little or no documentation? (Maybe your manager frequently stops by and says, “Can you come join this meeting now?”) You should start by asking your boss what the expectations are. Personal assistants and your teammates are other good sources of information.

Hierarchy often determines when and where it is acceptable to communicate with senior colleagues. For example, in more-hierarchical environments, you might have to “pre-clear” any communications upward in the hierarchy with your boss. In less hierarchical organizations, people may be encouraged to email senior leaders to chat with them. The best way to figure out these rules is to ask around. Your peers and direct reports may be well positioned to tell you how to proceed with your manager and those above. Ask about recent successful initiatives and how colleagues influenced senior leaders in their communications.

You should also note how information tends to be presented. For instance, do meetings revolve around formal presentations, or can individuals informally share issues, debate topics, and engage in real-time brainstorming without being judged? Some organizations and departments prefer 50-page presentations with reams of details and analyses, while others prefer to work from a simple emailed agenda with a bulleted list of topics. Pay attention to how information is typically packaged for meetings, the extent to which issues are debated versus

"checked off," and how deferential people are to those in positions of power. Observe how senior leaders in the room respond to formal decks and strong recommendations, versus informal discussions. Which style consistently results in a decision coming out of the meeting?

Decision-Making

How companies make decisions also varies in important ways. Some companies make real-time decisions in formal meetings, while others tend to finalize decisions offline. Even if formal meetings are the norm, you may find that the real decisions happen by the coffee station, in the hallway, or over lunch. Watch for whether the decisions made in the meetings get implemented. If you see people agreeing to some set of actions in a meeting, and then notice that other things happen afterward, that suggests there are strong informal decision-making mechanisms at play that you'll need to uncover. For example, a decision to invest in a new product might ultimately rest in the hands of two pivotal individuals even when there is an entire senior leadership team reviewing the decision. You'd want to meet with these two key leaders far in advance of any formal meetings, and convince them of your point of view. Or perhaps everyone in the room appears to agree to invest in that product collectively, but you notice that several individuals chose not to voice their disagreements in public for political reasons. You will need to circle back and influence each of them after the fact to ensure they don't derail your project.

Another aspect of decision-making to understand is whether your company culture has a *bias for action* or a *bias for analysis and consensus*. In organizations where the bias is for action, time and attention spans tend to be more limited, and decisions are made quickly. If you're pushing for an initiative, you need to present your position clearly and give key stakeholders the information they need to make a decision. Other company cultures prefer a more protracted discussion of options, models, and strategies. More patience is required on your part, especially because

this bias for consensus often means sending more supporting materials and analyses, and redoing the same presentation several times, before reaching a final decision. The question you want to ask is, what is your own bias for action, and how does it fit your new culture?

Individual Versus Group Perspectives

Some companies approach work as being largely the product of individuals, while in others it is the product of a collaborative orientation. If an organization is very individualistic in its approach, it will generally support a "hero mentality" that recognizes the ambitious individual. Rewards are often individually based, and performance management tends to be based on individual ratings where everyone's unique contribution is justified to their peers.

Group-focused organizations provide more of a safety net in that risks and rewards are shared, but it may be harder to stand out as an individual and differentiate yourself. These organizations tend to be flatter and more focused on shared goals and results. If you are a highly ambitious individual who enjoys individual recognition, you may not get what you need fast enough in terms of career progression. One cue is to listen for how people discuss their work in meetings. If people generally talk about the group achievements, and you use "I" in your presentations, you will quickly be branded as someone who is not a team player. Once again, the key is in recognizing how individuals are recognized and rewarded.

Change Agents

Another cultural factor that can have a profound impact on your status and influence is the culture's orientation toward change. Most places are resistant to outsiders bent on change. Typically, though, highly talented leaders brought in from the outside are told to "shake things up," to challenge the status quo. Unfortunately, what happens to many of these folks is that they fail. Either they misread the cultural cues as to how disruptive they should really be (versus what they had been told) or they

didn't build the supportive relationships needed to back them up on key decisions — or both. Because they didn't receive the proper onboarding advice, if any, they underestimated the cultural bounds they'd have to work within. So the challenge for any incoming leader is to determine what you can challenge in the culture, and when you should do so.

Pacing and buy-in are also critical factors. You need to ask: Can I be a highly assertive, fast-paced champion of change, or do I need to invest in engagement, dialogue, and consensus building first? Nobody will answer these questions for you — you need to figure it out by watching reactions to the initial recommendations you make. Start with a few trusted people to test your ideas. Ask them how others might respond before dropping your big idea in a formal setting with senior leaders. Know which leaders have your back before you propose major changes.

The main thing to keep in mind when you join a new company is that your previous achievements don't allow you to act outside of the norms of the culture you're in now. Most organizations will hire you for past experiences, but your future success there will be determined by your impact in your new environment — and depending on how well you understand and work within your new culture, your impact can be amplified or derailed.

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