

GETTING THE BIG PICTURE: ASSESSING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Always remember that people make up organizations. By definition, an organization is a group of people who associate and organize around some shared interest or work. Organizational culture encompasses the pattern of behaviors, beliefs, values, traditions/rituals, and artifacts (objects and outcomes) that characterize or describe a given group or population.

Just as individuals have unique personalities, each organization has a unique culture. Just as people are dynamic and ever-changing, so are organizations. An organization's culture is not unlike a candle's flame, bonfire, or wildfire. While each flame shares certain properties, each one differs from the other based on a number of factors.

Assessing organizational culture requires that you observe and understand how individuals and teams relate to each other and behave together in dynamic ways. Your goal is to identify patterns, including evidence or tangible artifacts (physical, psychological, and emotional). These provide clues to help explain how, why, and for what purpose organizations and team members behave and operate the way they do.

Employees have different customs, motivations, goals, needs, values, and abilities that interplay with what the collective organization is driving for. Below is a tool that you can use to help you assess an organization's culture and determine if their structure and norms align with *your own* customs, goals, needs, values, and abilities.

You can use the tool to record first-hand observations and information gleaned from conversations with friends, family, current/former employees, contractors, and vendors who work with the company. The more perspectives you seek out, the more accurately you'll be able to assess the organization's culture and the easier it will be for you to determine if it's the right fit for you.

Worksheet: Assessing Organizational Culture

Topic	What to Look for	Observations	Insights for Action & Follow-Up
Power & Influence	<p>What leadership style is exhibited by leaders? Is it hands-off, command and control, consultative, or collaborative?</p> <p>Which members of the team are informal leaders or influencers? Who do others respect, listen and communicate to, and follow?</p> <p>How does one gain or lose influence within the team? Who doesn't have influence that should?</p>		
Structure	<p>What does the organizational chart look like? Are there many layers of management and bureaucracy or is it a "flat" organization with easy access to leaders?</p> <p>What do the workspaces look like? Are there differences between who gets to have certain workspaces?</p> <p>Does the employee workspace layout contain open cubicles or offices with doors? Is the team physically together or virtual?</p> <p>What feeling do you get when you walk into the front entrance or lobby? Is there tight security or a welcoming receptionist?</p>		
Goals	<p>What are the organization's stated vision, goals and priorities? To what extent are they clear and understood by employees?</p>		
Norms	<p>What type of attitudes and behaviors are accepted and encouraged vs. frowned upon and discouraged?</p>		

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	What must one do to “fit in”? How do “things get done” within the organization?		
Cohesion & Engagement	<p>Do team members appear to cooperate and support one another or is the environment more competitive?</p> <p>Do team members seem to like, respect, and trust each other?</p> <p>What is the team morale? Do you hear a lot of laughter and fun or are they more serious? Are employees committed and engaged or withdrawn?</p>		
Communication & Information Flow	<p>How do team members typically communicate with each other? Who talks to whom?</p> <p>Does everyone seem to communicate freely with each other or are there cliques? Who’s included vs. isolated (left out)?</p> <p>Do certain individuals serve as a central hub, conduit, or gatekeeper of communication between individuals or teams?</p>		
Team Roles	What roles can you observe within a group or team? For example, who leads, catalyzes action, keeps everyone on track, stirs the pot, enforces rules, surfaces emotions, jokes around, acts as a voice of reason, mediates differences, cheers people on, champions ideas, produces results, serves as a thought leader, treated as outcast (black sheep/scapegoat)?		

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<p>Conflict Resolution</p>	<p>Does the organization or team discuss tough issues or are there a lot of undiscussables?</p> <p>How are interpersonal conflicts addressed? What process is typically used – avoidance, respectful and candid dialogue, gossiping, passive-aggressiveness, appeasement, withdrawal, or suppression, or coercion?</p> <p>What issues do people gossip about?</p> <p>When mistakes are made, do individuals take personal responsibility/ownership or blame others? Do team members give each other benefit of doubt or criticize?</p>		
<p>Decision-Making & Meetings</p>	<p>How are decisions typically made? Are they mostly “top-down” or more inclusive in nature? Is team consensus- oriented, majority rules, seniority-driven, or whoever shouts the loudest?</p> <p>To what extent are team members authorized and empowered to make decisions? Is the environment fast or slow-paced?</p> <p>How would you describe the meetings that take place? Do people typically nod in agreement publically while disagreeing privately?</p> <p>Do people regularly show up on time and prepared or is it common and acceptable to be late and unprepared?</p>		

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<p>Recognition & Rewards</p>	<p>How are people acknowledged and what for? What doesn't get recognized that should?</p> <p>How competitive is the organization's compensation with the market rate for similar positions?</p> <p>What are the benefits and perks and who receives them?</p> <p>Are high performers treated differently than low performers or is everyone treated similarly regardless of performance?</p>		
<p>Policies & Procedures</p>	<p>Are there a lot of written policies and procedures? How closely are they adhered to versus ignored?</p> <p>Which policies and procedures attract the most attention from employees?</p> <p>What unwritten policies or practices are evident?</p>		
<p>Traditions, Customs & Rituals</p>	<p>What patterns of behavior or habits exist?</p> <p>What gets celebrated and how? (e.g. holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, accomplishments)</p> <p>What's cherished and/or considered sacred?</p>		
<p>Values</p>	<p>What is the organization's or team's stated values vs. observed values? What seems to matter?</p> <p>How are these values connected to decisions, priorities, conduct, and daily operations?</p>		

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Performance	<p>What level of performance do you see? What kind of results are achieved?</p> <p>What are the consequences for poor performance? What gets punished?</p> <p>Is the organization growing, stable, or shrinking? If publically traded, what are the stock price trends and Wall Street analysts saying? If nonprofit, what does Guidestar.com reveal?</p>		
Artifacts	<p>What do you notice on display in the lobby, hallways, workspaces, and meeting rooms? (e.g. furniture, awards, photos, paintings, posters, toys, souvenirs, books, food/treats)</p> <p>How do people decorate (or not decorate) their offices or personal spaces?</p>		
Resources	<p>Does the organization seem to have a lot of resources available?</p> <p>How well does the organization manage its resources?</p> <p>Are people saddled with more than one job or does company backfill open positions?</p> <p>What are current/former employees and customers on various websites saying? (e.g. Glassdoor, Yelp, LinkedIn, and Facebook)</p>		