



SOLVE THE CULTURE PUZZLE

FIVE CLUES TO YOUR COMPANY'S DEEPEST BELIEFS

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THE SHORT COURSE

- Fitting into a new company can be challenging and frustrating.
- Quickly understanding core beliefs of your new company can make your integration more productive.
- Five clues will help you figure out what matters and how you can adjust your style to make a flying start.

John has been a successful young marketing executive ever since graduating from business school fifteen years ago. He has worked for a variety of global industry leaders and always excelled. His assignments included several overseas roles where he worked daily with people from a variety of cultures. Throughout his formative years, the trajectory has been up, up, up.

Maybe that's why he looks so bewildered as we sit at lunch at a hole-in-the-wall Thai restaurant near his office. I have been working with John over the past few months after receiving a nervous call from his boss. "No one doubts John's talent," the boss told me, "but he rubs so many of his colleagues the wrong way that I'm not sure he will make it in our company."

John's first reaction to our work together was not all that unusual: denial. He didn't see that he had a problem. But on this day, he finally begins to acknowledge that maybe, just maybe, he does.

"I just don't understand what works around here," he says, stirring his egg drop soup. "I've worked all over the world for big companies and never got negative feedback from colleagues. Yes, we had our bumps and bruises, but those companies expected that. Here..." his voice trails off as he munches glumly on a spring roll.

Most leaders who go to a new company encounter some version of John's frustration during their transition. They walk in the door with assumptions about what has worked from their past, only to find out that it doesn't work that way in this company. Unfortunately, the differences are not printed on a nice laminated card in the HR department's orientation packet. And if they were, they would probably be wrong or at least woefully incomplete. After all, most people find it very hard to accurately describe their own culture's deepest beliefs.

Professionals like John rarely lack talent. Their struggle has less to do with their poten-

tial than with their ability to fit in with a way of working that may be less natural for them. Some try to buck that invisible system for a time. But when your job requires the cooperation of colleagues, that approach usually leads to friction and lower productivity.

So for all of the leaders like John, trying get started in a new role at a new company, here are five clues that can help you solve the puzzle to your firm's culture. Study them carefully and you have a good chance of shaping productive working relationships with colleagues.

Clue #1: The Hero Clue

Almost any company has heroes that shape beliefs about how people should act. They may be obvious people – the iconic CEO or founder – but they may also come in unusual shapes and sizes. Sometimes a particular salesperson, staffer, or researcher is seen as the model of how things should be done.

How do you find heroes? One obvious place, of course, is on the stage at awards ceremonies. Organizations tend to recognize those that exemplify their core beliefs. But it is even more interesting to look at those seen as opinion leaders, the people with influence and authority beyond their formal role. They are the ones who are consulted on decisions and interview new recruits. The company goes to extraordinary lengths to keep them because they are seen as crucial to keeping the bloodline of the culture going.

Of course, the corollary to the Hero Clue is the Goat Clue. Any organization has stories of people who came into key roles with real promise, but left ahead of schedule. When asked what happened, people will often say, "She just didn't fit in around here." They are the ultimate outsiders, the ones that no one wants to emulate. This should be a signal to discover more about the culture through that person's story.

For Heroes and Goats, ask questions about why people in the organization see them that way. What did they do (or not do) to achieve their status? What does that tell you about what works (or doesn't work) in this culture?

Clue #2: The Language Clue

Words wield power. You can discern a lot by the language and imagery used by people in a company. And experts in the field argue that the kind of words used by a company and its leaders actually *creates* the culture. Here's an example.

A non-profit with a noble cause depends on its staff and volunteer leaders for success. One such organization spent an enormous amount of time (and money) bringing those people together and encouraging them to work together for the common good. "We're all a team around here," they said regularly. But in unguarded moments, the top leaders of that organization would scratch their heads and wonder why the leadership team had divisions, conflict, and constant tension – and more importantly, why several key leaders refused to share vital information and best practices with others.

"Look for members of the company who have influence and authority beyond their formal role."

We took a closer look. Most of the language and imagery around the organization came from the world of athletics and the military. They talked about their mission and their work in those metaphors. Not surprisingly, when we polled the leaders they saw the organization as fundamentally competitive. When an organization's language is steeped in competitive metaphors – full of winners and losers – it's only a matter of time before that way of thinking seeps into the behavior and expectations of the whole group.

A quick look around a company's core images and language can tell you a lot about how people think. Understand how they think and you are that much closer to understanding what behavior they expect.

Clue #3: The Decision Clue

Little says more about how power and relationships are viewed than decision-making. Very few company executives stomp around saying, "Senior leaders make all of the important decisions around here, so don't take any initiative." But employee survey after employee survey will tell you that most ground level employees feel under-empowered, so you can do the math.

In itself, that doesn't tell us too much. There is an eternal (and in my opinion, appropriate) tension between leaders and team members on how decision-making authority is distributed. What's more telling is the process the company uses to make decisions. Are decisions made overtly in formal meetings or informally behind closed doors? Does every person and/or department feel they should have veto power over a decision (often cloaked in language of "input") for it to proceed? Is the premium on speed of decision, quality of decision, or inclusion of diverse parties?

An informal conversation about recent decisions and the winding path they took will inform you on what really matters in the company: speed, results, due process, inclusion, smoothed feelings, competition, or innovation.

Clue #4: The Conflict Clue

Conflict may be inevitable, but how a firm *deals with* conflict tells you a lot about what's expected. Just ask John, the mid-career professional described earlier. He grew up in technology companies where cutthroat competition and aggressive conflict were the norm. Not only did you expect others to do everything in their power to get their way, but you didn't respect people who shied away from conflict.

Imagine his bewilderment when he arrived in a company where conflict rarely spills out in public. In his new company, people don't say no if they disagree, they simply fail to say yes. John walked out of meetings thinking that he had agreement with colleagues. In fact, he didn't. But the only way he found out was through their inaction or perhaps an echo of their "different point of view" coming back days later through the grapevine. John saw this as underhanded, even passive aggressive. Regardless, what it really showed was a deep belief in the culture that people should get along even if they didn't agree.

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Clue #5: The Rewards Clue

This clue may be so obvious that we walk right by it. We all know that the compensation structure of a company drives a lot of behavior. Just ask the partners of leading professional service firms. Many of them, though they know that developing people and intellectual capital will drive the long-term future of the firm, complain that the only thing rewarded during the bonus-splitting exercise is revenue or personal billings. And certainly, a company's compensation scheme can give significant clues about what matters to the firm. (For instance, revenue *is* seen as critical in a high fixed-cost business like a consulting firm!)

But don't dance by this too quickly. Beneath the veneer of compensation systems, there is a different level of reward going on. These are the informal rewards that often mean as much or more to people in the company as money. (One school of thought is that people emphasize monetary rewards when they are not satisfied with these other, more intrinsic incentives.) These rewards include opportunities for advancement, interesting assignments, high-profile projects, prime office space, extra vacation, inclusion in decisions, status as an in-house expert, or even a warm note of appreciation. As interesting as these artifacts of recognition are, the cultural clue lies in why people received them. What did they do that merited this sort of reward and why was that reward chosen? What special symbolism does the reward have and what does it say about what's valued and expected in the organization?

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Solving the Puzzle

So you ask questions, listen, observe people, and begin to draw conclusions. How do you sort out the clues and make sense of your new company's culture? Here are a few filters you can use to get started. See where your new organization falls on these four continuums:

The Task/People Filter: Which of these two beliefs do your clues lead to?

- "We're all about a task around here. If we're friends, that's a bonus."
- "We want to accomplish great things with people we respect and like."

The Individual/Collective Filter: Which of these two beliefs do your clues lead to?

- "Each person should be rewarded for their individual effort. If we improve the individuals in this organization, we'll all succeed more."
- "No single person is greater than the company. We don't tolerate anyone who puts their personal agenda above that of the group."

The Power Difference Filter: Which of these two beliefs do your clues lead to?

- "We run a meritocracy here. Seniority and position means less than what you bring to the team."
- "We depend on the experience and power of the senior members of the organization for our future. They earned it, we aspire to it, and we respect it."

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The Structure/Speed Filter: Which of these two beliefs do your clues lead to?

- “We do things right, even if it takes longer. That gets us to the right decisions and the best results.”
- “We do things fast, even if it means we make mistakes. That gets us to innovative solutions and breakthrough results.”

Once you have a good idea of the core beliefs in the company, you have a simple (but very difficult) task. Examine the company’s expectations and beliefs next to your own, looking for places you will fit naturally as well as places you may struggle. Those areas of misalignment need to become a special focus for you in your early days as a leader in the organization.

You may be tempted to judge your new cultural environment, to point out what is inconsistent or just plain annoying. Resist the urge, at least in the beginning. The culture was there long before you and if you attempt to push against it before your credibility is in place, it will be there long after you have left!

Adjusting to a new culture – where you are quite naturally a “foreigner” – isn’t easy, but with a little self-control, some input from a few “natives” and some time to work it through, you’ll be on your way to a flying start.