

HOW CULTURAL COMPATIBILITY CAN ENHANCE YOUR SUCCESS

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To outside observers, Joyce K. Reynolds seemed at the top of her corporate career. She was senior vice president of marketing for Siegal & Gale, a New York City-based international communications firm and an affiliate of Saatchi & Saatchi, which, back in the 1980s, was one of the world's hottest ad agencies.

But there was one momentous problem. "I did not fit in," says Ms. Reynolds. "I was an entrepreneur — and they were more of a structured company."



As a high-ranking executive in the organization, Ms. Reynolds reports, she "would go out and land new clients, but it never occurred to me that the CEO and other executives in the firm might want input into that process."

Ms. Reynolds — who today heads her own eponymous consulting company in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. — isn't alone. Other executives have seen similar scenarios unfold over the years — conflicts often labeled as "cultural clashes" at the office. For her transgressions, she was labeled "as not being a team player," she recalls, "and that was very confusing for me."

When Carole Martin was a human-resources executive in the biotechnology industry, research and development executives were expected to be introverted. "When we hired a way-out extrovert, he was like a fish out of water," says Ms. Martin, an HR consultant in Danville, Calif. "His fellow scientists saw him as weird and rejected his friendship."

TWO DISTINCT CULTURES

In HR consulting circles, fitting the "corporate culture" has long been viewed as a key to success for executives, although the concept has remained somewhat undefined. But now, a growing body of research shows that there are at least two distinct types of corporate cultures: individualistic and collectivistic.

Collectivistic companies encourage loyalty to the group and a willingness to make personal sacrifices to advance the greater good. Conversely, individualistic organizations tend to concentrate on costs and benefits, but highly value independent thinking.



“Hiring an executive with a collectivistic attitude to work in an individualistic organization, or vice versa, is likely to produce a cultural clash,” says Dr. Chris Robert, an assistant professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia, who has studied the phenomenon.

The culture clash will occur because the rewards and promotion systems in place in the different kinds of firms are decidedly distinct. These systems are the basis of corporate culture as they foster the kind of behaviors and values that senior executives seek.

Individualistic firms will offer promotions — and pay raises — based on individual accomplishments. Collectivistic firms emphasize the endeavors of teams and reward great team efforts. “This potential clash between organizational culture and individual employee culture should be taken into consideration in the hiring process,” says Dr. Robert.v

CULTURE CLUB OR CLASH?

How do companies determine that an executive hire is a good fit, or a misfit? Usually, a series of interviews with a prospective hire can help pinpoint a candidate’s corporate cultural references, says Mary Jo Marchionni, an Allentown, Pa.-based career counselor and personal coach.

Typically, recruiters can determine the type of corporate culture an executive prospect thrives in quite quickly, says Paul Ray Jr., chairman and CEO of Ray & Berndtson, an executive-recruiting firm based in Fort Worth, Texas.

“We ask questions to determine if they’ve excelled in a company that rewards individual accomplishment — providing bonuses for those who make a sales quota — or [rewards] team accomplishments — like taking everyone on the winning sales team out to dinner,” he says.

If the company offers bonuses for meeting sales quotas — and the prospect thrives in such an environment — the individual is likely to fit well in the company’s culture. But if the prospect doesn’t respond to such incentives, he or she likely won’t be a successful hire for that employer.

Mr. Ray — who studied corporate culture and collaborated on a recent report on the topic with the Harvard Business School — says General Electric Co., whose former CEO, Jack Welch, consciously crafted an “individualistic” style culture, is an example of a company that rewards individual initiative. Conversely, Federal Express Co., which rewards employees who are part of a team effort, is an example of a company with a “collectivistic” culture.

CULTURAL SIGNS FOR JOB SEEKERS

Job-hunting executives should be mindful of the collectivistic versus individualistic mindset of potential employers, says Mr. Ray. He advises probing potential employers to determine their cultural style and then deciding if it would be right for you.

Rather than focusing on the pay level for a new position, how many employees you’ll manage or travel requirements, ask a different set of questions, experts suggest.



Start by learning what kind of behavior the company rewards. Ask questions, such as, “Who succeeds at this company?” “What accomplishments are celebrated there?” or “How do you determine what’s a failure?” says Carol Kinsey Gorman, a Berkeley, Calif.-based industrial psychologist, and author of “This Isn’t The Company I Joined” (John Wiley & Sons, 1997). “Those kinds of questions help you frame up the definition of the culture there,” she says.

Sometimes, clues about corporate culture are evident before an interview starts. “I had my own idea of corporate culture,” says Sonia Taylor, an account manager at Allison & Partners, a San Francisco-based public-relations agency about a recent job search. “I was gung-ho, aggressive, loud and, at times, blunt.”

But at the new company she was eyeing, “everything from attitudes to dress was different. I noticed co-workers coming in wearing open-toed shoes, no pantyhose, and much more eye-catching outfits. Even the clients came in for meetings dressed in jeans and without a tie.”

Ms. Taylor was concerned that the company was too individualistic for her – based on that first impression and her previous experiences in the executive world. These cues prompted her to ask additional questions about the company’s culture before entertaining a job offer.

YOUR PERSONAL BEST

But what if you’re a collectivistic executive who is already working in an individualistic company? Realize that you can’t change an employer’s true culture by yourself, says Ms. Reynolds, whose company consults with large corporations on cultural issues. Drawing from her own experience, she says that to be truly satisfied, executives must be true to themselves and seek work at culturally compatible employers.

“It’s a painful reality, but the truth is that you may never be happy if you’re working for the wrong kind of company,” she says. “We all respect the fact that you’ve got a mortgage to pay and tuition bills for the kids, but you’ll never be able to truly succeed unless you find the kind of employer who matches you.”

The process could take a long time — and is often a part of a personal self-discovery process, Ms. Reynolds notes. “I’ve had clients who say, ‘I act enthusiastic at the office, but no one seems to believe me,’ ” she says. “That’s because you can’t fool yourself. If you’re not really enthusiastic, you won’t perform at your utmost level.”

Often, it takes years of experience to know what kind of company fits you best. Paul Gower worked for a “traditional, paternalistic company,” Burmah Castrol, but didn’t feel he fit in there. He thrived after transferring to a subsidiary that was a “cowboy-type operation.” But when the company wanted to transfer him back to the corporate office, he feared another cultural clash and resigned to enroll in an M.B.A. program at the Manchester Business School in the U.K.

Finding an employer that matches your personality will unleash your creativity, leading you to accomplishments you may have never thought possible, Ms. Reynolds says. Mr. Ray agrees.



When an executive finds the right corporate culture, it's as if she, for the first time, is "communicating in a language that the [employer's] culture can understand."

ONE JOB SEEKER'S QUEST

For Todd Murphy, finding a work culture that matched his style was a key goal of his job search in Los Angeles. He identified it at the Phelps Group, a marketing-communications consultancy, where he's now an account supervisor.

The firm's culture is "team-based," he says. It's a place where "if I want to meet with our president/CEO about business, I just stand up, look over my workstation wall and into his and see if he's free," Mr. Murphy continues, adding that the "yearly agency retreat is an exercise in camping, golfing and improving our agency outside of the company's walls."

In coming years, Mr. Ray expects that employers — and employees — will grow savvier about corporate culture. Individuals will reject job offers from companies where they don't expect to thrive culturally — no matter what pay and perks they're offered. Companies will prefer to hire employees who want to stay for long

periods.

"When they hire or add people to their company, they'll hire only those who fit into the system," Mr. Ray says.