

### **Organizational Cultural Fit**

**Point of the Assignment:** To understand the importance of organizational cultural fit and how it impacts your career success.

**Understanding Organizational Culture:** Organizational culture is a result of the values, assumptions, behaviors, attitudes, expectations, hidden rules, and dress codes that employees of an organization have in common. It impacts how people communicate, behave and work. Cultures can vary within an organization, such as differences between departments, work groups, employee levels and classifications, etc. Culture is often defined and shaped by the organization's founders and leaders and then reinforced by employees at every level of the institution and over time. As with any culture, new-comers are generally expected to adhere to the norms of the group of people, or to be ostracized as an 'outsider' and face the consequences. Therefore, cultures tend to be re-enforced and difficult to change.

This concept of organizational cultural fit also applies to educational and training institutions as well regarding its work with their students. The mission and philosophy of the school, and other factors will affect how the instructors treat the students. Sometimes instructors will be very supportive and devoted to helping their students to reach their fullest potential, going out of their way to help their students. However, sometimes instructors can be very harsh and critical of the students because they are preparing their students for the 'real world.' Some instructors prepare individuals for specific jobs. Most instructors who teach job skills usually take their role very seriously, and will be very firm and harsh with a trainee whose attitudes and actions cause alarm and demonstrate potential for causing harm to others or other serious consequences. This is especially true for jobs that affect public safety, such as doctors, police, firefighters, nurses, counselors, etc. In fact, the instructors' attitude will likely reflect an attitude of "It is my job to prepare you so you can make it to retirement." These instructors know that future employers will expect that only competent individuals will have graduated from their school, so if there is concern that the student does not meet expectations, they will be either likely engage in corrective measures to fix the problem, or kick them out of the program. Also, some training programs will deliberately have their curriculum set up to 'weed out' trainees who don't measure up to particular expectations and standards. This is likely done for one or more of the following reasons: 1) Competition in the program is very intense. 2) Too many go into the field for the wrong reasons. 3) To eliminate individuals who don't keep up with expectations. The bottom line here is that it is possible that some students in an educational program may be considered 'not a good fit' for the culture of this school. In that case, the concept of organizational cultural fit will apply to them as well.

**Importance of Employee/Employer Cultural Fit:** When interviewing potential candidates for jobs, employers are concerned about the following: 1) Can you do the job? 2) Will you do the job? 3) Will you get along with others? 4) Will they regret hiring you?

Recognizing the power of cultural fit is very important to career success because no matter how well qualified an employee is for a position, if they don't get along with their co-workers and supervisors, their jobs (and ultimately their professional reputation) will be seriously in danger. Employers don't like having employees around who don't get along with their co-workers or who create conflicts and problems just by being there. Individuals, who get labeled 'troublemakers,' are

## Organizational Cultural Fit

seen as a liability and a problem maker. Institutional leaders' priority is to maintain the safety, integrity and well-being of the organization, its employees, and its customers. Any internal or external threat to that wellbeing will be neutralized because they are responsible for maintaining the safety of the organization and people they serve. It is just like parents who are responsible for keeping their children safe. Therefore, an employee who creates a lot of conflict and tension will be seen as a problem to be solved.



Figure 1: Square peg into round hole - causes friction and damages peg.

However, many individuals in a position of poor cultural fit, may not understand what is happening. They are likely aware of someone constantly criticizing them, but don't understand why they are being criticized. Instead, they often perceive that constant criticism as an attack, believe they are 'being singled out,' abused, discriminated against, or are being personally persecuted. For many, the automatic response may be to defend against attack. Unfortunately, that will only make the problem worse, and cause them to be seen as defiant or insubordinate.

### **Common Causes of a Bad Cultural Fit**

#### **1. Most common with new employees**

*(Have not yet proven themselves capable of doing the job, or reached a level of full assumption of responsibilities, or the trust and respect of colleagues and supervisors.)*

- a. **Differences in Expectations** – between the employer and the employee (*job duties, requirements, targeted customer population, how to get the job done, level of supervision to be provided, etc.*)
- b. **Differences in Priorities** – between the employer and the employee (*What is important, how to get the job done, where changes should be made, how to handle conflicts and unexpected problems, quality vs. quantity, etc.*)
- c. **Differences in Values** – between the employer and the employee (*Beliefs in how people should be treated, emphasize quality over saving money, saving money vs. saving the environment, etc.*)
- d. **Differences in Attitudes** – between the individual and the organization (*enthusiastic vs. stoic, serious vs. happy, somber vs. affectionate, friendly vs. firm, etc.*)
- e. **Differences in Personality** - organization vs. individual – *Quiet vs. loud and friendly, tough vs. tender, serious vs. fun loving, laid-back vs. industrious, rule-following vs. free spirited, abrasive vs. diplomatic, risk-taking vs. permission-seeking, etc.*

## Organizational Cultural Fit

- f. **Not qualified** (*Individual does possess the needed skills, abilities, temperament, and/or experience to do the job assigned, and/or not able to keep up with the workload demand, etc.*)
2. **Most common with veteran employees**  
(*Have been around long enough to establish a reputation for being competent in the job and develop trust, respect, and a positive relationship with co-workers.*)
  - a. **Changes in leadership** – (*new leader implements unwanted changes, has different expectations/values/priorities/ leadership style than the former leader, personality conflicts, etc.*)
  - b. **Changes in organizational mission/structure/goals/values, priorities, etc.** – (*organization goes in a new direction that the current employee does not appreciate*)

### What Can You Do to Increase Your Likelihood of Cultural Fit?

#### 1. Job Seekers:

- a. **Investigate the company before and after the interview.** Read its mission and values statements. Identify their target audience/customer base. Conduct company searches.
- b. **During your job interview ask questions about cultural fit, values and priorities.** What kinds of activities, attitudes, expectations and behaviors are valued and/or looked down upon at this company?
- c. **Try to find current and former employees and ask them about the institutional culture.** Ask them the questions just listed.
- d. Before accepting the position, **listen to your ‘inner voice’** about goodness of fit.

#### 2. New Employees:

- a. **When you are first hired, listen, watch, ask questions, learn and keep quiet.** Avoid gossiping, taking sides, or complaining. You don’t know who knows what, who talks to whom, who gets along with whom, and who is or is not respected by organizational leadership. Avoid expressing opinions or getting too comfortable until you understand the culture and the ‘hidden rules.’ Otherwise, you won’t know if you unknowingly violate one of those rules. Unfortunately, if you do, someone probably won’t tell you – instead they will likely just judge you negatively.
- b. **Get a written job description after you are hired.** Read and reread it repeatedly until you fully know and can accomplish what you were hired to do.
- c. **Clarify with your supervisor of their expectations and priorities.** Make sure you truly understand what they want from you. Review your written job description periodically to remind yourself what they are paying you to do, and what they expect of you. Make sure you are both in agreement as to what you are expected to do.
- d. Clarify with your supervisor your **short-term and long-term goals** for reaching full competence on the job.
- e. **Find a respected veteran employee who will mentor you and help you understand the culture.** Be careful who you turn to for advice, counsel, and solidarity. If you choose to befriend someone who is not well respected, liked, or considered competent, their reputation will likely reflect badly on you.
- f. **Don’t try to change the institution and how they do things.** You can’t change something you don’t understand. Instead try to understand and adapt.
- g. **Earn your employers trust and respect before trying to make changes.** Most people also don’t appreciate some outsider trying to disrupt something they worked long and hard to build. Most people and organizations don’t appreciate an outsider coming in and trying to change things – especially when they have not yet earned trust and respect,

demonstrated their competency, and don't really understand the big picture yet. However, once you have earned their trust and respect, they may be more willing to hear what you have to say.

**3. Veteran Employees:**

- a. **Humble yourself and remain teachable.** Don't develop an attitude of superiority if you acquire a new (or younger) supervisor. Remember that person was appointed to that position for a reason. It is likely that the institutional leadership wants to accomplish something through that person.
- b. **Be part of the solution** – not part of the problem. Employees who resist implemented changes cause a lot of friction, resentment, and headaches for the boss. Many veteran employees are inclined to fight institutional changes. Unfortunately, that adds to the conflict and can harm your professional reputation. Consequently, they often wind up being on the 'first to go list' when it is time to lay off employees. Only complain about proposed changes when your expertise tells you that the proposed changes will cause serious negative consequences. If you fight change or complain simply because "we have always done it this way," or because you are comfortable and set in your ways, then you will quickly get labeled "resistant to change" and possibly an "obsolete dinosaur". That will have a definite negative impact on your professional reputation.
- c. **Recognize and accept when and why leadership is trying to make changes to mission/ structure/ goals/ values, priorities, etc.** The leadership may simply be trying to keep the organization alive during a turbulent and changing environment. Or they may simply be implementing mandates that have come from above them, or responding to new laws that affect the business.
- d. If you acquire a new supervisor, remember that **you will need to establish a level of trust and respect with someone new.**
- e. **Be mindful of what they are dealing with.** Often times that new boss has been given mandates from above of what they are expected to accomplish. They also often understand that the veteran employees may or may not be happy to have them. They are new in the job and need to prove themselves to their supervisor just like you do.
- f. **Identify your own priorities.** If your priority is to keep your job, then cooperate. If you find that the institution is going in a direction you can't accept, then you will need to consider other options. Talk to a qualified career counselor, if necessary, to help you work through this process.

**Your Options for Dealing with a Bad Cultural Fit**

There are more common, but unrealistic expectations, which most people tend to have when dealing with a bad cultural fit. Unfortunately, the employee usually winds up losing in the end: Their job and their professional reputation suffer the consequences.

***Realistic Options for Dealing with Bad Cultural Fit:***

1. **Adapt to their expectations.** Communicate with your supervisor to find out what they expect. Find out, from their perspective, what is causing the problem. Understand what they want from you and try to give it to them. If you have truly done everything you can do to adapt to their expectations, and it still isn't working, then it is clearly not a good fit.

You are free to fight; but before you do, consider the potential consequences. If you do fight, try to anticipate the potential consequences and weigh them against what you hope to gain.

Consequences taken to the extreme can often end careers.

2. **Get an objective, neutral well-respected insider's perspective.** Find a well-respected co-worker, who has been around a while, and who has seen you in your working environment, who can look at the situation from an objective perspective. Find out from them if there are any 'hidden rules' that you may be unknowingly violating. They should be able to help you identify whether or not there is a personality conflict between you and the institution. Perhaps they can help you identify anything you may be doing to contribute to the situation. Be sure to find someone who can be objective. Someone who just encourages you to feel like a 'victim who has been wronged' is not doing you any favors – that will only make the problem worse. You can't control the system, but you can focus on changing what you do have control over.
3. **Get training/help to develop skills deficiencies.** If part of the challenge involves not having the skills to do the job, then get the training necessary to become competent in your job. If your supervisor wants the situation to work out, they should be happy to hear that you are trying to address the situation.
4. **Quit (but give notice) – even if you don't already have another job lined up.** If the job doesn't fit, and/or you are unwilling or unable to adapt to their expectations, the sooner you accept the situation for what it is, the sooner you can do something about it. There is nothing wrong with saying you left a new job because it was not a good fit. This happens more frequently than most people realize. The shorter your stay of employment with them, the less likely anyone will care about it in the long run, and consequently the less long-term damage that will be done to your professional reputation. In fact, job search experts suggest not even listing jobs that last less than a few months, because in the long run, no one will care about it. Also remember that just because you did not fit the culture of this organization, does not necessarily mean you are worthless. It means you will fit better somewhere else.
5. **Get professional mental health and/or career counseling.** Talk to a professional counselor. By seeking a professional counselor, who is employed outside of your organization, you are going to find someone who is able to put your needs first. A mental health counselor can help you with your conflict resolution skills, your stress coping skills, and/or help you identify and address any potential blind spots or actions you may have that could be contributing to the situation. Seek a professional career counselor if you need help considering career/job change options, making job change decisions, or need help developing current and effective job search skills.

### ***Ineffective Ways of Dealing with Bad Cultural Fit:***

1. **Fight with the institution and/or supervisor.** If you are not happy with your job and/or employer, the odds are pretty good that the feeling is mutual. Remember they have the power. Besides would you want to pay someone who does not give you what you are paying for? So why should they? Some employers will just simply get rid of you. However, larger institutions have formal processes for terminating employees, and therefore will have to work hard to justify getting rid of an employee who doesn't fit. In that case, they often look for, or invent an excuse, to get rid of you. Fighting with them over doing your job will only make their attitude towards you worse. Anything and everything you do and say will be viewed from the perspective that you are not competent and/or are a bad employee.
2. **Expect the institution to change its values/mission/culture, etc.** Change is always hard – especially when done by individuals who have the power and skill to do it. A brand new, low-level employee has very little power and influence to change how institutions operate.

3. **Take legal actions and/or file formal complaints.** This is always an option. If the institution does something truly illegal or unethical, it may be worth the consequences to take action. But before you do, ask yourself what you may be doing to contribute to the disagreement. Be assured that any imperfections on your part will be brought up in this process. Make sure that this is not a situation of the supervisor trying to correct areas of ‘improvements needed’ in your performance. Also consider that, more often than not in bad-fit situations, it is more about disagreements. So, taking legal actions over a perceived injustice is more likely to just give them even more reasons to dislike you and try to find an excuse to get rid of you. Also keep in mind that with most employers, the Human Resources department may not necessarily be the best place to find an ally. Many times, H.R.’s priority is to keep the company out of legal trouble by informing the supervisor how to handle things legally. In addition, remember that under those circumstances, the supervisor is very likely going to be limited in what he/she can say and do for the individual because of those legal restrictions. So, their interactions with that individual will likely be limited and controlled.
4. **Allow the situation to escalate to its logical conclusion: your termination.** If you fail to address and resolve the situation, it will likely take care of itself. Unfortunately, individuals who don’t properly address poor-fit issues usually wind up quitting or getting fired. In addition, the longer they are in that position, the more likely this process can cause the individual to experience unresolved emotional damage to the psyche due stress, loss of self-esteem, loss of self-confidence, anger, bitterness, depression, decline in physical health, etc. Feeling like no matter what you do, it will be wrong is also seriously damaging to one’s emotional health as well. If this happens, seek professional counseling to address those issues.

**An Extreme Example of Poor Cultural Fit Gone Wrong: Christopher Dorner (2/2013)**

Christopher Dorner, a young African American man, was able to live out his dream when he was hired as an officer for the Los Angeles Police Department. However, his career was troubled from the very beginning at the police academy and ultimately was short lived. According to his writings, he had serious problems with how people (fellow officers and the public) were treated by the LAPD. He had personally very strong convictions that people should be treated with respect; but he felt that the LAPD was racist and engaged in the use of excessive force. He violated very deeply-held values held by the law-enforcement community by filing several formal complaints against other officers – including his superior-training officer. *(These kinds of actions are so deeply loathed; they often will end a police officer’s career.)* Through formal hearing processes, his complaint was declared to be unfounded, so he was eventually fired. He struggled with serious anger management issues, so for four years after his termination, he ruminated over his reputation being destroyed after he firmly believed he did the right thing. In addition, he also dealt with the challenges of losing his income, identity, future ambitions, and his home. He followed proper procedures to have his termination overturned, going as far as he could. However, he ultimately lost that battle as well. His final solution to “get his name back” was to wage a very public and violent war against the Los Angeles Police Department. By the time that war was finally over, the LAPD and other local agencies spent multi- million dollars, four people were murdered, and several more were seriously injured. He ultimately killed himself when cornered in an hours-long gun battle with police, and he will go down in history as “just another deranged lunatic who senselessly murdered innocent people”. In the process, the LAPD re-opened his termination case, and determined that they were justified in firing him.

Organizational Cultural Fit

- **Former Officer Wanted in Connection With Double Murder in Irvine**  
<http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Irvine-Couple-Died-of-Multiple-Gunshot-Wounds-Sheriffs-Official-Monica-Quan-190106131.html>
- **Ex-girlfriend: Dorner was stressed out, bottled up**  
<http://www.cnn.com/2013/02/14/justice/lapd-dorner-former-girlfriend/>
- **Dorner Had a History of Complaints Against Fellow LAPD Officers**  
<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2013/02/dorner-had-history-of-complaints-against-fellow-lapd-officers.html>
- **La Palma Police Chief Recalls the "Chris Dorner That I Knew"**  
<http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/La-Palma-Police-Chief-Recalls-a-Chris-Dorner-That-I-Knew-191354001.html>
- **The Girlfriend of Christopher Dorner Speaks Out**  
<http://www.myfoxla.com/story/21534215/robin-sax-the-girlfriend-of-christopher-dorner-speaks-out>
- **Can We Prevent the Next Chris Dorner? Law enforcement has to do a better job of preventing unstable people from joining the profession.**  
<http://www.policemag.com/channel/careers-training/articles/2013/05/can-we-prevent-the-next-chris-dorner.aspx>
- **Dorner Justifiably Fired From LAPD: Report**  
<http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Dorner-Justifiably-Fired-From-LAPD-Report-212538541.html>

**Personal Application:**

1. **Give an example of a situation where you, or someone you observed, was (or is) a bad fit to their job. (Describe the situation)**

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2. **What were the circumstances that caused conflicts?**

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3. **What (if anything) did you (him/her) do to contribute to the conflicts?**

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4. **How did the supervisor respond to you (him/her)?**

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Organizational Cultural Fit

**5. How did the co-workers respond to you (him/her)?**

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**6. Did you (he/she) understand that it was a situation of poor fit?**

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**7. How did you (he/she) handle the poor-fit situation?**

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**8. Did anyone try to help you (he/she) adapt to the cultural expectations?**

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**9. In retrospect what were some warning signs that this was a 'bad fit' situation?**

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**10. In retrospect, how could you (he/she) have handled the situation better?**

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**11. Are you currently experiencing a bad fit situation?**

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**12. Are you experiencing any negative consequences (stress, depression, anger, etc.) because of the situation?**

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**13. If yes, what can you/should you do about it?**

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**14. What short-term goals can you set for yourself to address this?**

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**15. Who can you go to for support as you try to address it?**

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**Additional Resources:**

To learn more about issues related to organizational cultural fit, download any of the following handouts from: <http://www.dreams-goals.com/IndividualLessons.html>

- Reaching Career Goals
- Hidden Rules
- Success
- True Self
- Aligning Goals
- Culture, Education & Unspoken Expectations

**Additional Readings:**

- **Culture: What Is Organizational Culture?**  
<http://humanresources.about.com/od/organizationalculture/a/culture.htm>
- **Are You A ‘Cultural Fit’ For The Job?**  
<http://www.careerealism.com/cultural-fit-job/>
- **The Only Way to Fix Broken Company Culture**  
[https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/article/20140926161743-10486099-the-only-way-to-fix-broken-company-culture?trk=tod-home-art-list-small\\_1](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/article/20140926161743-10486099-the-only-way-to-fix-broken-company-culture?trk=tod-home-art-list-small_1)
- **You're Probably Making These Five Mistakes At Work**  
[http://www.content-loop.com/youre-probably-making-five-mistakes-work/?utm\\_source=LinkedIn&utm\\_medium=status\\_update&utm\\_campaign=Capgemini\\_Ye arlong\\_HMI\\_INT\\_2013](http://www.content-loop.com/youre-probably-making-five-mistakes-work/?utm_source=LinkedIn&utm_medium=status_update&utm_campaign=Capgemini_Ye arlong_HMI_INT_2013)
- **The Most Important Reason People Fail in a New Job**  
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikaandersen/2012/04/25/the-most-important-reason-people-fail-in-a-new-job/>
- **5 Unhealthy Job Search Habits Keeping You Unemployed** (*Discusses cultural fit*)  
<http://www.careerealism.com/unhealthy-job-search-habits/#KoXAxRLDu7XIMA45.99>
- **7 Ways To Sniff Out The REAL Company Culture**  
Read more at <http://www.careerealism.com/company-culture-real/#IXEz4x06lllZg2yz.99>
- **7 Signs it is Time to Quit Your Job**  
[https://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20140721130505-68335342-7-signs-it-is-time-to-quit-your-job?trk=tod-home-art-list-small\\_1](https://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20140721130505-68335342-7-signs-it-is-time-to-quit-your-job?trk=tod-home-art-list-small_1)
- **A Tale of Two Corporate Cultures**  
<http://www.corporateculturepros.com/2011/10/tale-two-corporate-cultures/>
- **Is It Better to Hire for Cultural Fit Over Experience?**  
<http://fortune.com/2011/04/28/is-it-better-to-hire-for-cultural-fit-over-experience/>

Organizational Cultural Fit

- **Rethinking Work: Use the Corporate Life Cycle to Guide Your Hiring Decisions**  
<https://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130812035921-15454-rethinking-work-are-you-in-the-right-job>
- **Workshop: “Managing Conflicting Priorities: - School, Social Life, Work - Making Decisions about What is Important - and What is Not”**  
<http://www.dreams-goals.com/Wkshp-Priorities.html>
- **Workshop: “Planning for an Unpredictable Future: ”** *How to Respond to a World of Constant Change*  
<http://www.dreams-goals.com/Wkshp-UnpredictableFuture.html>
- **Workshop: “Resumes for Today's Job Market - The ‘Rules’ have changed. Does your resume reflect the new rules?”**  
<http://www.dreams-goals.com/Wkshp-Resumes.html>
- **Workshop: Perfecting the Interview Process**  
<http://www.dreams-goals.com/Wkshp-Interviewing.html>

**Test your understanding:**

**What is the main point of this assignment?**

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**Why were you expected to do this exercise?**

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**What type of person would need to do this exercise?**

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**How well do you fit the profile of the person for whom this assignment was created?**

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**Reflection:** *(Write down your response after completing this assignment.)*

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