

Is This a Good Fit?

The Connection Between Organizational Culture and Communications Style

Introduction and Overview

Maria Simpson, Ph.D.

Edward van Luinen, M.A

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Introduction

Whether you are management or staff, in the C-Suite or HR or OD or IT, you have probably thought about the issue of “fit.” A good fit is a match between the organization and its staff members, processes, and systems. A bad fit does not find that match and results in interpersonal conflict, ineffective teams, inadequate or inappropriate systems, and lost productivity and revenue.

If you are considering the issue of “fit,” you are probably asking some or all of these questions.

How does the issue of “fit” relate to employment?

- Am I a good fit for the job I am considering?
- Is the organization I’m in a good fit for my expertise and approach?
- What happened to make such a good hire work out so badly and not fit in?

How does the issue of “fit” relate to OD?

- How can I recognize, address, and even avoid the problems of a lack of fit in my organization?
- Can I design new systems that have a better chance of being a good fit for this organization than some of them are now?
- Is there anything I can consider or measure in advance of an organizational decision that would reduce the possibility of these mismatches causing conflicts?

How does the issue of “fit” relate to leadership development and the success of divisions or departments?

- Do the people we promote to leadership positions have the right communications skills and style for this organization?
- What elements are missing from our leadership development and/or mentoring programs that need to be added to ensure success in our culture?
- Do we do enough communications training at all levels to reduce the potential for conflict that escalates and increase the potential for resolving conflict at its earliest stages?

You can address these issues before they become problems, first, by understanding your organization's culture; second, by understanding the communications style that is most effective in it and why; and last, by ensuring that everyone receives communications training based on the accepted practices and approaches that are described here.

By understanding these elements, organizational systems and processes can be designed, and staff members hired, to prevent the frustration and costs of the "bad fit."

In this exploration of culture and conflict, we explain:

- what organizational culture means.
- how it is demonstrated in organizational structure and behavior.
- the communications and conflict styles that to work best in each organizational culture.

Ours is a very practical approach to understanding and addressing organizational culture and organizational conflict. We have used a new approach to synthesize these areas and demonstrated their deep connection and impact on organizations. Because these concepts, like the organizations they represent, are complex, these ideas are meant to help you explore the dynamics in your organization and its staff members, however, they are not prescriptive or definitive. Both organizations and individuals are too complex to be defined by one trait or one dynamic. We see these systems as a context for understanding, a way to raise awareness, and an opportunity to design the best possible organizational success.

We hope you will let us know how you have been able to use these ideas and the impact they had. We look forward to hearing from you.

Maria Simpson, Ph.D.
info@mariasimpson.com

Edward van Luinen, M.A.
edwardjvl@gmail.com

Part I: What is Culture?

What Does a “Bad Fit” Look Like?

A Short Scenario

The Players

The Compliance Officer (CO), a Relatively New Hire and technical expert

The HR Director, who has to manage the developing mess

The CEO, whose vision for the future may not be possible without the Relatively New Hire

The Setting

A medium-sized, established organization

The Time

Now, and not a good one

The Compliance Officer (CO), a Relatively New Hire and an expert in the relevant regulatory areas, has been with this organization for just over a year, and is still not completely comfortable in the job. She was hired to bring the organization into consistent regulatory compliance and to develop systems that would ensure compliance in the future, but the transition into the new position has been rocky.

The CO knows what has to be done, wants very much to contribute to the organization’s success, and has even had some successes with implementing new systems, but those successes have been accompanied by frayed relationships. She has the support of her managers, but seems unable to gain the support of others. Department heads and even her own staff members challenge her decisions when legal issues are involved and her expertise should automatically be accepted. She also seems unable to convince others to

focus as intently on the work as she does; there is a great deal of work to be done and little time to do it. How can the CO be successful in a situation she doesn't understand? And more importantly, could she have avoided this situation? Her technical expertise has been enough for her to be successful in previous situations, but that doesn't seem to be working here. She is beginning to wonder if this is the right placement for her.

The HR Director wonders what can be done about this situation, which unfortunately, is not all that unusual, and if it could have been avoided. All the references for the CO were glowing, not only about technical skills but about issues of integrity and ethics, which are particularly important for this position. And, admittedly, the CO has been successful in updating some systems and saving the organization money. The HR Director is considering executive coaching, but coaching is expensive. How much coaching would be needed, and who would be coached? Was this just a bad hire or were there organizational issues that also contributed to the problem? The staff has worked together successfully for years, and integrating the New Hire has been difficult.

The CEO has to plan for maintaining services in the context of more and more limited resources. Not being in compliance has cost the organization dearly in fines that had to be paid and fixes that had to be funded. Now that resources are more limited, it is vital to avoid those unnecessary costs, and the CO was seen as the person to accomplish that goal. However, if this new Compliance Officer has not gained the trust of others in over a year, can she be successful in meeting the goal of full compliance since that requires the support of other staff members? This person is completely qualified for the job. What went wrong, and can it happen again?

Hiring mistakes are expensive, not only in funding a new search, but in the costs lost to non-compliance and deteriorating trust among the regulatory agencies and inspectors who are getting impatient with promises for change that have not been kept. A decision will have to be made pretty quickly and ways found to avoid similar situations in the future, a problem faced by all too many organizations all too frequently.

The Problem of “Fit”

Like the New Hire, each of us has experienced the problem of a bad fit at one time or another. From the employee side, it seems as if nothing we do is right, that we are always criticized, that others don't recognize and appreciate our skills or don't seem to be nearly as interested as we are in doing a good job.

From the management side, this person has become a distraction to efficiency and effectiveness, always standing out or disagreeing, not following expected procedures or imposing procedures where they are not necessary, not getting along even though technical qualifications and performance are quite good, and taking too much management time and attention. In effect, the person does not fit into “the informal network” of the organization or become socialized in its communications or other practices. (Hofstede, pp. 177-178, 183)

Eventually, if the fit is not improved, conflict will be on-going, and employees may leave on their own, not wanting to be where they are not valued and always criticized. Or the difficulty may be redefined as a performance issue, employees may be fired based on the performance issue, and then may file a wrongful termination complaint, which costs a fortune to defend and another fortune to settle. “Whoever disrupts the harmony is rejected, however good a worker he or she is.” (Hofstede, pp. 178)

Situations like these all too often end badly. However, they can be mitigated or even avoided if three things are clear:

- the organizational culture.
- the organizational communications style.
- whether the employee's communications style matches the organization's.

Of course, other considerations may apply depending on the situation, but the lack of consistency between organizational communications and employee communications styles is the first and most obvious sign of a bad fit.

* * *

At this point, you may already be thinking of people in your organization who may not be “a good fit.” What indicators lead you to this conclusion? Identifying them is the beginning of understanding what being a “good fit” means.

Defining Culture

The Wikipedia definition of culture is:

The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group. (wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture, 9/4/09)

The American Heritage Dictionary definition supports this approach, although it is a bit broader and includes the idea that culture is learned and “socially transmitted:”

The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population. (p. 348)

In *The Dynamics of Culture*, Bernard Mayer, a noted writer on conflict resolution, defines culture this way:

. . . the enduring norms, values, customs, and behavior patterns common to a particular group of people. (p. 72)

His definition is particularly important since it is written with a discussion of conflict resolution in mind, the topic of the second half of this paper. (In this discussion, “conflict” is considered a particular form of communication, and the term “communications” may be used to include both general patterns of communication and specific patterns of conflict.)

Essentially, then, culture means those things that members of a group value, ascribe to, or do because they are members of that group, and by valuing them, ascribing to them, or doing them distinguish themselves from members of other groups which value, ascribe to, or do different things.

These beliefs and behaviors, identified by cultural anthropologists working internationally, are learned as people grow up in the culture by watching how others behave, learning about the history of the group, and listening to the sayings and aphorisms that define what is important and what “good and bad” mean to this group.

It is interesting to note here, that while culture fosters a sense of identity with others in the same group, it also creates conflict between groups as members of each culture defend their beliefs and values against those of other cultures, setting up an “us against them” mentality.

When someone in our own group does something negative, we tend to attribute that negative behavior to external, situational circumstances, like being late because of the traffic, and maintain the idea that members of our group are good, well-intentioned people. When someone in another group does something negative, we tend to attribute that negative behavior to negative qualities of the individual, like dishonesty or bad character or not caring about others by being late, and maintain the idea that members of other groups are not as “good” as members of our own groups or cultures (a belief called “attribution bias”).

The concept of culture is not limited to the idea of a national culture. Mayer explains that “everyone belongs to multiple different and overlapping cultures, a situation that creates internal conflict at times.” (p. 72) A religion is a culture, a family, a professional society, a political organization, even fraternities or sororities are cultures. As people try to reconcile the competing beliefs or required actions of the different cultures with which they identify, they may find themselves in conflict with several different groups at once, or in conflict with their own belief systems. Think about your own overlapping cultural identities and the potential for conflict becomes clear.

Eventually people in business began to wonder if the ideas about national cultures developed by the cultural anthropologists had useful implications for their organizations as well and might be used to understand organizational dynamics, support organizational or systems development, and build organizational capacity. The connection was confirmed in an international study of cultures in IBM offices around the world completed by Geert Hofstede.

While both national cultures and organizational cultures share the same general definition, two key elements distinguish these cultures:

- the length of time they have been organized.
- the reason they were organized.

Organizational cultures have much shorter lives than national cultures and are organized for a specific purpose related to an existing situation such as a change in business environment, technology, or social circumstance. These organizations are described as “socially constructed.” (Hofstede, p. 180) They also reflect the personalities and values of their founders. The reason Bill Gates established Microsoft in 1975 is quite different from

the reason Candy Lightner founded MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) in 1980. Gates responded to the economic and technological possibilities of the moment that made his company possible and then hugely successful. His was a financial and technical interest. Lightner's daughter was killed by a repeat drunk driver, and MADD was founded to raise awareness of this crime and stop drunk driving, a crime which wasn't taken all that seriously until then. Lightner's reasons for creating her organization were driven by personal experience and the need to make social change rather than financial gain or scientific development. (MADD.org/About-us.aspx)

Interestingly, although an organizational culture reflects the personalities and goals of its founder, Hofstede showed that it also reflects the national culture in which the organization was begun. People are the products of their cultures, so it is logical that their creations reflect the cultures in which they were raised. (Hofstede, p. 183)

In 1982 Deal and Kennedy applied the insights of the cultural anthropologists specifically to business organizations in their seminal work *Corporate Culture*, and used a phrase from Marvin Bower, the author of a McKinsey and Company study called *The Will to Manage*, as the most succinct of all the definitions of culture:

How we do things around here. (p. 4)

* * *

How can you be clearer about "how we do things around here" to avoid the kinds of clashes typified in the scenario involving the CO and her organization? To answer those questions we have to know more about models of organizational culture, communications and conflict styles, and how the two are related.

Part II: Models of Organizational Culture

In this section, the Deal and Kennedy model from their book *Organizational Culture* is compared with the Trompenaars/Hampdon-Turner model described in their book *Riding the Waves of Culture*. The four cultural models described by Trompenaars/Hampdon-Turner and formed by the intersection of the two organizational axes, focus and degree of formality or structure, are discussed in detail, including implications for organizational behavior, systems, and decision-making.

Part III: Culture and Conflict

In this section, the connection between organizational culture and conflict style is explored using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Indicator as the reference. Each cultural model seems to have a particular conflict style that works most effectively. The key to being a good fit in an organization may be knowing which conflict style to use in each cultural model. The five conflict styles are coordinated with the attributes of each model, and the reason for their success explained.

Part IV: What Created the “Bad Fit?”

In our original scenario, the new Compliance Officer (CO) was having a hard time becoming effective in the organization she had joined about a year earlier. This situation is clearly a case of a bad fit and contradictory expectations. Her individual conflict style was not a good fit with the organizational culture. The reasons for that fit are explored in detail.

The conflict could have been mitigated with better communications skills and a more thorough understanding of the organization’s culture, and therefore, its expectations for behavior. Suggestions for ensuring a good fit are explored.

Appendix A: Sources of Power

A key component of authority in an organization is its definition and source of power. How do members and leaders of an organization achieve power? Is it role based? Person based? Relationship-based? Temporary? Permanent? It is important to understand how power is generated and how it is manifested, since power is one of the primary ways that goals, work, expectations, and communications are demonstrated.

There are several schemes for defining and describing power. One well-accepted model describes two sources of power: personal power and structural (or legitimate) power. (Mayer, pp. 50-61)

Personal power refers to the personal traits that someone draws on to become recognized as a leader. These can be technical ability, professional credibility, relationship development, even a quick wit or stamina. "Referent power," or the power that comes from having a strong network of others with power, is considered part of personal power because it is based on relationships. In other discussions, it is considered a separate source of power. Personal power is especially important in organizations where the management structure is flatter, advancement is based on achievement and relationship, and decisions are made through collaborative processes.

Structural power refers to power that comes from one's position in the organization, and can be based on title, rank in the hierarchy, or seniority, among other things. These attributes are important in structured organizations because they are defined by the systems and processes that determine organizational action and decision-making. Union environments, such as those that require successfully passing a promotional exam, often demonstrate these attributes.

A final aspect of power is whether it is achieved or ascribed. Achieved power is earned by hard work, success in other positions, and education. Power is ascribed by seniority or position in the organization, traits associated with hierarchical organizations.

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About the Authors

Maria Simpson, Ph.D.

Maria Simpson is a specialist in organizational conflict resolution. She works as an executive coach to improve communications and conflict resolution skills, and as a consultant on team and leadership development. She has conducted large-scale organization development programs that integrated conflict management systems and approaches.

Maria has held senior management positions at the Constitutional Rights Foundation, the New York Academy of Sciences, and The Conference Board among others. Kaiser Permanente, HealthView, Inc., Easter Seals Southern California, Toyota Financial Services USA, Premiera Care, and Bank of America are among her corporate clients.

Maria is a prolific writer and frequent speaker. Since 2003 she has written a weekly email on management communications and conflict resolution called "Two Minute Training." *Leading Unstoppable Teams! The Best of Two Minute Training*, the first collection of these columns, was published in 2010. Maria speaks often at conferences such as the international conference for the Association for Conflict Resolution. She also teaches conflict resolution and mediation at CSU Dominguez Hills and UC Santa Barbara.

Maria received her doctorate in communications from New York University and completed her mediation training at the Los Angeles County Bar Association. She has been a mediator for the Los Angeles County Superior Court for more than twelve years, and serves on the boards of directors of the South Bay Center for Dispute Resolution, the Southern California Mediation Association, and Empathia: Pacific, a provider of EAP services. She can be reached through her website at www.mariasimpson.com and info@mariasimpson.com.

Edward van Luinen, M.A.

Edward van Luinen has fifteen years successful leadership experience in global human resources specializing in learning and organization development. His experience includes Fortune 500 companies (Avon Products and IAC) and smaller, entrepreneurial companies (Heineken USA and DoubleClick). Edward is a collaborative and results-oriented thought leader who has successfully linked company and divisional strategies to talent management strategies and programs that increase employee retention and job satisfaction, create a pipeline of new leaders, and build performance through skill development at all levels of the organization.

Edward received his Bachelor of Arts degree cum laude in French from Calvin College. He also received his Master of Arts degree summa cum laude in Education from Teachers College Columbia University. He speaks Spanish, French, Dutch and German.

Edward currently is the Talent and Organization Development leader at Sony Electronics. He leads the learning strategy, management development, and employee communications efforts. He can be reached at edwardjvl@gmail.com

Is This A Good Fit?

Have you ever asked yourself how something could possibly have gotten “this bad?” Whether you’re looking at a bad hire, team dysfunction or a process problem, this book can help you answer that question by exploring the relationship between organizational cultures and the communications and conflict styles that work best within them.

Using a case study, the definition and models of organizational culture are explored first. Then, conflict and communications styles are discussed, especially which styles work best in which cultures, and how these styles impact all aspects of organizational functions. Finally, there is a detailed analysis of the case study, and tips on how you can apply the concepts and insights to your own organization.

For those in OD, this information will help you design projects and processes that will fit well in your culture. For those in HR, this information will add another layer of understanding to hiring and evaluating employees. For those in Conflict Resolution, relating the concept of culture to the organization adds a dimension to the discussion that can help resolve employment disputes and team conflict.

This paper takes a whole new look at established concepts and synthesizes them in a way to provide a new tool for organizational understanding and development.

Simpson and van Luinen provide those of us who work in the worlds of HR and OD thoughtful yet accessible insights in maximizing personal and organizational results. By focusing on the critical intersection between organizational culture and personal conflict styles, they offer real world insights and strategies to help ensure a win-win for both the organization and the individual.

*Bruce Decker
Former Associate Dean of Toyota University*



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A Division of Personal Skills Management
P.O. Box 641185, Los Angeles, CA 90064
info@mariasimpson.com