Corporate Culture

Finding a Fit That Suits You

by Linda A. Hamilton

Culture is defined as "the ideas, 'customs, skills, arts, etc. of a people or group that are transferred, communicated, or passed along to succeeding generations." In the world of American enterprise, there is also a culture that influences how employees think, dress, communicate, and interact in the work environment. The corporate culture differs from company to company and region to region. While the differences are sometimes subtle, corporate cultures in California can vary significantly between cities like San Francisco, Sacramento, and Los Angeles.

Showing an understanding of corporate culture is critical to making a winning impression in the job interview. Once a job is secured, adapting to the company's specific cultural expectations will be important to being accepted within the work environment, maintaining a minimal stress level, and doing well in the job.

Traditional Structures

When people think of "corporate," it's often the traditional, authoritative structure that comes to mind. In this type of company, the CEO or president dictates to the employees what is to be done, and the corporation consistently operates under strict guidelines. Everyone dresses in executive business attire at all times, casual dress being completely unacceptable. Advancement in such a rigid corporate culture may take as many as 10-15 years of devoted work, and promotions are determined by merit and seniority.

"Although I was a rising star, I didn't want to wait 15 years to receive the type of responsibility I wanted or to become an officer, so I left after 4^1/2 years," says John Benton, JD, of a law firm he worked for in Chicago. Benton now works in governmental affairs for an insurance company. As vice president of government relations, his job allows him to work within a corporate structure that encourages him to make his own decisions and use independent judgment.

Corporate Teamwork

Of America's top 100 employers, most delegate responsibility to all their employees, encouraging independent thinking while staying focused on accomplishing company goals. Being a team player, using independent judgment, and being willing to "fail forward," or learn from mistakes and grow, are important keys to being successful within the corporate framework. "Who you work with is far more important than who you report to," says Gerald Isom, president of CIGNA Property and Casualty. Everybody has an important application within the company team as a whole. It's what you do in that role, not who your supervisor is, that makes you important.

The trust and cooperation within this type of corporate framework reverberates throughout the organization to give even the entry-level employee a sense of value and individual worth. When employees feel good

> **The ability to connect with a company's individual culture is important to being accepted within the work environment and doing well in the job.**

about themselves and their jobs, production often remains high and profits increase. The result could be similar to a national agency which recently gave all its employees a 10-percent bonus because their 1995 market production generated outstanding profits. Because the president believed it was a company-wide effort, he shared the profits with those who created the success — the staff.

Within such a team-oriented work environment, each division builds and depends upon the other. Customer service representatives must interact with all other departments to effectively troubleshoot accounts, solve problems, and have adequate answers for customers. Production must maintain a high standard of quality control to ensure products don't break down on site. Marketing must be aware of production deadlines, customer service requests, and shipping and delivery limitations to effectively penetrate territories and increase company market share. All divisions rely on each other to achieve the company goals.

Jobseekers in the '90s must be adaptable, flexible, independent thinkers who are willing to make decisions and who take pride in the quality of their work. Only then can they be effective team players and advance in a corporate structure that meets with their work ethic and long-term goals.

Divisional Entrepreneurs

One unique corporate culture takes the concept of initiative and teamwork even further, establishing the entire ladder of authority as a series of entrepreneurs operating their own divisions. The CEO/ president delegates responsibility to each division manager. The structure allows each manager the freedom to run the business as he or she sees best, while upholding company goals to build profits, increase market share, promote a positive company image, and maintain high morale within the company's ranks. Sound like a franchise? Think again. This structure is the basis for one of California's most successful corporations, Hewlett-Packard.

By using independent thinking to make decisions, both managers and employees are able to learn from the results. State Insurance Commissioner Chuck Quackenbush has been quoted for saying he prefers to have an 8-4 record instead of a 12-0 record; if he doesn't make mistakes, he knows he's being too cautious. A less than perfect record allows him to apply the lessons he's learned from his mistakes to make better decisions in the future. Quackenbush's attitude is shared by a growing number of corporations and their changing cultures.

Adapting to Local Customs

For young jobseekers or those completely unfamiliar with the corporate culture, an entry-level position may be the best way to get in the door and learn all aspects of a company's operations through in-house training and hands-on experience. As you

become familiar with the corporate system — the goals, the language, and the attitudes — you'll gain the skills and understanding to be more valuable to other corporations.

Executive-level jobseekers often already have the experience of working within a corporate culture, but they must be able to transfer and adapt this knowledge to a new corporate structure. Top managers in today's more progressive companies must be willing to delegate, not dictate, authority. They are increasingly expected to work *with* their co-workers as team players focused on a common goal.

As part of management, they are responsible for motivating employees. This may include counseling struggling staff members to help them find their role in the company's team efforts and reach their full potential. Instead of firing an employee who seems incapable in one area, managers in this kind of corporate culture will work with other divisions and suggest an alternate position where the employee's personal strengths can make a better contribution to the company's success. This approach may contrast with older, more rigid corporate structures which still exist in many companies.

In Search of a Cultural Comfort Zone

People tend to identify a company's corporate culture by the way its employees dress, associating conventional business attire with a rigid structure and casual dress with lax management. While dress codes sometimes become a reflection of corporate culture, they can be a poor indicator of a company's actual management style, depending on the region and the particular company focus.

The traditional belief is that maintaining a serious executive look is mandatory for promoting a positive company image. Companies like IBM maintain a strict dress code, encouraging the dark suit, crisp white shirt, and briefcase for their executives. Apple Computer, on the other hand, allows more casual attire, contending that comfort helps keep the creative juices flowing to generate innovative ideas that effectively challenge the competition.

Walt Disney Co. in Anaheim allows its cartoonists and animators to dress informally to promote the creative flights of fantasy that power the magical aura Disney has produced for the last 40 years. Creativity-based companies aren't the only ones to embrace less rigid dress requirements. Throughout California, many companies have a "casual day" each week, allowing employees to wear comfortable clothing in a more relaxed atmosphere.

Finding the corporate culture which best suits you will depend on your knowledge and experience, the level of responsibility you're seeking, and the environment in which you work best. Ultimately, jobseekers must evaluate each corporate culture by the company's reputation, their personal interaction with staff members, or by accepting a job and evaluating the feel of the company from the inside. Once inside the corporate doors, you should have no trouble determining whether the atmosphere is compatible with your long-term career goals.   ###

Act as if you are going to succeed and you begin to make it possible by improving your present performance.