Given the competitive environment for recruiting and retaining individuals at all levels of an organization, personnel selection is becoming a much more critical element of performance improvement. If it is done well, organizations will reap the rewards of qualified employees who will produce a return on investment. If it is done poorly, organizations will experience employee discord and high turnover.

How corporations engage in personnel selection varies widely. Many times, organizations default to pencil-and-paper assessments for statistical comparisons between potential job candidates. Other companies engage in generic interviews and intuitively determine whether applicants are qualified for a job. In either case, organizations determine a "goodness of fit" between themselves and the applicants. The "goodness of fit," however, may be determined by such intangible factors as interpersonal skills, team orientation, physical appearance, and ideas of how well applicants might work within the organizational culture.

It is critical for an organization to determine how potential employees will fit into the way it does business (Boyatzis & Skelly, 1991). A job candidate may perform well on a pencil-and-paper screening test, but once hired, he or she may not "fit in" with the corporation's operating norms, beliefs, values, and assumptions about how work gets done. Without some congruence between individual and organizational expectations, the new hire may experience frustration and anger and soon look for another job (Pascale, 1991). In such cases, the personnel selection process failed. Likewise, in a general employment interview, where few, if any, organizational realities are conveyed to the applicant, the new hire may be surprised to learn how work is done. If the new employee soon seeks work elsewhere, again the personnel selection process has failed. There is clearly a psychological contract that is established between a new hire and the organization, the formation of which begins in the personnel selection process (Boyatzis & Skelly, 1991).

While no personnel selection process is perfect, often a critical selection criterion is left out: How well potential hires will fit into an organizational culture. Organizational culture represents employees' shared norms, beliefs, and values and serves as a guide for organizational behavior (Ott, 1989; Schein, 1990). Organizational culture is first introduced to employees during personnel selection, which also begins the socialization process (Pascale, 1991). Socialization occurs as new employees learn and are taught "how business is done around here" (Conrad, 1990). During applicant screening, organizations assess how potential employees may fit in, and applicants begin to learn about what the organization expects and how it operates (albeit at a tacit level). The art of sharing and learning the organizational culture occurs as the interviewer and applicant communicate and should be an important part of the screening process.

General assessments of the fit between organization and applicant may be made in any personnel selection process. Our goal, however, is to engage in a more thorough assessment of the elements of organizational culture to provide human resource (HR) and performance improvement professionals with specific ways to assess their organization's culture and to screen job candidates to ensure a good match between the individual and the organization. The benefit of such a process is clear: The better the fit between employee and organization, the more likely the employee will stay over time to produce a return on investment for the organization.

There are five steps in the sequence of integrating organizational culture into the personnel selection process. They are as follows:

- Internal Organizational Culture Analysis
- Distilling Organizational Culture "Cues and Clues"
- Communicating and Consensus Building
- Determining Organizational Culture Selection Criteria
- Implementation

1. Internal Organizational Culture Analysis

For a personnel selection process to include elements of organizational culture as part of the selection criteria, the organization must first analyze itself. Arguably, the first step is the hardest: taking the time and resources to engage in an authentic analysis of who, what, when, where, why, and how the business operates. Compounding the difficulty is attempting to analyze the intangible elements of culture such as beliefs, values, and underlying assumptions.

Organizational culture has been frequently studied but rarely applied to improving human performance. Our framework is a synthesis of studies that have described organizational culture as levels (Dyer & Dyer, 1986; Ott, 1989; Sankar, 1988; Schein, 1990). The levels represent the depth of meaning that employees consciously or unconsciously assign to their environment and how they interact with each other. Artifacts, beliefs/values, and basic underlying assumptions are the three levels by which organizational culture can be analyzed. The levels are analytical tools that HR professionals and performance technologists can use to assess the environment in which they are working, to begin to distill the elements of culture they can use as personnel screening criteria.

The studies of the levels of culture come from a sociological or anthropological tradition that suggests humans construct their reality socially (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993; Ott, 1989). In an organizational context, humans interact to construct what meanings are assigned to such things as where people sit, the company logo, the mission statement, and how management interacts with staff. An organizational culture exists in the minds of and interactions between employees, not as a static phenomenon independent of people. Organizational culture, then, consists of the shared norms, beliefs, and values that emerge, that are maintained, and that change through interaction (Conrad, 1990; Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993). Thus, organizational culture is not an immutable, monolithic entity. It is a function of the ongoing, dynamic communication among and between employees that influence the culture.

How strong an organizational culture is influences how much individuals can deviate from traditional operating practices (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). The issue becomes, then, how employees balance their own uniqueness with the constraints of how an organization does business. Eisenberg and Goodall (1993) suggest that employees have to balance creativity and constraint within an organizational culture. The balance is constantly in flux during the day-to-day interactions among...
employees. Organizational communication and culture share a symbiotic relationship: You cannot analyze or understand one without the other.

The levels of organizational culture are a framework that can help in understanding the rich meanings embedded within the environment of the organization (see Figure 1). Level One is comprised of physical artifacts or patterns of behavior. Documents, mission and vision statements, annual reports, the layout of office furniture, where people sit and with whom, the language of employees (jargon, humor, metaphors), and how and where daily interactions occur are just some of the factors. Artifacts are easily identified but often misinterpreted by “outsiders” unless they are examined in relation to Level Two: beliefs and values. The level of difficulty in defining organizational culture increases when trying to identify and analyze organizational beliefs and values that are not documented but that employees understand. For example, an organization might value employees who work long hours even though that would not be written in the employee manual. Beliefs and values not found in the organizational documentation can be identified through observation, interviews, and other qualitative methods (Schein, 1990).

Level Three artifacts, basic underlying assumptions, are the most difficult to identify and classify and can only be discovered after spending a significant amount of time within an organization (Ott, 1989). Basic underlying assumptions are the subconscious or unconscious part of an organization whereby the employees behave in a certain way without knowing why. Underlying assumptions refer to employees’ orientation to time, space, the environment, and each other. For example, some employees might refer to competitors or clients as “idiots” because the employees assume they personally know more than everyone else does. That assumption may be perpetuated through daily organizational communication; over time, it becomes part of the collective conscience about how clients or competitors should be treated. The assumption is not stated anywhere but becomes part of the daily routine without employees giving it a second thought.

The goal of using these levels of culture is to begin identifying organizational cultural cues and clues that are agreed on by organizational members as essential for new employee success. That is, by distilling the essence of what it means to be a member of the organization, a baseline for assessing a match between job candidates and the organization has been created. Gleaning this information may occur through internal surveys, individual interviews, focus groups, and astute observation. An external consultant can often provide an unbiased viewpoint; an internal consultant, who is part of the organizational culture, may not be able to “see the forest through the trees.”

2. Distilling Organizational Culture “Cues and Clues”

Conducting the internal organizational culture analysis will generate a significant amount of data. Step 2 in the process is to categorize and interpret the data into meaningful “cues and clues” that indicate something about the way business is done in an organization. In other words, the distillation process is critical to understanding how employees make sense of the organization and whether job applicants will succeed within the established culture.

Another part of this step is to begin linking the levels of culture together. How do the artifacts relate or represent organizational beliefs and values, and what assumptions underlie all of them? For example, the company logo can be an artifact (it is physically present in the organization), represent a belief or value (leader in the industry, instant recognition of the product), and potentially reflects an underlying assumption (orientation toward the world, customers). All “things” within an organization are value laden and carry intrinsic and extrinsic (and often multiple) meanings that reflect assumptions about the way employees should accomplish work.

**LEVELS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level One: Artifacts/Patterns of Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level Two: Norms/ Beliefs/Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level Three: Basic/Underlying Assumptions</td>
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**Figure 1. Levels of Organizational Culture (Off, 1989; Schein, 1990).**

Asking a series of questions (based on the data gathered) that will begin to identify the organizational culture cue and clues can help the distillation process:

- What artifacts are present in the organization and where are they there (e.g., a computer on every desk to process information, communicate, produce results)?
- What does the company value or believe, and why (e.g., do we value our customers because they provide revenue to sustain the company; customers provide valuable feedback)?
- What are the basic/underlying assumptions of the company (e.g., management trusts employees to do the right thing; managers do not micromanage)?

The levels of culture will not identify everything there is to know about the organization. They are only meant to provide “clues” about the way in which employees interact to create principles that guide their behavior as members of the organization. The clues and cues become the benchmarks for determining performance expectations that HR should communicate to potential new hires. For example, if employees are given bonuses as a reward for working long hours, then the applicant should understand how the bonus program operates. Conversely, if giving employees time off rewards
work efficiencies, then the potential new hire should understand the performance expectation and how to benefit from it. The clues and cues can be translated into questions for job applicants to answer to judge how well applicants will work within the organization's parameters and to provide performance expectations to applicants (see Model Case).

3. Communicating and Consensus Building

Communicating to employees that a cultural analysis is occurring and why the results will be used is essential to garner cooperation. An internal communiqué that describes the process and purpose to all employees will signal the project is underway and that surveys, interviews, observations, and other activities are forthcoming. Ensure and maintain confidentiality, because sensitive issues may arise that employees must trust will be shared only in the appropriate context and setting.

After analysis and distillation happen, a personnel selection task force or team must meet to agree on the essential elements of the organizational culture. This process is rarely easy or brief. However, consensus is necessary if the next step is to take place: deciding which cultural cues will be used in the personnel selection process.

4. Determining Organizational Culture Selection Criteria

This step nulls the information distilled thus far into discrete questions or scenarios to ask job applicants. Not all the data gathered can or should be used. The goal is to determine what core norms, values, and assumptions should be used as benchmarks for the “goodness of fit” test. What are the critical elements of the organizational culture that may predict the success or failure of the potential employee? The selection process is a fraction of an employee's entire organizational experience, yet may bear heavily on whether the employee will be retained over time. Consequently, the essence of the organizational culture should be communicated during the selection process to determine the best match between employee and employer (see Model Case).

Examples of this approach include, but should not be limited to, interview questions that juxtapose the wants, needs, and desires of the applicant with the essence of the organization's culture. If, for example the organization values lifelong learning, questions addressing the applicant's strategies for remaining current in the field would be appropriate. If the organization tends toward a rigid hierarchy, the interview must determine how applicants respond to authority. If the organization deals in highly competitive markets or with classified information, questions or scenarios that predict how applicants will handle matters of security and preserve the integrity of confidential information will be essential.

5. Implementation

Once the criteria have been established, they can be integrated into existing personnel selection methods. Many options exist for integration. An employer could create a separate section of the selection process that addresses organizational culture, either on paper or during an oral interview, or both (depending on whether the questions should recur or not). Alternatively, the organization could create scenarios, based on true organizational events, to which applicants respond (oral, written, or both). The scenarios must be carefully crafted to engender responses that disclose applicants' own values and basic assumptions.

Another possibility includes giving applicants the culturally based questions in advance so they can reflect on their own beliefs, values, and assumptions and provide answers that are more complete answers. This approach assumes potential hires will be authentic in their answers and not respond normatively. It is an option that depends on the depth and breadth of the selection process. Regardless, there are a variety of ways to complement existing personnel selection methods with a culturally inclusive approach.

Organizations should be creative; there are many ways to orchestrate the personnel selection process. It is as much about artful choices as it is about scientific procedures. A culturally based selection process engenders creativity because there is not just one way to do it. Crafting ways to tell organizational stories that provide insight to potential new hires is a creative practice.

Caveats

Individual Responsibility

While the onus of the personnel selection process is squarely on the organization in this discussion, the individual applicant also has goodness-of-fit culpability. Applicants should reflect on their unique belief and value systems and come prepared with their own questions that might elicit cultural clues and cues. Good applicants do research before a job interview and read such corporate artifacts as annual reports, marketing brochures, and press reports. Employers can cue applicants about organizational cultural issues by encouraging them to ask questions to ensure that applicants engage in their own goodness-of-fit test. Applicants should also be encouraged to talk with current employees, especially potential peers, to ascertain what the organization values and assumes about work (regardless of whether the applicants will be hourly or salaried). Personnel selection is a dynamic process, not an exercise in stimulus response.

Cultural Caution

When engaging in an internal analysis of organizational culture, an organization needs to ensure that contentious issues can be addressed without jeopardizing current employees. Discretion is critical during the data-gathering process, and confidences cannot be violated. The organizational culture analysis may uncover information that management was unaware of or that it does not want to hear. The organization needs to use the cultural cues and clues that are mutually agreed on during the consensus-seeking phase of the process. Contentious issues can be set aside and engaged at a later time or at management's discretion.
Model Case: XYZ Corporation

Artifacts
Hierarchical reporting relationships with several layers of management, long history in the chosen industry, employee owned corporation, everyone works within a cubicle of varying size depending on rank.

Beliefs/Values
Loyalty, long hours, customer oriented, and bottom-line driven.

Basic/Underlying Assumptions
Professes team orientation, but all incentives reward individual effort. Professes to want employee input, but all decision-making is top down, with little or no midlevel management or below input. The company hires professionals who do not require direct supervision. Project management is done in a hands-off manner.

Job Aid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVELS/QUESTION</th>
<th>INTERVIEW OR PAPER &amp; PENCIL QUESTION</th>
<th>TRAIT VIA SCENARIO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level One:</td>
<td>Artifacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level Two:</td>
<td>Beliefs/Values</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level Three:</td>
<td>Basic Assumptions</td>
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An interview or paper-and-pencil question gives the opportunity to ask the same question in different ways to determine applicants’ responses are reliable.

In the scenario method, HR staff could describe a scenario during an oral interview with potential follow-up questions and/or provide applicants with a pencil-and-paper format, which allows the opportunity to write a thorough answer. In either situation, the scenario is based on true organizational events.

Additionally, it is worth noting that organizational culture is not a monolithic entity that encompasses an entire organization. Large corporations with multiple departments and offices will have many variations of organizational culture. Medium or small firms may also have multiple versions. It is important that human resources and performance improvement professionals choose the right scope of analysis and not try to investigate the whole organization if that is unnecessary. An external consultant may be helpful in deciding how a corporation should be “chunked” for the purposes of analysis. The results can become the baseline to which further analysis can be added over time to create a cultural composite. Revisions to the composite should frequently recur.

Conclusion
All organizations engage in some form of personnel selection. The degree of skills and knowledge required for the job influences the scope of the selection process. Often, however, corporations only determine the skills and knowledge required for the job and do not formally assess the cultural characteristics of their organizations. The objective of this article is to provide an additional level of analysis to the personnel selection process and help organizations assess the goodness of fit between themselves and potential job applicants. The art of personnel selection is as important as the science.

The stakes in personnel selection could not be higher. Today’s job market is dynamic and fluid, and corporations are challenged to find and retain qualified workers. If organizations hire employees who do not match well with the corporate culture, those employees may readily leave to find work elsewhere. Also, a cultural mismatch may disrupt daily operations and workflow because of internal conflict. Either way, the personnel selection process affects profit and loss-something organizations and human resources and performance improvement professionals care about. It pays to be concerned about how organizational culture will affect new employees.
Performance improvement practitioners who lead or support personnel selection processes should be mindful of the role organizational culture plays in influencing applicant performance. The levels of culture can become part of the “tool kit” that professionals can use to enhance existing screening methods. We suggest that the levels of culture can improve the performance of traditional personnel selection methods. Combining the art and science of personnel selection will enhance the goodness of fit between organizations and their new employees.

References


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