

When Choosing a Job, Culture Matters

4:08 PM Wednesday May 2, 2012

by Bill Barnett | [Comments \(146\)](#)

Some organizations will excite you. They'll stimulate your success and growth. Others will be stressful. They may lead you to quit before you've accomplished much or learned what you hoped to. With **the pressure** (or excitement) of finding a new job, it's all too easy to pursue a job opportunity or to accept an offer with only a hazy view of how the institution really operates. The path to an institution you'll like is to investigate the culture you're thinking of joining before you accept the position.

Sean (name has been changed) is a master at this. He pursued a job offer at a *Fortune* 500 company to be the first Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). He was well-qualified, presented himself well, and got the offer. He'd been competing with capable people. He was proud he'd "won the contest."

The next step was a return visit, after which he'd decide to accept the offer. Sean had already learned a lot about the company's businesses and some things about the organization. His priority now was culture and how the new position might fit: "I asked people, 'What are you excited about? What are you proud of? Who are your close friends in the company? How does the group function together?'" Sean learned things like who the heroes were, what made them successful, and what his biggest challenges and opportunities would be in the job. The different people he met with were learning from his questions. It was almost like he already worked there, and they were jointly determining how to make the new role successful.

Surprisingly, Sean turned down the offer. The new role was a misfit in the company's culture.

As he learned more about the company, Sean questioned how he'd be viewed as the first CAO in a company where everyone else focused on bottom-line results. It was a highly performance-driven environment with lots of business units. Corporate staffs were secondary.

"I asked how they'd keep score on me, how they'd really know I was making a difference," he said. "We never got to satisfactory answers to that question. They weren't hiding anything. This CAO position was a new one, and they didn't really know."

Sean was concerned that this new position wouldn't fit in the company's culture, that he wouldn't really be accepted, and that it wouldn't be a springboard to the line job that he really wanted after two or three years as CAO. He might have made it work, but why take the risk?

It's not uncommon for job seekers to enter organizations without understanding the culture and come away disappointed. When considering a new job, be sure to investigate the institution's culture. Consider these questions to guide you:

1. What should I learn? Understand the organization's purpose — not just what they say they're doing, but also how their purpose leads to decisions and what makes them proud. Learn how the organization operates. For example, consider the importance of performance, how the organization gets things done, the level of **teamwork**, the quality of the people, how people communicate, and any ethical issues.

Except for ethical issues, there's no absolute standard of what's best in organizational culture. Different purposes and different organizational features can be more or less appealing to different

people. When you understand how the potential employer operates, you'll need to consider how well that matches your goals. Your target organizational culture is an important part of your aspirations.

2. How should I learn? Read everything you can find about the institution, but read with a critical eye. Institutions have formal vision statements, and they often mention cultural topics in other public reports, but these documents are written with a purpose in mind. Independent writers take an independent perspective. They can be more critical, but they can miss details and get things wrong.

Discuss culture with people in the organization. You'll talk to people in the interviewing process, of course. But you may learn different things if you meet others there who aren't involved in your recruiting process. Also talk to people outside the organization who know it — customers, suppliers, partners, and ex-employees. Their different experiences with the institution will affect their views, so ask about situations where they've seen the culture in action.

3. When should I learn? It's hard to learn about culture at an early stage in your search. But your impressions can guide you to target some institutions and avoid others.

Culture may come up in job interviews, although it may be complicated to do much investigation when you're trying to **sell yourself**. People sometimes worry that discussing culture might make people uncomfortable and put a job offer at risk. **The culture topic is certainly not off-base**, and it is necessary to know for future growth in the company. Hiring managers should expect it. Whether it's in interviews or after you have an offer, you'll do best if your questions show you're learning rapidly about the organization, **taking the employer's perspective**, and beginning to figure out how to succeed there. Culture questions can cast you in a positive light. Sean's line of questioning confirmed the CEO's judgment to hire him, even if Sean didn't like the answers.