

# The Five O'Clock News®

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"One organization with a long record of success in helping people find jobs is The Five O'Clock Club."

FORTUNE

Celebrating 25 years—  
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Outplacement Network for  
Professionals, Managers  
and Executives

## "That's the Way We Do Things Here" Understanding Organizational Culture

by Anita Attridge

Five O'Clock Club Career Coach

*Custom, that unwritten law, by which the people keep even the king in awe.*  
Charles Davenport

Joining a new company can be like moving to a foreign country. You will encounter new customs, dress, language, ideas and rules, and you will need to learn about all of these in order to do well.

- You will be expected to work and interact effectively in the organization.
- You will be accepted and you will fit into the organization—or not!
- You will be assessed for recognition, compensation, rewards and promotion, depending on how well you perform in the new—and perhaps very different—culture. **If you choose to ignore organizational culture, you do so at your own peril.**

Yes, there will be the new customs, dress, language, ideas and rules, but simply defined, **organizational culture is *the set of written and unwritten rules by which people function to get their work done.***

What makes you successful in one company may not make you successful in another company. For example, at General



*"It's my newer, cooler look. I'm hoping my younger clients will dig it."*

Also in this issue

◆ When Is It Time to Move On? ◆ How to Change Careers

Electric, the organizational culture is regimented and managers are expected to use the GE processes without question. At Xerox, the organizational culture is fast-paced, and continuously changing. Managers have considerable latitude in how they get the job done. At Merck, the organizational culture is consensus driven, with a strong emphasis on data analysis. Managers need a consensus to accomplish their goals.

What kind of environment are *you* accustomed to? If your new employer expects people to work differently than you did at your previous organization, you will be *expected to adapt* to the new culture.

### Case Study: Sara and the Hierarchy

Sara, a highly successful marketing director in an insurance company, accepted a marketing director position with a prominent healthcare company. The insurance company had strict rules about meeting with senior management. People were expected to discuss their marketing ideas in detail with their own manager, request permission to meet with senior managers, and *then* share the results of those meetings with their manager.

In her new job at the healthcare company, Sara's first assignment was to develop marketing ideas for a new product. She followed the process of meeting with senior managers that had been expected in the insurance industry. She was taken aback when her manager said, "Sara, why are you bothering me with all of this detail? And why haven't you met with the senior managers already?" The following day, a colleague explained that Sara didn't need permission to meet with the senior managers: "Everyone here has access to whomever they need to talk with to get their job done. I'm surprised you waited so long to meet with them, too." Having the freedom to meet with senior managers whenever she needed was a new way of working for Sara.

**Organizational Culture:**  
**Unwritten, Unspoken and Powerful**  
Organizational culture is powerful

because it determines how a person will fit into the workplace. It can prevent a person from being promoted because, despite talent, skills and contributions, she chooses to do things "her way," going against the grain of "the way we do things here".

Unfortunately, organizational culture is:

- Usually not discussed *formally*; and
- Rarely found in written form.

But it does govern the way work really gets done.

We sometimes hear that a person was turned down for a job because the interviewer felt that he or she would not be a good fit. In other words, the interviewer knows organizational culture well enough to gauge who will succeed and who won't. If the job hunter has little idea about the culture of the hiring company, it will be hard to grasp why he was not hired or, more importantly, what he could have done differently in the interview.

### Case Study: Bart Knew His Stuff, but That Wasn't Enough

Bart, a finance manager who worked for a large telecommunications company, landed an interview for a similar position with a computer company. During the interview, Bart was asked about his accomplishments, how he interfaced with department heads and how the work was done in his company. The telecommunications company had automated financial systems honed to meet the company's needs, and prided itself on how well the processes worked. Changes were carefully thought through before they were implemented.

The computer company, however, had a different attitude about how to get work done. Responsiveness to changing customers' needs was key and their financial systems were continuously modified to keep up. Managers in all functions were expected to anticipate changes and be prepared to respond rapidly.

When Bart was not invited back for the third round of interviews, he called the hiring manager to find out why he

had not made the cut. The manager told Bart that his financial skills were impressive, but that she did not think he was a *fit for their organizational culture*. Bart met

with his Five O'Clock Club Career Coach to discuss what had happened. When pressed by the coach, he admitted that he didn't know much about the culture in the computer company. He'd gone on the interview unprepared. With a little research and reflection, Bart realized that the expectations of a finance manager in a computer company differed greatly from those in a telecommunications company. On his current job, the pace of change was moderate. The computer company was fast-paced; chaos was accepted and the ability to change at a moment's notice was crucial. Bart now understood the cultural differences, and saw that he had not positioned himself well during the interview.

*A company is judged  
by the president it keeps...*

James Hulbert

### Organizational Culture Isn't Right or Wrong: It Just Is

The culture of an organization is commonly determined by the founders. It may evolve over time, but the processes and ways of working together become deeply embedded. The unspoken rules, based on shared values and beliefs, become *the reality of how the organization gets work done*. Those who join the organization are expected to adapt and accomplish their work in accordance with the culture. Here's a checklist of questions to guide the newcomer in adapting:

- What it's really like to work here? What are the realities of working "our way"?



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## UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

- What behaviors and attitudes are expected?
- How are co-workers expected to communicate and deal with each other?
- How are decisions made and problems solved?
- How are employees and customers expected to be treated?

*Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better.*  
Richard Hooker

### How Should You Choose Where to Work? Know Thyself!

All of us have preferred ways of working, although many of us don't give much thought to it. If you're working in a company culture that supports your preferred style, you are usually content. If you land in a company culture that is different from your preferred style, you may be compelled to change the way you work—or change jobs. We often fail to closely question how an organization works, even when we're in the interview process.

It is vital to understand your own preferences. The clearer you are about how you like to work, the more likely you are to choose wisely—and you will become attuned to how an organization really gets its work done and expects new members to work. Use the following *Working Style Preference Exercise* to assess your desired work environment.

This exercise should help you to see what is really important to you—and where you will fit. If, for example, working in a fast-paced organization that encourages risk-taking is highly important to you, you probably will become frustrated working in an organization where the pace is slower, and risk-taking is not encouraged. Neither style is right or wrong...they are just different and require different approaches. In *The Five O'Clock Club* book, *Targeting a Great Career*, there are additional assessment exercises that will give you insights about how you like to work.

### Investigating Organization Culture

Understanding yourself is a good beginning. The next step is to uncover as much as you can about the organizational cultures of the companies you may be targeting to get

## Working Style Preference Exercise

Think about an organization where you have enjoyed working and were comfortable—or imagine an ideal organization where you think you would enjoy working. Then review the choices under the following 11 topics and select the one that most closely matches your working preference. After you have selected your preferences, rank the importance of each. Use a scale of *one to five with one being not important and five being very important.*

### Interactions in the organization:

- *How do people interact with each other?* Ranking \_\_\_  
 Are they direct and freely discuss their views?  
 Are they non-confrontational and don't openly disagree with each other?

- *How are people expected to react to others in the organization?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Are they expected to stand up for themselves?
  - Are they expected be a team member and not stand up for themselves?

- *How accepting of questioning is the organization?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Are you encouraged to question current practices?
  - Are you expected to accept current practices without question?

- *How do people do their work?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Do people work together collaboratively?
  - Do people work on their own with minimal involvement of others?

- *How are decisions made?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Are decisions made quickly?
  - Are decision made slowly?

- *Who makes the decisions?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Is decision making driven by the manager?
  - Is decision making consensus driven?

### Organization attire:

- *How do the majority of people dress?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Traditional business attire?
  - Business casual?
  - Very casual?

### Organization activity:

- *How does the organization operate?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Is it a fast paced organization with lots of activity and change?
  - Is it a moderate paced organization with a minimal amount of change?

- *How does the organization deal with risk taking?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Is risk taking encouraged and rewarded?
  - Is risk taking discouraged and often punished?

- *What is the working style in the organization?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Is it collaborative with people working together?
  - Is it competitive where people are pitted against each other?

- *What is the operating style in the organization?*

- Ranking \_\_\_
- Is it formal where hierarchy is strictly observed?

interviews. At The Five O’Clock Club, we tell clients they can learn about companies in three ways:

1. Primary Research: talking to people who are in the know—or who *know* people who are in the know. That’s what we mean when we say, “Network, network, network!”

2. Secondary research: reading as much as you can about companies, *e.g.*, articles in business publications, trade journals, websites, blogs.

3. Your own direct observation.

Make use of all three methods to find out about company cultures as you prepare for interviews, or even as you start a new position. All three can also help you to gain deeper insights into the culture of your *current* organization.

Actually, secondary research comes *first*, because you don’t want to network intensively (primary research) until you already have a lot of background information—so that you will sound knowledgeable when you speak with people. You want to **be prepared to ask good questions about the company culture during the interview**, so you need some information and a grasp of realities before your networking and job interviews.

A good place to start is learning about the company founder(s). These people exert an extraordinary influence on the company culture. It’s *their* company and they determine:

- The beliefs and values of the workplace.
- The company’s focus of attention.
- The decision-making and problem-resolution processes.
- Conduct and achievements that will be rewarded.

If the founder is no longer with the company, find out about the leaders who replaced those who were present at the beginning. Who succeeded to the leadership roles, who failed, and why? How has the company culture evolved over the years?

There are usually many sources of information for your secondary research:

- Read the latest annual report to learn what is important to the company.

- Review the company website to learn about the company’s history, the founder and the current CEO. A website presents an idealized portrait of the company; however it provides insights into how the company wants to position itself in the marketplace.

- Dig up as many articles as you can about the company in business publications. You’ll likely find a variety of materials, some with information about how the company culture is viewed. In these days of blogs very little can be hidden!

- Look and listen to the marketing messages. Ads and slogans often convey underlying beliefs about the company’s identity and views about its customers.

With an understanding of the company based on secondary research, you’ve made a good start, and are positioned well for your primary research, *i.e.*, speaking with people who can shed even more light on your targeted companies.

*There is guidance for each of us,  
and by lowly listening,  
we shall hear the right word.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

### Network, Network, Network: The Critical Next Step

After gaining an initial understanding of the company, getting in front of people is one of the best ways to learn about what really goes on there. So, who can you network with to learn about the companies you’re interested in? If you’ve never done this before, you might be surprised at how many resources you actually have:

- Make a list all of the people you know and the companies they work for. This list should include friends, relatives, present and former colleagues, neighbors—even the people you run into when you’re at the gym or out walking the dog. There might be dozens of people you don’t realize you have fairly easy access to.

- Also list the professional, community and religious organizations to which you belong. There are all those people you know from church, synagogue, PTA, Little League, etc. Professional associa-

tions have lists of members and their workplaces. These lists are invaluable tools for identifying people to call. Even if you don’t know the people, you can contact them and tell them that you’re a member of the organization and would like to have an informational meeting. Members like to help other members.

- Scour your alumni directories. Fellow alumni are excellent for networking.

Use *all* of these networking resources! The more people you talk with the more you’ll learn, and since you’re asking for information—not a job—people are likely to be cooperative and generous.

*The eye sees only what the mind is  
prepared to comprehend.*

Robertson Davies

### Personal Observation: You Can Be an Eyewitness

At The Five O’Clock Club we have always recommended arriving early for interviews. This gives you the chance to see and hear what’s going on in the workplace. You can ask for water, and may be directed to the water cooler or to the employee kitchen. You can observe:

- How people are interacting with each other.
- How they’re dressed.
- The energy level and activity.
- Items on display in the company reception area. What company symbols are visible and how are they used?
- How the physical space is designed. Are there offices and cubicles of varying size? Are there cubicles in a large bullpen area, or are offices accessible by corridor?
- The awards, certificates of recognition and employee photos on display. These offer clues to the company values.

As well as observing, you can also ask questions. If you meet someone at the water cooler, you can say, “There’s so much hustle and bustle here [or: This place seems so calm], what’s it like to work here?” Of course, you’re trying to get a feel for the company culture. You may be surprised at the answers. (See our book *Mastering the Job Interview and Winning the Money Game*

by Kate Wendleton.)

## Ask Questions about Company Culture During the Interview

Based on your research and networking, you should have questions that relate to the culture. Having done the Working Style Preferences exercise, you have a better grasp of the kind of environment you'll do well in, and you can probe as to how the work gets done. It might be too confrontational to ask, "Is it appropriate to question current practices in the organization or is it best to just follow the practices in place?" Nor would you want to say, "According to what I've been reading on the blogs, your CEO is a real tyrant." But you can ask, "What's the tone here? Is it okay to make suggestions about improving procedures? What's the company culture like?"

### Case Study:

#### Doris: "If Only I Had Asked"

Doris, a marketing researcher, interviewed for a position at a research consulting firm. She met with her perspective boss, the president and several colleagues. The projects sounded interesting and challenging, so Doris was delighted to receive an offer. In her previous jobs she had enjoyed collaborating with colleagues, and she looked forward to doing the same in her new role.

On her first major project, she did extensive research, summarized her findings and asked a colleague—who was working on a similar project—if he would like to compare notes. He told her that wouldn't be necessary because everyone worked alone for the most part, and had the freedom to present projects to management and customers without consulting others. Research was the key, not collegiality. Doris soon found that everyone liked to work alone; no one was interested in collaborating or even sharing information. In fact, they considered collaboration a waste of time.

Doris realized that this culture was different from those she had worked in before. Collaboration was important to her and she assumed that most organizations operated on this basis. It had

not even occurred to her to ask—during the interview—about how people accomplished their projects. Now she would have to adjust to a lonely way of working, or move on.

#### Starting a New Position: Adjusting to "How Things Are Done Here"

Up to this point, we have focused on finding out about company culture before accepting a job offer. But what can you do on the job to learn even more? If you start from Day One on your new job to quickly learn about the "way things are done here," that will ease your transition. How well *you* fit in will be established in the first few weeks, so learning the culture—as it is, up close and personal—is as important as learning policies and procedures. To be successful, comply with both formal and *informal* expectations.

**Pay attention not only to *what* needs to be done but *how* it should be done.** Every new employee knows he or she must figure out *what* must to be done, but you may not achieve desired results if you don't also figure out *how* it needs to be done.

"What" needs to be done includes:

- the objectives or goals I need to accomplish
- my work priorities
- the technologies and systems used
- the information I need to accomplish my job
- the resources available to me

"How" the job needs to be done relates to the culture:

- How do people work: independently or collaboratively?
- How are decisions made?
- Who needs to be included in the decision-making process?
- What is important to senior management?

#### Case Study: Jeff The Intersection of Two Paths

Jeff was excited about his new position as VP of Human Resources at a prestigious consumer products company. At his previous job Jeff was known for his creative ideas and ability to

develop HR programs to meet business needs. He enjoyed identifying and solving problems, had a lot of ideas and worked well with his staff and clients to incorporate their ideas. He worked with senior managers to ensure that his solutions would work in their areas within budget and headcount.

After a few months on his new job, Jeff felt that he was not making progress and that he was not being well received. He ran into continuous roadblocks about his ideas. He was told that he was moving too fast, even though he *thought* he was moving too slowly.

Jeff's Five O'Clock Club Coach asked him to watch and listen more carefully as to how his peers operated in the management committee meetings. He then noticed that his peers always asked for permission before starting new projects. There was usually a lot of discussion about *if* the project should be done instead of *how*. Once the project was approved, each step was reviewed in excruciating detail.

When Jeff was ready to initiate a new project, his coach convinced him to discuss his ideas with the management committee, even though he thought it was a waste of time. At the meeting, he suggested implementation of the project. After much discussion about whether the issue should even be addressed at this time, a decision was made to go forward.

Although he was hired for his creativity and innovation, Jeff saw he would need to spend much more time gaining project approval, as well as approval for each step. **He was now in a consensus-driven culture in which executives didn't have much freedom to make decisions.**

#### Leaning about the Culture from Within: Observe

Now that you're on the job, observation and networking are keys to your success. Discover the unwritten rules of organizational life in your new workplace.

#### Observe:

- Who talks to whom?
  - Do people interact with others

at all levels of the organization?

- Do people primarily interact only with their manager and peers?
- What language do people use when talking about their work?
  - Do they use acronyms or terms specific to the organization? If so, learn these rapidly.
  - Do they use more easily understood terms?
- What is the preferred means of communication?
  - Email?
  - Telephone?
  - In person?
- What is the style of written communication, via memos and email messages?
  - Are they formal?
  - Are they informal?
  - Are the messages usually brief?
  - Or are they detailed?
- Who is copied on the communications?
  - Are numerous people copied?
  - Are only people directly involved copied?
- How are meetings conducted?
  - Are they formal with agendas set prior to the meeting?
  - Are they informal with agendas developed or shared in the meeting?

### Case Study: Steven: Waiting Alone

At Steven's former company, everyone was expected to be early for meetings, the meetings started on time, and latecomers were not welcomed. When he moved to another company, Steven was always the first to arrive for meetings, which never started on time. No one seemed to care that people wandered in 10 or 15 minutes late. He found this irritating, but when he voiced his concern he was told, "We don't start meetings here until everyone is present." Steven learned to accept that meetings would not start on time at his new company because "that's the way we run meetings here."

### Learning from Within: Networking

Networking and building relationships will help you to understand the nuances of how work gets done in your

new workplace. Be sure to network with:

- Direct reports
  - Co-workers
  - Your boss
  - Peers in other departments
- Begin networking on your first day with the company, starting with co-workers and direct reports. They can help you to understand how work gets done in your areas, as well as in the company as a whole.
- For example, finance, sales and marketing, manufacturing and HR will have their own functional sub-cultures within the wider context of the company culture. This is why there is often a "we" vs. "they" feeling among functions within a company. The employees in each of the sub-cultures may dress differently, have different physical work spaces and different ways of accomplishing tasks.

If you don't like to network, do it anyway! And become good at it if you want to understand organizational culture and build relationships that can help your career in the long run.

Your networking meetings can and should be interesting. After all, you're learning about the culture when employees tell stories about people and events that have taken place in recent years or decades. And the company lore reveals a lot about what is distinct and unique about the organization. Listen to stories about:

- The heroes and how they rose to the top of the organization.
- Crises encountered and overcome.
- Milestone events in the organization's history.
- Anecdotes about senior management.
- Management's reactions to blunders and mistakes.
- The handling of firings and layoffs.

Each story gives you additional insight into some aspect of the organizational culture. For example, in one company the story is often told about its response to a bad economic downturn. The company was strongly committed to no layoffs, so employees and management worked together to reduce everyone's hours. As a result, no jobs

were cut during the recession. The story reinforced company values regarding the importance of employees and the efforts the company would make to support everyone. This story was often told, particularly to new employees.

As you network, ask questions and listen carefully. Tell people that you are genuinely interested in finding out the insider's view of how the organization works. Some of the questions you can ask:

- What should I know about how to act?
- How is success defined here, and how does one succeed?
- What is the biggest mistake one could make?
- What are the sacred cows that I need to be aware of?

The answers to these questions will help you to master the subtleties of corporate culture and avoid pitfalls.

### Advice from Veterans

I asked a few of my Five O'Clock Club clients about the most important lessons they had learned in adapting to new workplaces. Their advice can serve as a summary of the points made here:

- Do an assessment of your own needs. Know yourself, so that you will understand the kind of corporate culture that best aligns with your preferred working style.
- Do your homework and learn about the cultures of the organizations you will be targeting.
- Ask candid questions about the organizational culture during the interview and after you're hired.
- During the first couple of weeks on the job, observe carefully, meet as many people as you can, and ask about the culture.

You will have many challenges when starting a new job: Understanding your job responsibilities, learning what your new boss is really like, figuring out how best to get along with new colleagues. Make sure that learning and mastering the corporate culture is a top priority—*to achieve the fit you want.* ●