How Important is Cultural Fit?

There seems to be more discussion recently about determining "cultural fit" as part of the selection process in organizations. This is a generalization, but the topic seems to be more in vogue in small to mid-size companies and ones that are growing. There is an ongoing dialogue in these organizations that goes like this: When we started this company, it was an **idealistic place and we don't want to do anyt**hing to screw that up. We want to make sure we bring new people into this organization who share our values.

Too often it seems that if you press someone to describe what those values are, you get a **response like, "I know them when I see them."**

Let me say up front that I am all about doing a rigorous assessment of people being brought **into an organization. I hate it when an organization's primary selection question is, "Tell me about yourself." Yuck.**

I strongly believe in starting with a person's duties and responsibilities (job description) and determining the six to ten behavioral skills (sometimes described as soft skills) and technical skills required to do the job well. You then ask behaviorally based questions (for example, Tell me a time when you solved a problem, helped a team member or developed a spreadsheet) to obtain a specific example of where the person demonstrated this skill in the **past. You rate the quality of the person's answer using a definition of the competency. This** allows you to compare candidates on each of these skills. This kind of interview or assessment is can be done in person or virtually. It allows the interviewer to ask probing **questions in response to the candidate's initial answer. Typically, this helps you collect** richer information than if the question was asked and answered, period.

Let's get back to cultural fit as part of the selection process. I am not one who believes that cultural fit can be determined based on a conversation and the interviewer saying, "I'll know it **when I see it."**

With organizations, I define culture as the values, norms and beliefs that shape how work gets done.

While that sounds ethereal, I believe cultural fit must be defined and measured. When **someone is a "team player" in your organization, what** does that look like? What would I see them do or say? With that definition in hand, I can ask a candidate to offer an example of when he or she was a team player and measure the answer against your definition. There

can be overlap between behavioral competencies and cultural values. Cultural fit is typically something you want all employees to possess.

But that doesn't mean every employee must possess every organizational value. For example, your company may have a number of jobs that require resourcefulness (which could be seen as a value or a behavioral competency), but not every job in the organization requires it. In this case you would assess this capability as a behavioral competency in the structured interview for jobs where it was seen as important.

Some organizations create an online multiple-choice questionnaire to determine cultural fit and use that as an initial screen before a face-to-face interview. Other organizations use cultural fit as the final hurdle in the selection process: We know you have the behavioral and technical competencies we are looking for in this position, but can you fit with how we do things here?

There is a maxim that says, "Every strength taken to an extreme becomes a weakness." Cultural fit, when done well, will help you recruit an organization of employees who see the world the same way and share a common belief about how to reach that target. The dark side to cultural fit is lack of difference and diversity. If we all see the world and the problem the same way, what are we potentially missing with our rose-colored glasses?

I worked for a 100-year-old company that had an extremely strong culture. When it attempted to bring in talent that was different and unlike the prevailing culture, too often **the result was "organ rejection." While the organization desired to address its shortcomings** with talent that had those skills, more often than not the system closed ranks and refused to accept the new ideas. Instead, it drove people out either voluntarily or involuntarily. The result was a loss on several levels - for the person, who uprooted his or her life for this opportunity, and for the organization, which spent money getting the person to town and then absorbed the cost of unwinding the deal. Most importantly, the organization lost the benefit of exposure to different ideas and perspectives that may have helped it achieve its goals or avoid potential problems.

About the Author

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