

## Culture Finder

### Finding the Corporate Culture Where You Can Thrive

Every company has a culture, whether it is created intentionally or not. Have you ever wished that you knew the culture of a company *before* you accepted the job offer? Did you ever regret ignoring the red flags that came up in the interview process once you were in a new job? Better yet, do you wish to recreate the great experience you had two or three jobs ago? You are not alone.

Finding the ideal company culture is not an exact science. In fact, it may not be high on your list of written priorities. Nevertheless, it has probably occurred to you that working in the right culture brings out the best in people. The good news is you can take a highly proactive approach to discovering a company's true culture before you join. What are the benefits of such a strategy? With a well thought out strategy you can:

1. Align yourself to do your highest and best work, ensuring growth, contribution and rewards
2. Place yourself in a position of informed choice when considering multiple offers
3. Go in with your eyes open and with a sensible strategy when the environment is less than ideal
4. Use the strategies outlined in this process to understand your challenges today while crafting and implementing a positive exit strategy

### The Four Dimensions of Corporate Culture

For ease of assessment we can dissect corporate culture using the following four dimensions:

1. **Strategy: How companies differentiate themselves in the market.** I have identified four common strategies which fit most companies.
2. **Structure: How companies handle reporting and decision-making.** I have identified four types of reporting structures.
3. **Style: How companies communicate with customers, prospects, and employees.** I have identified four unique styles of communication.
4. **System: How companies create and implement the culture** (consciously or unconsciously). I have divided the dimension of system into four areas of distinct possibility.

See if you recognize your company in each of these four areas. Ask yourself which of the Strategies, Structures, Styles and Systems would support your best work. The answers are not the same for everyone.

- I. **Strategy:** It is critical to align with a company that knows and deploys its strategies clearly and consistently. A good strategy often stems from a well-defined mission statement. The four strategies depicted in this illustration speak to the ways that any company can choose to position and sell its unique value proposition. Note that no one strategy is inherently better than another across the board, but choosing the right strategy for a given company makes all the difference in success or failure. Examples of each quadrant include:

STRATEGY	
MAKING A DIFFERENCE	CUSTOMIZATION
COMMODITY	BEST IN CLASS

- a. **Making a Difference:** Franklin Covey. Through education and enhancing activities, decision-making, and life balance, the company makes a difference in customers' lives.

- b. **Customization:** George Martin, Record Producer. He created loyal customers in the music industry by producing customized sounds for The Beatles, Carly Simon and others.
- c. **Commodity:** Southwest Airlines. In a commoditized market, they pride themselves on operational efficiency, consistency, and on-time flights.
- d. **Best in Class:** Bose Sound Wave Radio: It is more expensive but is unapologetically positioned as the best money can buy.

II. **Structure:** Much can be learned about a company’s culture by examining the way that decisions are made and how reporting is handled. This speaks to a company’s inherent values and viewpoint on human capital management.

- a. **Collaborative Consensus:** Varying viewpoints are solicited and considered. Benefit-New ideas can be surfaced and applied. Downside-Critical decisions can be delayed.

STRUCTURE	
COLLABORATIVE CONSENSUS	HIERARCHICAL & TOP-DOWN
BOARD OF DIRECTORS	SINGLE POINT OF COMMAND

- b. **Hierarchical & Top Down:** Commands come from the top and filter down. Benefit-If done with clarity and consistency, efficiency and quality can result. Downside-When reasoning is not clear or decisions don’t make sense, dissension, a lack of productivity and high turnover can result.

- c. **Board of Directors:** This can be an internal management team or literal Board of Directors making strategic decisions. Benefit-When leadership is strong and communication clear, the company can make powerful strides. Downside-When leadership is weak, indecisive or inconsistent, breakdowns occur at all levels.

- d. **Single Point of Command:** One person sets the tone and direction. Benefit-With a benevolent leader direction can be clear, provided the leader surrounds himself/herself with significant talent and integrates input in their weak areas. Downside-When the leader does not know when to allow autonomy, does not see their own weaknesses, or does not know when to step in and direct, the result is confusion and poor outcomes.

III. **Style:** The way that customers, prospects and employees experience day-to-day communication with a company is perhaps the best indicator of true company culture.

- a. **Collaborative Implementers:** These are the people, teams, and companies who look for the best quality input on new initiatives, daily operations, and overall strategies. There is a healthy balance between collaboration and action.

STYLE	
COLLABORATIVE IMPLEMENTERS	VISIONARY DRIVERS
RESPONDERS & MAINTAINERS	REACTORS & BLAMERS

- b. **Visionary Drivers:** This is often a single leader or small team of leaders with an inspirational vision of excellence with the know-how to get things done and who spread their enthusiasm to others.

- c. **Responders & Maintainers:** These companies operate in response to, but rarely ahead of, the customer and the market. In this environment the customer is important, but there is insufficient energy or passion to innovate or excel.

- d. **Reactors & Blamers:** In this culture, the focus is more on blame than the solution. Oftentimes, denial of major underlying issues is rampant and any solutions offered may be temporary or address only surface concerns.

IV. **System:** This relates to the tools used to create, implement and maintain the desired culture. The first 3 dimensions—Strategy, Structure, and Style—all set the tone for the System ultimately used to create culture.

a. **High Awareness + High Discipline:**  
This model combines an honest awareness of issues and opportunities with the consistency of a disciplined approach to resolving problems and seizing opportunity. Tools are selected, refined and applied consistently to gain desired and measured outcomes.

SYSTEM	
HIGH AWARENESS & HIGH DISCIPLINE	LOW AWARENESS & HIGH DISCIPLINE
HIGH AWARENESS & LOW DISCIPLINE	LOW AWARENESS & LOW DISCIPLINE

b. **Low Awareness + High Discipline:**  
This model functions under the leadership of a driven leader with a high degree of consistency and discipline who is unaware of—or simply does not care about—how the methods used impact employees and sometimes, customers.

c. **High Awareness + Low Discipline:** I refer to this style as “Book-of-the-Month-Club Management,” because there is great excitement about the latest in management books and tools, but little or no consistency in implementation—and worse, no consequences for failure to meet expectations.

d. **Low Awareness + Low Discipline:** This culture exemplifies the “seat of the pants” style where there is low or no awareness of what we don’t know, and new things are tried wily-nily with no substantial level of consistency or direction. There is an overall lack of planning and a lot of last minute stress to meet deadlines.

When we apply these four dimensions and the four quadrants of each to a company, we can come up with some good insights into motivation, culture, strategy and likelihood of corporate success. It is also possible to see areas of personal alignment with a company, or misalignment, as the case may be.

When interviewing for a position we have a wonderful opportunity to gain a glimpse into these four aspects of a company’s culture. Yet in many cases, this opportunity is squandered. Why? Sometimes it is lack of preparation, other times it is based on fear that we will lose the opportunity. Often, individuals do not consider it an option to get this much information in advance of a career decision.

I maintain that it is our responsibility and right to gather reasonable information before making a critical life decision. After all, you will become at least a stakeholder in the success of the next company you join. Your livelihood and quality of life depend in large measure on the success or failure of the entity where you spend most of your waking hours. By examining the four dimensions of corporate culture before you accept a job, you position yourself for the best possible outcome.

How can you discover where a company fits in each of these areas? There are four major ways to gain the information you need in what I call the discovery process:

1. Open-ended and probative interview questions (more on this in a moment).
2. Third party information, including third party magazine articles (not press releases), and interviews with suppliers and vendors.
3. Customer references (yes, you should ask for references and check them, too!)
4. Speaking with current and past employees, if at all possible (I will tell you how).

Here is how to conduct a successful discovery process:

1. Research the company and their competitors. Try to determine how (or if) the company conveys its unique value proposition. Read industry articles to discover what the company’s relationship is with

Wall Street if publicly traded, its reputation within its own community, and its position relative to the competition.

2. Find out who the company partners with and informally ask around about reputation, quality and communication. See how they treat their vendors and suppliers. Do they pay on time? Do they have a reputation for creating one-sided agreements? Do people want to do business with them?
3. Once you have an interview and have established rapport, you can ask more in-depth questions about culture. The questions that follow are only examples, and are meant to spur your creative thought process in gaining an understanding of the company culture:
  - a. What is more important to your company, delivering the product with efficiency and consistency, or collaborating with the client on a custom result or product? Why?
  - b. Would you say your company prides itself more on being first-to-market with new ideas, or on providing services that enhance your customer's decision-making processes?
  - c. Give me an example of a recent corporate initiative that is public (not confidential) and tell me why it is important to your company.
  - d. What are some examples of the tools your company uses to implement and maintain a cohesive company culture?
4. When you are well along in the interview process, and have established a strong mutual interest, it is appropriate to ask for customer references. Some may respond with surprise, but if you are professional and firm in your request, you should be able to get the information you seek. Be sure you call and conduct a professional reference check, just as you do when hiring someone who reports to you.
5. Through networking and research, find someone who knows a current or past employee. This may take some creativity and persistence on your part, but it is well worth the effort. Ask for an informational interview and ask a few questions, such as: "What were the things that attracted you to the company?" "What do (or did) you like most about your job?" "What impresses you most about this company?" "What are the common traits of the people who tend to succeed in this organization?" Again, keep it professional.

Be sure to tailor the questions in each phase of the discovery process to fit the situation and the interviewer. If you are greeted with a blank stare when posing these questions, you are either talking to the wrong person or possibly the wrong company. Hopefully, however, these questions will generate a lively dialogue and help you make informed career decisions while positioning you powerfully in comparison to other candidates. With a slight twist, the above questions can be refocused when you speak to vendors and customers. With the proper due diligence you can create an accurate 360 degree perspective on a potential employer.

A note of caution: be prepared to answer probing questions about *your* unique value proposition when you adopt this strategy. The answers to these questions lay in your unique "Success Criteria," "Clarification of Marketability," and "Position Profiling"—work that you may have already completed. Above all, be honest with yourself and others about which strategy, structure, style and system brings out your best contribution. Be ready to paint a specific picture of how you fit in and can solve problems in the near-term while contributing to the long-term success of your new employer.

###

*Kathleen Winsor-Games is a principal of The Winsor Group, a boutique firm offering executive search and executive coaching services. She is also a Member of the Board of Directors for the Colorado Human Resources Association (CHRA). Ms. Winsor-Games may be contacted at 303-331-3401.*

**Visit our website at [www.thewinsorgroup.com](http://www.thewinsorgroup.com)**