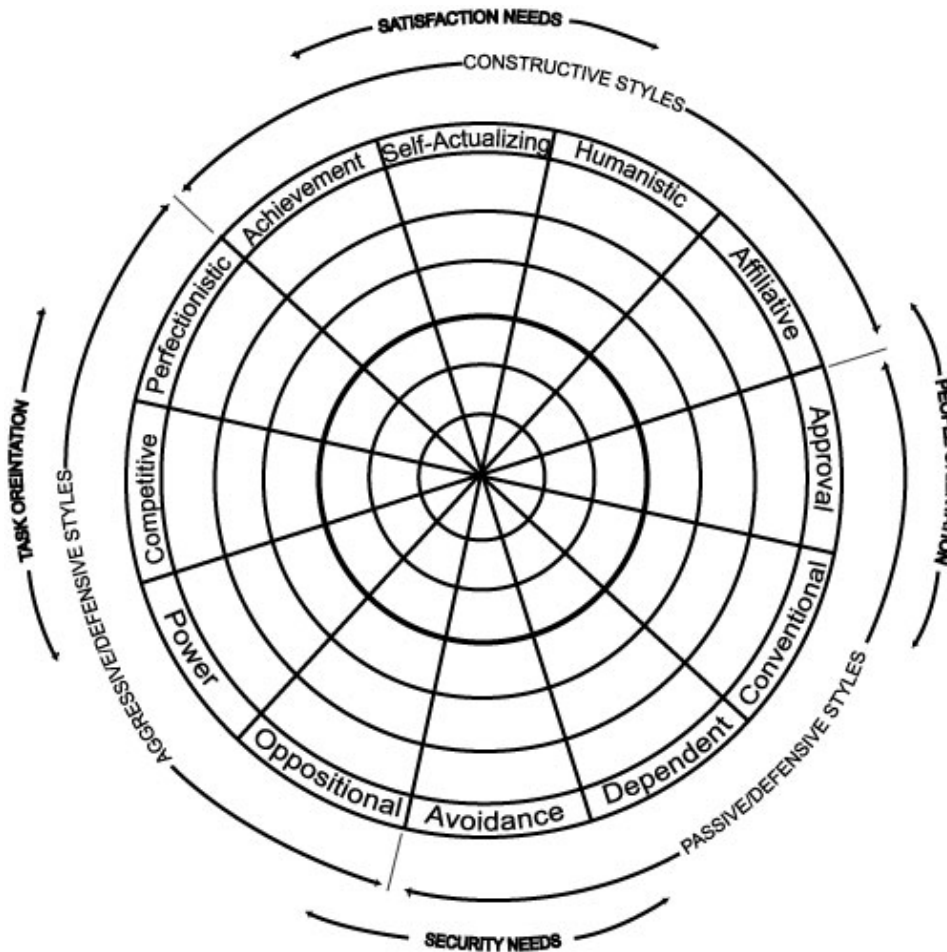


The Five-Minute Guide to Culture

CULTURE: The norms and shared values among a group of people. “The way we do things around here.”

NORMS: Rules of behavior (usually unwritten.). Common ways of acting that perpetuate themselves in an organization because people “teach” them to newcomers, rewarding those who fit in with the prevailing norms and sanctioning those who don’t.

CIRCUMPLEX: A graph used to depict the occurrence of cultural norms in an organization (or a department) and their intensity.



The 12 points on the circumplex correspond to hours on a clock and represent the following cultural norms or behaviors that people are expected to display:

Achievement (11): People set challenging but realistic goals, establish plans to reach them and pursue them with enthusiasm.

Self-Actualizing (12): People enjoy their work, develop themselves and take on new and interesting activities

Humanistic-Encouraging (1): People are supportive, constructive and open to influence in their dealings with one another.

Affiliative (2): People are friendly, cooperative and sensitive to the satisfaction of their work group and of other work groups elsewhere in the organization.

Approval (3): People agree with, gain the approval of and are liked by others.

Conventional (4): People conform, follow the rules and make a good impression.

Dependent (5): People do what they're told and clear all decisions with superiors.

Avoidance (6): People shift responsibilities to others and avoid any possibility of being blamed for a mistake.

Oppositional (7): People are critical, oppose the ideas of others and make safe decisions.

Power (8): People take charge, control subordinates and yield to the demands of superiors.

Competitive (9): People work in a win-lose framework and work against their peers.

Perfectionistic (10): People avoid mistakes, keep track of everything and work long hours to attain narrowly defined objectives that may further their individual performance, but not contribute to the over all goals.

CULTURE TYPES

The 12 norms group into three main culture types.

Constructive: The behaviors in this group help people meet satisfaction needs – the kind of satisfaction derived, for instance, from reaching one’s potential.

People balance expectations for thinking independently and taking initiative with expectations to work consensually and share power. They regularly voice unique perspectives and concerns while working toward agreement.

Constructive cultures are evident in environments that value (and reward) quality over quantity and creativity over conformity. Cooperation is believed to lead to better results than competition. Effectiveness is judged at the overall level, not just at a unit or department level.

In constructive organizations, levels of satisfaction, teamwork, service quality and sales growth tend to be high. They tend to have a dual focus – on financial success today and on developing people, strategy and market share to ensure more success in the future.

Employees (both staff and management) at a variety of industries – including newspapers – identify the constructive culture as the “ideal” for their organizations. This is true even in high-reliability organizations, such as the military and power plants.

It is not uncommon for senior management to have a constructive culture, but for those values and behaviors not to have permeated the rest of the organization.

Passive/Defensive: the behaviors in this group play to a need for security and low risk.

People do what it takes to please others and avoid interpersonal conflict. Rules, procedures and orders are followed without question. In this highly directed environment, jobs are narrowly defined and supervision is intense. Managers rarely catch employees doing things right, but never miss when they do things wrong.

Unresolved conflict and turnover are common in such organizations, as well as low satisfaction and motivation.

While these cultures were successful in the past in producing consistent, reliable products and services because of relatively stable competitive and technological environments, today they work against responding to quickly changing customer needs, competition, and technological advances.

Passive/Defensive cultures are often found in “protected” organizations, such as government agencies, organizations that are closely regulated by government or ones that operate as monopolies. Lack of competition and a belief that the customer base will remain constant often leads these organizations to preserve the status quo rather than look for major opportunities and improvements.

Aggressive/Defensive: The need for security is also a strong driver of behavior in this type of culture. But whereas the dynamic in a passive/defensive culture is more person-oriented (for instance, avoiding interpersonal conflict), the focus here is more task-oriented. People approach tasks forcefully, not to further the overall goals of the organization as much as to protect their status, security and “turf.”

These cultures encourage people to appear competent and superior, even if the underlying skills and experiences are lacking. Those who admit shortcomings or ask for help are seen as weak. There is an emphasis on confrontation, competition and criticism.

An unrelenting pressure to appear perfect and expert mitigates against customer service, admission of errors, trying new and perhaps risky things and teamwork. It can also depress motivation and health.

Although professing otherwise, management tends to put its own interests before those of its key constituents – customers, employees and stockholders. Often they are able to appear effective (although not indefinitely) because of the past successes of the organization. But this sort of culture prevents organizations from adapting to changes in their environment and will ultimately affect financial performance.

This culture is found in fast-paced organizations, where people have to think and take action quickly on a regular basis. Examples would be the computer and telecommunications sectors, with a high level of competition and short product cycles; the military; and emergency services where fast, physical, logistical movement is essential. It is also found in organizations that suddenly and unexpectedly experience huge sales growth (such as biotech and e-commerce firms.)

The nature of such environments leads many companies to falsely conclude that to be aggressive and compete externally they need to mirror those qualities internally. But internally aggressive cultures do not produce the best results. Quality is often sacrificed for quantity and coordination is bypassed in favor of immediate personal success.

This culture is also found in organizations that have gone through downsizing or who emphasize traditional methods of quality control (for instance, putting quality responsibility at the supervisor level).

**So is the implicit message -- Constructive = Good?
Aggressive/Defensive = Bad?
Passive/Aggressive = Worst?**

The cultural analysis that your newspaper has participated in is descriptive rather than judgmental or prescriptive. Each organization has to decide whether the current operating culture aligns with where it wants to be and if it provides what the company needs to accomplish its goals.

It has been well proven, in empirical studies of the last 10-15 years across a broad swath of organizations, that strength of culture is not enough to ensure continued success. Further, cultures that serve organizations well at one stage of their life may be counter-productive in a later stage.

For instance, aggressive entrepreneurial organizations may find that the culture that “worked” during start-up becomes, as they grow, a liability if aggressive-defensive norms dominate their internal ways of working. People may downplay the capabilities of new competitors, or enter new markets that are inconsistent with competencies, or emphasize internal competition over the gains to be realized by working with some interdependency.

Sometimes, those responsible for the successes of their newspapers misattribute their accomplishments to the newspaper’s culture that evolved – and may have been useful – in another era. Yet, it is equally likely that the paper’s success was *in spite of* the culture. It may have been due to other powerful factors such as market conditions, timing, location, and availability of resources or technological expertise

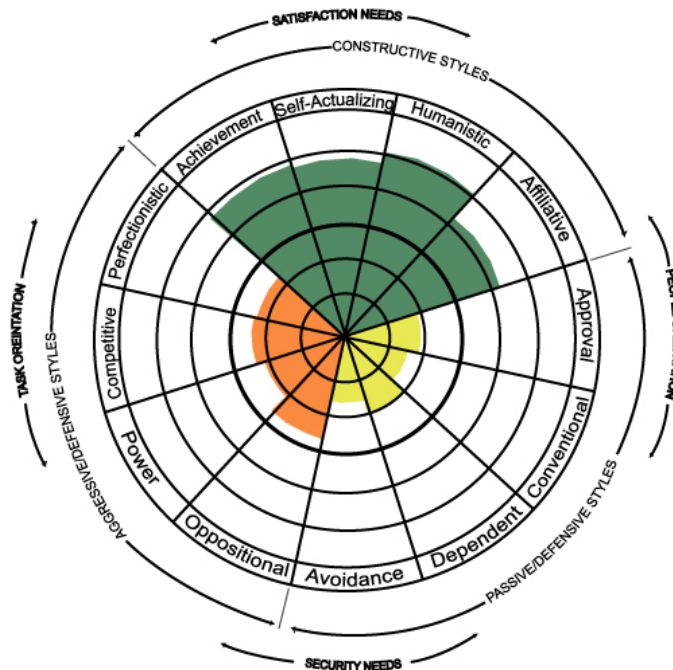
There is a strong body of research that shows organizations that sustain excellent performance in changing environments are those that have behaviors and values that support adaptiveness. In today’s environment and going forward, constructive cultures are the most desirable because they allow for greater adaptability.

INTERPRETING A CULTURE DEPICTED ON THE CIRCUMPLEX

The culture of an organization (or a department) is a mix of all 12 norms, in varying degrees and intensities.

Look for the norms that are most extended from the center of the circumplex. These spikes describe the predominant thinking and behavioral styles expected of people in the organization.

The most extended spike is the primary style, the next extended the secondary style. Sometimes they fall within the same broad cultural type; sometimes they are in different types. In either case, the type that best describes your organization is calculated by averaging the scores of the four norms in the cluster.



In the example above, the culture is strongly **Constructive**, especially along the *Humanistic-Encouraging* norm. *Achievement*, which just edges out *Self-Actualizing*, would be the secondary style. Defensive norms are clearly present, but to a much lesser degree.

Condensed from *Organizational Cultural Inventory Interpretation and Development Guide*, Human Synergetics, 1998.