The perfect fit

Understanding the environment you work in could help you climb the career ladder more quickly, writes Jessica Twentyman. So stop, look and listen to get a grip on company culture.

Every workplace is different. Each has its own values, beliefs and goals – the characteristics that together make up its unique corporate culture. All workplaces have one aspect in common, though: their most successful and respected employees tend to be the ones who actively support and promote those values, beliefs and goals in their daily working lives.

The good news is that most organisations don’t employ someone who doesn’t seem to fit with their culture, according to career coach Corinne Mills, managing director of Personal Career Management. The interview process, she says, is designed to weed out these people, ensuring that “the candidate is right for the company and the company is right for the candidate”.

In other words, whoever originally recruited you did so in the belief that you and the company were a good match. Once you’re actually in the job, it’s your responsibility to explore that culture more deeply, so that you can navigate it.

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MAKE YOUR MARK

Observing how your colleagues behave will help you build relationships, settle into the organisation and progress upwards.

In his 1936 self-help classic How to Win Friends and Influence People, Dale Carnegie made a valuable observation about building relationships within the workplace. “You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you,” he wrote.

More than 70 years on, much of Carnegie’s advice sounds distinctly quaint to modern readers. But this snippet may be worth contemplating, especially if you’re in the early years of your career, a time when employees feel most under pressure to make their mark at work.

All guns blazing

Without much experience of workplace dynamics that pressure can lead you to behave in ways that are more likely to burn bridges than build them. Professor Binna Kandola, a business psychologist and co-founder of specialist consultancy Pearn Kandola, says, “If you pile in with all guns blazing trying to impress new colleagues..."
The ability to adapt is a good skill

it more smoothly. There are a number of questions you should consider here.

HIGHER GOALS
Does your employer have a mission statement and how is this put into action? What are the company’s corporate social responsibility targets? What charities or community projects does it support?

MANAGEMENT STYLE
Does your employer favour control or autonomy for its staff? What is the company’s tolerance for risk? Does it rely on employees sticking to clearly defined business processes or is its approach more ad hoc? When it comes to reporting lines does it have a hierarchical or flat management structure?

STAFF INTERACTION
Do the employees compete or collaborate, or a mixture of both depending on circumstances? Are their interactions generally formal or informal? What are the most commonly used means of communication – telephone, email, instant messaging or some other means? To what extent do employees from different departments interact with each other?

Getting to grips with corporate culture will largely be a process of observation and interaction. By observing, you’ll get to see how the organisation’s high-fliers behave, speak and dress. By interacting, you’ll get to learn more quickly about what you, the individual employee, is expected to do to fulfil the company’s values and goals.

In career terms it’s a useful exercise. Most corporate cultures evolve over time and some can change quite suddenly – if a new chief executive is brought in, for example. The ability to adapt and adjust accordingly is a good skill to have, not just for short-term job satisfaction but also for lifelong personal development.

and managers you’ll certainly create an impression – but it’s likely to be a pretty unfavourable one.” Worse still, that impression could end up following you around for years.

Lack of confidence is most often to blame when recent recruits ruffle corporate feathers, says Professor Kandola. As in other areas of life, relationships in the workplace shouldn’t be forced. “They’re built on the trust and credibility and respect that builds up between people over time. You have to be patient and trust in relationships to evolve naturally,” he says.

In the meantime, instead of looking to make a splash – or in Carnegie’s words “trying to get other people interested in you” – it makes more sense to focus on the other side of the equation by “becoming interested in other people”.

Learning to fit in
This is a time to ask co-workers about themselves and how they work, to become familiar with the organisational landscape and culture, to better understand the dynamics at work. In other words, learn to fit in before you try to stand out.

Even as a nervous new recruit, by shifting the focus away from yourself and onto your colleagues and learning more about the environment you find yourself in, you will start to feel more confident in your ability to navigate that environment. The right body language will also help to reinforce that sense of quiet confidence and composure you should be looking to project.

“People who are cool, calm, collected and in charge of their emotions use clear, deliberate movements. If you want to make a good impression, you should use minimal body movement,” say Australian body language specialists Allan and Barbara Pease in their book Body Language in the Work Place.

Defensive body language such as crossing your legs or fiddling with clothes shows insecurity. “When you change your body language, you interact differently with people and they will respond differently to you,” say the authors.