ORGANIZATIONAL **Dynamics**

Discerning career cultures at work ☆

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Cecilia, a recent MBA graduate and first-year associate in a major consulting firm, was on a Thursday evening plane trip, returning home, reflecting on whether her current company was the right place for her. Even though the company was successful financially and an industry leader, she was beginning to realize after working on several projects that she was contemplating many questions about how good the personal and cultural fit would be for her. "How do I know if the people here are really 'my kind' of people?" "How can I tell if the firm's values and expectations of employees, especially junior employees, are compatible with the way I want to be at work?" "How can I develop and thrive here?"

These are questions that new employees, as well as prospective hires, often have but may hesitate to ask. Rather, people often look for career signals that communicate expectations about valued career outcomes and plausible career pathways within their organization. These signals can be found in organizational career policies, compensation practices, cultural artifacts, and practices that communicate career priorities within the organization. These sources of information are all part of an organization's career culture — the shared norms, assumptions, and artifacts that shape the meaning of careers within the organization.

How could Cecilia use these signals to discern the nature of an organization's career culture? In this paper, will address this question. First, we will describe elements of an organization's career culture and a framework for understanding and assessing career cultures. In addition, we discuss the role of organizational career signals as a way of understanding how career cultures can influence individual career motivations, decisions, and behaviors. We examine the prevalence of mixed career signals in organizations and what effects they can have on the organization's members. Hopefully, we will provide some assistance to Cecilia as she attempts to discern

the meaning of the signals from her would-be employer and to assess the degree of fit between her and the company's culture.

DISCERNING CAREER CULTURES THROUGH CAREER SIGNALS

Careers do not develop in isolation. Careers within organizations instead are very much shaped by the organization's culture and practices. An organization's career culture is a powerful source and transmitter of social information, shaping individual career motivations, decisions, and behaviors. Career culture is a distinct aspect of a broader organizational culture. It represents beliefs and practices that prescribe what is valued for career success in the organization. For example, a university may have an organizational culture that values collegiality and collaboration. It can also have a career culture that values differentiation as characteristic of career success — faculty who are able to differentiate themselves from others, by their unique expertise are valued and perceived as models of success. This may not be the case for all universities, but is an example of how an organization's career culture is distinct from other aspects of an organization's culture.

Career cultures can be hard to read and diagnose. One way of doing so is through attention to organizational career signals. Career signals provide information that shape how employees assess and enact their careers within the organization. They are also the medium by which individuals read and decode an organization's career culture. They influence behavioral outcomes by informing individuals that certain types of behaviors will lead to the achievement of specific career outcomes.

Career signals contain important information about career-related behaviors and outcomes that organizations value, as well as information about career identities and approaches to career development that can be career-enhancing in those firms. Among the variety of career signals

that exist in organizations, we focus on four different types of career signals, organized along two fundamental dimensions. The two dimensions relate to two sets of fundamental human needs or personal orientations in relation to a work environment. One dimension describes the kinds of needs and associated rewards that are most important to a given person: intrinsic or extrinsic. Extrinsic rewards are those that are administered by an external agent such as your employing organization. Extrinsic rewards include money or pay, promotions, status or honors, such as title, awards, and public recognition. Intrinsic rewards are those that a person experiences internally, such as the pride of accomplishing a challenging task, the knowledge that one has helped another person, and the self-esteem arising from achieving a level of distinction in your job or career.

This distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards has been established in both management and psychological research, including research by Teresa Amabile and colleagues on work preferences, and the psychologists, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci in their research on individual differences in motivation. Earlier, this distinction was made by the industrial psychologist Frederic Herzberg, who popularized the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, and by the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow, who distinguished between what he called lower and higher level needs (e.g., safety and security needs, vs. needs for belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, respectively.) This dimension is also closely related to the two major criteria of success that are discussed in the careers literature: subjective (intrinsic) and objective (extrinsic) success. This subjective-objective distinction goes back to the early work of Everett Hughes and his colleagues in what was called the Chicago School of sociology.

Career cultures that are high on intrinsic values are cultures that value and reward career behaviors that are self-directed and guided by personal values. This is typical of social enterprises, where career success is often measured by the enactment of your values and passion or calling. In contrast, career cultures that are high on extrinsic values are those that value visible achievement, distinction, external recognition, and status. This is typical, for example, of financial services, where the market nature of the work is also reflected in a career culture that values material rewards and status.

This intrinsic/extrinsic distinction is also related to people holding either a *performance* or *learning* goal orientation when confronted with novel tasks. People hold a *performance goal orientation* when their primary motivation is to (a) perform at a high level of distinction on the task, ideally better than other people, and (b) avoid appearing incompetent. The other stance is a *learning goal orientation*, wherein the person's prime goal is to learn and develop their proficiency in the new domain. They are more concerned about learning as much as possible than performing at a high level or avoiding making mistakes.

The second dimension — assimilation vs. differentiation — represents two fundamentally opposing ways of relating to an organization. One kind of attitude that a people could have toward their employer is that they might be motivated to fit in, to become part of the organization, to be an "insider." This is the assimilation orientation. Organizations foster assimilation when they socialize their employees toward embracing similar organizational values, identities, and behaviors. The U.S. Military Academy at *West Point* is an example of this approach, where cadets have prescribed career paths, with the intent of developing military officers who espouse specific organizational values. Differentiation, on the other hand, represents an emphasis on uniqueness or individuation. This is common in creative environments, such as design firms, technology, and the arts, where novel career backgrounds and behaviors are valued and celebrated, as they are seen as leading to more creative work products.

The concepts of assimilation and differentiation were established through research on optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) developed by the psychologist Marilynn Brewer. Brewer describes the process of identification as a "reconciliation of opposing needs for assimilation and differentiation from others." Assimilation and differentiation both have their unique strengths. In assimilation cultures, members tend to have a stronger group identity and, consequently, support from group members. Strong socialization processes help produce this common sense of identity. In differentiation cultures, members are encouraged to develop their own unique identities. They can often be alone, yet very independent in this pursuit.

Elsewhere we have discussed the role of career cultures for the recruitment and retention of talent, together with how this is an important ingredient for business success. As Edgar Schein points out in his seminal work on organizational culture, culture is a multi-level phenomenon characterized by visible characteristics called *artifacts*, less visible but still often discussable *values* that contribute to distinctiveness, and *basic assumptions*, which are deeply-held beliefs about the nature of reality and how things work. Organizations often have distinctive cultures, and these often have associated career cultures, which can also be described by these three levels. We also know from research on occupational and organizational choice that people with similar career interests, identities, and personalities tend to self-select into the organizations with organizational cultures and career cultures that are congruent with their interests, identities, and personalities. The work of vocational psychologist John Holland and I/O psychologist Benjamin Schneider provide strong data on this relationship between person-organization fit and outcomes such as job acceptance, retention, and satisfaction.

Table 1 illustrates a typology of career cultures along these two dimensions that creates four "ideal types" of career cultures. The combination of a strong focus on intrinsic values with an assimilation strategy (Cell I) for inducting members yields an *Apprenticeship culture* wherein newcomers are socialized by more experienced members, who serve as role models (since newcomers see the experienced members as embodying the values of the organization). The combination of intrinsic values and a differentiation development strategy yields a *Protean culture* (Cell II) in which newcomers are encouraged to discern their own passion, values, and avenues to contribute, as they craft a career path that reflects their unique identities.

A *Prestige culture* (Cell III) features the combination of a focus on extrinsic values and organizational assimilation. Here the rewards are clear, public, and linked to attaining "insider" status in a prestigious organization (e.g., becoming a partner in a professional services firm), and the challenge

Table 1 A Model of Organizational Career Cultures.

	Assimilation: Toward a Shared Identity	**Differentiation**: Toward Unique Identities
Intrinsic	**Apprenticeship Culture** *"Learn the ropes" Career Cultures (e.g., Bain & Company and West Point—organizations that provide structured career paths, with a focus on intrinsic career values)*	**Protean Culture** *"Find yourself" Career Cultures (e.g., Google and Zappos - organizations that empower employees to chart their own career paths)*
Extrinsic	**Prestige Culture** *"Only the very best" Career Cultures (e.g., Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley—organizations that are highly selective and provide strong financial career incentives)*	**Merit Culture** *"Prove yourself" Career Cultures (e.g., General Electric, CVS, P&G, and Johnsonville Sausage—organizations that reward uniqueness and individual achievement)*

for new members is to discern and master the rules for demonstrating their worthiness. A prime reward is secure membership of such a highly valued, often high status organization. In *Merit cultures* (Cell IV), the rewards again are extrinsic, though individuals need to demonstrate their unique merit, capabilities, and contributions. Table 2 details the elements within each of the apprenticeship, protean, prestige, and merit career cultures.

To clarify the nature of these career cultures, next we discuss case examples of each type. Our examples are informed by public information about the company, through published interviewees with employees in business

Table 2 Features of Career Cultures.

	Apprenticeship Culture	**Protean Culture**	**Prestige Culture**	**Merit Culture**
Description	*Assimilation* focused and an emphasis on *intrinsic* career values.	*Differentiation* focused and an emphasis on *intrinsic* career values.	*Assimilation* focused and an emphasis on *extrinsic* career values.	*Differentiation* focused and an emphasis on *extrinsic* career values.
Explicit Career Signals/Career Messages	*Learn the ropes* *See one, do one, teach one* *Get with the program* *We will develop leaders that represent our core values*	*Find yourself* *Captain of your own ship* *Follow your passion* *Pursue your path with a heart* *What would you like to do?*	*The best of the best* *Cream of the crop* *Elite* *Your network matters* *First class* *Join the club*	*Prove yourself* *Sink or Swim* *Ensure you shine, asap!* *Only the best survive* *Up or out*
Implicit Career Signals/ Organizational practices	Organizationally organized and coordinated Traditional mentoring Succession planning	Flexible career pathways Rotational job placements Internal career bulletin boards Employee initiated career opportunities Optional career development resources Managers who are given autonomy to chart unique career paths for their employees An employee-driven career culture Organizational attention to individual employee strengths and interests	Highly targeted recruitment A focus on academic credentials High social status as a marker of career success	Known for innovative approaches to performance measurement Pay for performance Up or out Promote from within
A likely fit for...	The "loyal citizen" who values intrinsic rewards and prefers to assimilate within a preexisting career structure.	The "pathfinder" who values intrinsic rewards and prefers to differentiate themselves from others.	The "pedigree professional" who values extrinsic rewards and prefers to assimilate within a preexisting career structure.	The "aspiring achiever" who values extrinsic rewards and prefers to differentiate themselves from others.

publications, public documentary videos, and employee postings in Glassdoor — the largest online database of employee information about company culture and practices.

APPRENTICESHIP CULTURES AT *BAIN* AND *WEST POINT*

Apprenticeship-oriented consulting firms, such as Bain & Company, are good examples of career cultures with strong intrinsic values and an assimilation focused approach to careers. In the example of Bain & Company, the career signals for an apprenticeship culture are strong and consistent throughout the firm. The positive consequences of this approach are reflected in strong employee ratings about the company culture on Glassdoor, earning Bain a 2015 *Employee's Choice Award* by Glassdoor. The following are some observations about Bain employees from Glassdoor and their company blog:

> *People want you to succeed not just because it makes them look good, but because apprenticeship and mentorship are the lifeblood of the business.*
> *The thing I love most at Bain is the apprenticeship model and the training and coaching that goes with it. I have learned an enormous amount in my time at Bain, not just in formal training sessions, but day to day on cases from people who made time to help me even though they were busy. Now that I have been here a while, I get to do this for others, and it is the thing that I find most rewarding.*

Reflecting this culture is an ''advice to new recruits'' post by a senior Bain partner on the company's blog:

> *You are in a great apprenticeship. The more junior you are, the more you can thrive because everyone above you is a potential coach, a potential mentor. Every time I give a ''welcome to Bain'' speech I say that part of what ACs and Consultants should do is seek out coaches and learn to meet as many folks as they can…We have horrible stories of failure, and we have some good stories of success which are inspiring. Everyone has a 'things to master' list. And they are all a bit different but, over time, common themes emerge. Collect the stories — good and bad — and collect the lists.*

In a similar vein, the United States Military Academy at West Point stresses the assimilation of thousands of cadets into a highly unified Corps of Cadets, bonding to one another through internal commitment to the values of duty, honor, and country.

Assimilation and strong identification with the West Point culture start with the admissions process, which is highly selective (9% acceptance rate). New cadets, who are training to become Army officers, enter the Military Academy as lowly plebes (first year cadets) on a steamy summer day in July, at the start of an intensive summer-long initiation rite known as ''Beast Barracks,'' which is run by upper class cadets. By the end of the first day, to the amazement of the plebes and their loved ones, the new cadets have been sufficiently trained to conduct a stirring military parade, with much pomp and circumstance in their new uniforms for their families. As one new cadet described the change he saw in himself:

> *It made me feel small. It makes you realize that you're just a part of a greater institution.*

After the parade at the end of the day and after he had said goodbye to his family, he reflected,

> *It was nice to let them see me as my new self.*[1]

The first summer is an extremely challenging process, physically, mentally, and emotionally, in which their old civilian, individually-based identities are stripped away (strongly symbolized by a short haircut) and replaced with a collective, warrior mentality. They live by a strict peer-enforced honor code, and their daily schedule is highly regimented. Many cadets ''wash out'' in the first year, and with each successive year they win more freedom and more privileges. Tim spent a year at West Point as a Visiting Professor, and it seemed to him that the cadets started off their college careers at the Academy with less freedom than the average private school fifth grader, and they end up at graduation with, at most, something approaching the autonomy and privileges they might have had as starting freshmen at a civilian university.

Most of the West Point faculty are Army officers, and the military education is based upon Army experiences and the Army authority structure. After the first year, summers are spent in the field doing Army training. In their second summer they are at Camp Buckner, near the Academy, doing Cadet Field Training, and in their third and fourth summers they serve in active Army units around the world. In all of these experiences, they learn by observing and being trained by Army officers, as well as by higher-ranking cadets — a true apprenticeship experience. In this training, the focus is on the collective, with the strongest bonds forming with their immediate peer group. The power of these bonds is expressed perhaps most poignantly in the deeply-held principle that in combat no one is ever left behind, whether wounded or deceased.

Cadets also develop ethically through adherence to the Cadet Honor Code, which states, simply, ''A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do.'' The last part, the non toleration clause, is taken very seriously and produces strong peer pressure for adherence. The punishments for not reporting an observed ethical breach are at least as severe as for those who commit them. Thus, ethical enforcement is largely peer-based, which contributes strongly to assimilation and a strong honor-based bond within the cadet community, all 4591 of them. The focus is on developing personal identity, loyalty, and sense of belonging to the collective — the Corps (also known as *The Long Gray Line*). The culmination of their assimilation into the Army culture is not only graduation but also a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army and the start of five years of service to the nation.

PROTEAN CULTURES AT *GOOGLE* AND *ZAPPOS*

In contrast to Apprenticeship cultures, where members are socialized toward externally structured career pathways, Protean cultures are characterized by a high differentiation

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[1] This video on surviving the first year at a service academy, can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHxZgD1aOR8.

focus, with an emphasis on each member's being clear about his or her own passion and autonomously pursuing that passion. This type of culture is consistent with a protean career orientation, in which self-direction and values-based action are important. A strong example of this kind of protean career culture exists at Google.

Google is a culture that is described by one of their software engineers, Eric Flatt, as follows: "We are a company built by engineers for engineers."[2] Many leaders at Google see their hiring filter as a major factor in the company's success, with the result that the company is a community of high achievers. Thus, cognitive ability is an essential selection criterion along with other qualities such as team and collaboration skills, initiative, flexibility, and being well-rounded. All of these attributes together go into making a person "Googley," which is a highly valued quality and signals that the person is a good fit with the Google culture.

The differentiation dimension of culture is particularly salient when one considers the meaning of *Googley* for employees. It is used to describe someone whose behavior fits with the Google culture, and it represents individuality, creativity, and working well with others, aspects that reflect a differentiation focus. In his book, *Work Rules*, Lazlo Block — senior vice president of people operations at Google — admits that "Googleyness…isn't a neatly defined box, but includes attributes like enjoying fun (who doesn't)…and evidence that you've taken some courageous or interesting paths in your life". The symbolism and idiosyncratic meaning of Googleyness is one example of how organizational culture need not be about conformity or assimilation. In contrast, Google's protean career culture is an example of how differentiation can be a means toward stronger organizational commitment.

Perhaps an even more telling artifact of Google's protean culture is its approach to hiring and selection. As noted by Block, the person responsible for hiring policies at Google, "Before you start recruiting, decide what attributes you want and define as a group what great looks like…A good rule of thumb is to hire only people who are better than you." The fundamental assumption behind this approach and to Google's culture is the belief, in Block's words, that "if you give people freedom, they will amaze you." These insights from an insider perspective reflect the differentiation and intrinsic focus of Google's protean career culture.

With a relatively flat organizational structure at Google, employees have a high level of autonomy. Google's approach to management is to take power away from managers and to trust employees to run things. At the same time, colleague-ship and community are important; the solo operator is not appreciated. Because the company is so responsive to changes in market demands, teams are constantly formed and reformed. New managers and co-workers thus come and go constantly. Given that autonomy is so important, managers have not always been valued at Google, though through a transparent and data-driven process called Project Oxygen, the People Analytics group identified eight behaviors of great

managers, which include actions such as, "Is a good coach," "Empowers the team and does not micromanage," and "Helps with career development." These behaviors, called the "Oxygen 8," and are now used as the basis for training and rewarding managers.

Zappos is another good example of a protean culture. The company prides itself on having an employee-centered culture and employee-directed approach to career development. The career signals about Zappos's protean culture are evident in its recruiting practices. In 2014, the Wall Street Journal featured how Zappos has eliminated job postings for recruiting employees and instead relies on a company hosted social network site — Zappos Insiders — for potential hires to network with current employees and to identify roles that they are passionate about and would like to apply for. The same article describes how Zappos uses software to identify roles for employees, based on their skill sets, but also on their personal interests. Employee accounts of Zappos, from Glassdoor, describe a career culture that is continually evolving, driven by employees, and one that allows for a good amount of employee career exploration and discovery.

> We're working towards a self-management status where we hope to work towards our goals and our passions on our own terms, but still being held accountable for job duties.

> The opportunities to grow and learn and experience new positions is astounding. You are not silo'd into a single position that you have to do every single day, you are given the ability to learn new skills and do what you are passionate about.

Protean approaches to careers, especially at the organizational level, are not without their limitations. The emphasis on intrinsic career values and a focus on differentiation can be unsettling for employees who are used to more hierarchical and structured approaches to careers and career development. The practices described at Google and Zappos, while innovative and disruptive to existing approaches to careers, have also attracted a fair share of debate. For example, in 2015, 14% of employees at Zappos accepted a buy-out deal to leave the company, after Zappos announced that it was getting rid of managerial roles and job titles. The organizational benefits and unintended consequences of such approaches have yet to be investigated in detail and offer a good opportunity for careers research.

PRESTIGE CULTURES AT GOLDMAN SACHS AND MORGAN STANLEY

Prestige cultures are typical in professional service firms, where reputation is central to business success, more so than most other industries. The concern with reputation permeates the cultural dynamic of such firms — from hiring employees who would enhance the reputation of the firm to an emphasis on status symbols such as prominent office buildings in prestigious locations. Artifacts of this culture include strong barriers to entry, targeted recruiting at elite academic institutions, and organizational work attire (dress suits) that conveys power and prestige. These artifacts are representative of the assimilation and extrinsic values orientation of a

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[2] Much of the information about the culture of Google is from Garvin, D. A, Wegenfeld, A. B., and Kind, L., "Google's Project Oxygen: Do managers matter" (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2013).

prestige career culture. Other defining characteristics include high levels of social status, shown by a concern with individual standing and firm reputation, in comparison with others. Social standing within the tournaments that decide career advancement serves as a strong motivator and indicator of career success.

Goldman Sachs is one example of such a professional service firm with a prestige culture. Since the inception of *Fortune* magazine's *Best Companies to Work For* list in 1998, Goldman Sachs has been one of the few companies to be consistently on that list, for 18 consecutive years. In 2014, it was featured on the front cover of *Fortune*, with the title, "Why everyone still wants to work at Goldman Sachs." A clear theme at Goldman Sachs is the salience of extrinsic values. In a 2015 survey of more than 3500 banking professionals conducted by *Vault*, an industry ranking company, Goldman Sachs ranked first in prestige, with comments from respondents, such as "cream of the crop," "the top investment bank," and one that offers "excellent exit opportunities." Employee perceptions of Goldman, obtained from Glassdoor, include:

> *Great brand name to have on your resume*
> *Surrounded by a lot of smart people. Prestigious firm and culture, learn quickly through challenging work.*
> *Career opportunities, compensation, flexibility, ability to travel, chance to build network, firm's reputation carries significant weight.*

Not surprisingly, prestige career cultures are more difficult to get into than other career cultures. This is due to the high level of selectivity of the organization and their placement as top paying organizations, thus attracting "blue chip" candidates who value and expect similar characteristics. In our review of Glassdoor quotes of such companies, the phrases "great benefits," "reputation," and "smart people" were among the common phrases to describe the company career culture. The following are some additional examples from Morgan Stanley employees, obtained from Glassdoor:

> Smart people, good benefits. Good horizontal mobility. They take good care of you when you travel.
> *Culture and status are two discerning good things about the company.*
> *Upward Mobility. Global opportunities. Smart people.*

Organizations with prestige cultures, such as Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, pride themselves as being career springboards for employees to develop their professional reputation and standing. In turn, many of their employees are headhunted by other reputable firms and for high level positions. For example, McKinsey & Company, a multinational consulting firm, prides itself on its alumni network and has an official alumni platform that reinforces its reputation and standing through the success of its former employees.

Selective recruitment and hiring processes are other salient characteristics of prestige career cultures. For example, Lauren Rivera, a management professor at Northwestern University, found that professional service firms engage in cultural reproduction by hiring candidates from elite cultural backgrounds. She describes this process of cultural reproduction as one where a person's cultural capital (in the form of leisurely pursuits, education, life experiences, or manner of presentation) is valued over and above skills or abilities.

Prestige cultures may vary by levels within the organization. They often exist more predominantly in the upper echelon and are often referred to as an *old boys club*. Organizations making career decisions solely based on credentials, or cultural similarity, instead of holistic assessments of ability can lead to the exclusion of capable individuals for career opportunities. Other potential unintended consequences of prestige cultures can include a lack of diversity in the employees. Indeed, the fact that these elite, prestige factors are embedded so deeply in the career culture can be a major cause of an organization's inability to change. This is a challenge acknowledged by professional service firms, particularly law firms, with an underrepresentation of female and ethnic minorities. An organization's prestige culture can also be a cause of employee turnover, especially among employees who may be from less privileged backgrounds and who find themselves as outliers to the culture.

That said, prestige cultures, like other cultures described in this paper, are not necessarily homogeneous entities, or if they have been, they may not remain so. The outliers in this culture reveal as much about the culture as well as its limitations. People who are different make the dominant culture stand out more clearly. As prestige cultures attempt to promote greater employee diversity, their homogeneous nature and histories can be strong barriers to change. For example, in Lauren Rivera's research in elite professional service firms, she heard a non-traditional employee describe the difficulty of bringing in new types of people:

> *Only once have I been passionate enough about a candidate to fight for him. He came across as someone who didn't have the usual sort of confidence.. This guy was a bit shy but had a very strong drive to succeed. A lot of people were looking for a frat boy, you know, preppy, East Coast, private school. But I'm definitely not that, and so I support people who don't fit the mold.. I loved him, and I championed him.*

MERIT CULTURE AT GENERAL ELECTRIC AND JOHNSONVILLE SAUSAGE

Merit cultures are shaped by strong assumptions about meritocracy — the belief that people should advance based on individual efforts and achievement. In contrast to the prestige culture, where reputation and educational credentials are valued; in merit cultures, new hires are expected to prove their worth through their job performance. Artifacts of a merit culture include a strong focus on employee performance appraisal (often developing novel methods for performance appraisal), job rotations and internal job boards for employees to learn and perform in new roles, quality improvement schemes, and performance-based employee awards. Such cultures tend to attract employees with a high drive for achievement.

General Electric (GE) is an example of an organization with a strong merit culture, evident in its results-oriented performance management system and its well-known practice of firing employees that are at the bottom of the performance distribution. The extrinsic values of the culture are ones that are tied to rewards and performance. Similarly,

on Glassdoor, a common theme of employee reports about the company is its business-centered and merit-based career opportunities:

> *Meritocracy personified. The company gives people big challenges, stretches their capabilities and helps them achieve more through a fantastic set of training opportunities in their first rate management training curriculum.*
> *Lots of opportunity within the company to move up the ladder or to move around to different functions or even a different General Electric business.*
> *Great place to grow from a functional role in to a leadership role"* but also one that *"can be very stressful for everyone with tight deadlines that have metrics tied to your performance.*

An advantage that General Electric has over other smaller companies is the scale and diversity of its operations, allowing for a greater scope of opportunity and career differentiation for employees. As the employee quotes shown above reveal, however, these opportunities are earned and not granted to every employee. Other examples of merit cultures include sales-oriented organizations (e.g., *Nordstrom* and *PepsiCo*) where career advancement and success are based primarily on performance outcomes of revenue generation and individual achievement.

For those interested in smaller companies, an excellent example of a merit culture is *Johnsonville Sausage*. This is a Wisconsin-based family owned firm, whose former CEO Ralph Stayer led the firm to national prominence through an impressive program of employee and organizational learning, starting with his own learning about how to delegate and empower members of the company. Merit based approaches are used by autonomous work teams to hire employees, make promotion decisions, make pay decisions, and solve production problems. The following are examples of this culture, as noted by employee observations on Glassdoor:

> *One of the best places I've ever worked. Opportunities to grow, stretch and learn new things are around every corner.*
> *A culture open to change, growth and challenge. Extraordinary communication between executives and the P2 M teams (town hall meetings are a great example). The company genuinely cares about its members and shows it through GPS (Great Performance Share) bonuses, additional incentives, giveaways and a great benefits package.*
> *A great culture based on teamwork, respect for every individual, personal growth, innovation, and accountability. Your opinion is sought after and valued.*

In presenting our model of the four types of career cultures we are sometimes asked about whether there can be areas of overlap among them. Our answer is "yes" there can be areas of similarity. No organization is a "pure" type. But the defining qualities of one type generally stand out. For example, both merit cultures and prestige cultures place a strong emphasis on evaluating new employees and advancing their careers when they succeed, but the basic assumptions about the personal qualifications of each employee are quite different. In a prestige firm, which typically hires top students from elite universities, there is a basic assumption

that, since you passed their tough selection hurdles, you are smart and special until proven otherwise. You don't have to prove your worth; you largely have to just not fail to measure up to the firm's high standards.

In a merit culture, in contrast, the basic assumption is that everyone starts on the ground floor and has to work their way up. There is more diversity at entry, and the firm hires at a wider range of schools than a prestige firm. A priority in merit cultures is helping individuals succeed and advance toward their career goals. The atmosphere is less exclusive than in a prestige firm. The merit organization is more accepting and supportive, but you have to prove yourself. In the prestige firm you have already proven yourself by meeting the entry standards. The ultimate reward in the prestige firm is to be granted permanent status (e.g., partnership), so that the reward is your ongoing identity as a member of the firm. In the merit firm you have to continue proving your worth through rigorous performance appraisal on an ongoing basis.

Are These "Ideal" Types Also "Pure" Types?

At this point, you might be wondering, what about organizations that have elements of more than one type of career culture? For example, couldn't a prestige firm also have a strong merit-based performance HR system? The answer is, of course! For example, a prestige consulting firm like McKinsey has to have a strong merit-based performance appraisal system to enable selection of the strongest candidates for partner. No organization is a pure type. We present these four combinations of organizations as ideal types to illustrate different characteristics and elements of career cultures.

If your organization has a mix of two types, we would encourage you to look deeper and to assess which is the *stronger* of the two types by observing which type shows the stronger signals. As you discern the career signals that you are detecting, if you pick up more and stronger messages that connote prestige rather than self-direction, this suggests a prestige career culture rather than a protean career culture. In fact, you probably won't find pure types anywhere, but there is value in pushing yourself to discern the primary type that characterizes your organization or one you are considering joining. If you tried this test at McKinsey, for example, you would probably pick up more frequent and more potent signals about a prestige career culture.

It is also useful for the organization (as represented by senior management and senior HR leaders) to be clear about its values and culture. Thus, you can send clearer signals to prospective and current employees, so that you can attract and retain talent more successfully. As the research of Benjamin Schneider has shown, an organization that can project a clear and strong identity does a better job of attracting and selecting individuals who are a good fit with the organization's culture — and it does a better job of retaining that valued talent.

Another question we have received about cultural complexity is whether organizations can have a combination of intrinsic *and* extrinsic rewards. Indeed many organizations use a combination of the two types. For instance, at Google employees get exciting, meaningful, intrinsically-rewarding assignments, *and* are very well paid. The test is again regarding the area in which you pick up the strongest signals. At

Google, as you listen to people talk about their experiences, you tend to hear more comments about the power of the meaning, purpose, and challenge of the projects, than you hear about the compensation and cafes.

DECIPHERING CAREER SIGNALS AND CULTURES

How can this framework of organizational career cultures by used by a new recruit like Cecilia or someone considering joining a particular firm? The best way to understand and diagnose culture is to conduct research on the organization's websites and on others like glassdoor.com, chat with people who work at the organization if you do not, or through personal experience, reflection, and observation if you do. Formal structured surveys are not the best way to capture the richness of culture. Here are some suggestions for your cultural diagnosis. The first step is to diagnose the career signals of the organization.

Career Culture Diagnostic

The following is a diagnostic process to assess an organization's career culture. It can be done individually or with a group of co-workers. It requires a blank set of index cards.

1. Reflect on and write down career signals you have received or observed in your organization. Career signals can be explicit, in the form of messages from co-workers, or implicit, in the form of career practices that you have observed. For example, at West Point, an explicit signal of an apprenticeship culture is the message that cadets are taught about respecting and learning from the careers of officers of higher rank. An example of an implicit career signal is the protean career practice at Zappos of helping potential hires discover their own passion and where it might fit within the company. Additional examples of career signals are provided in Table 2. One way to identify these signals is through using the following interview prompts:
   What are the messages that you have heard about how people develop their career in this organization?
   What are some images of career success in this organization? Which individuals are celebrated as successful and why?

   What policies and practices within your organization have had (or will have) an influence on your career?
2. Write each signal on an index card and aim to generate at least 10 different signals. Review the description of the four career cultures described in earlier sections. On the top of each card, label the signal if it fits with descriptions of any one of the four career cultures, (apprenticeship, protean, prestige, merit) or create a new category if the signal you identified does not fit neatly into existing categories. The aim of this process is to reflect on how specific signals relate to types of career cultures.
3. If you are doing this as an individual exercise, interview at least five other members of the organization about messages that they have received about career success. These could be signals about what constitutes career success, how it is achieved, who has succeeded and who has failed, and why certain career decisions are important. The suggested question prompts in step 1 can be used in these interviews.
4. Compile the cards of different career signals that you have generated as a group or as an individual after completing a round of interviews with co-workers. Sort these cards into categories based on the labels you have attached to them. You are likely to end up with more than one pile of career signals and a possible pile of signals that do not neatly fit into any one of the four career culture categories.
5. If you have a clear pile of career signals — a pile with more cards than the rest — this pile likely represents the organization's dominant career culture. Consider how this career culture relates to your own career values and priorities. If the alignment is clear to you, this may well be a viable organization for you. If not, consider the other types of career cultures and which might be more aligned to your career orientation and values.
6. Look across the different categories of career signals that you have identified. Consider the consistency and alignment between these signals. Is there a clear career message? Or are you receiving mixed signals?

Interpreting Career Signals

If you are receiving a clear career signal from your organization, consider its alignment with your own values and beliefs. Think about your feelings about being a member of that organization. Try asking yourself the career culture fit diagnostic questions in Table 3. You can do this either for an

Table 3   A Measure of Career Culture Fit to the Organization.

Please rate the following items from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	My career priorities are similar to what the organization expects of me to be successful.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	My career values are congruent with the organization.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	My definition of career success aligns with that expounded in the organization.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	My approach to career development is valued in this organization.	1	2	3	4	5

organization of which you are currently a member or for an organization you are considering joining. If you are not a current member of the organization, use information that you have been able to discern from various sources: on-campus interviews, correspondence with representatives of the firm, site visits, company presentations, and members of your network who work there.

If you score high on fit with the organization's career culture, it suggests that your career values and priorities are aligned and supported within the organization. If you are in the lower ranges of fit with your (potential employing) organization, this means that the fit between your identity and that career culture is not so good. What are your options? Depending on factors such as how concerned you are about the misfit, the openness and flexibility of your boss and the culture, and your alternative career options, you could either leave the organization, express your dissatisfaction, try to change the organization, or accept the organization as it is. Next we consider situations where the career signals are mixed.

Mixed or Complex Career Signals...

Mixed signals might mean a career culture endorses more than one single response to a particular issue. Here are some examples of mixed signals that commonly occur in organizations:

We want you to grow in this organization	BUT	*You either move up or out*
We support a diversity of career paths	BUT	*Some paths are more valued than others*
We want you to commit to a career with us	BUT	*We cannot ensure lifetime employment*

The above signals are ones that we would consider to be complex, not necessarily in conflict (i.e., mutually exclusive.) The second one, for example, is quite common in today's organizations. Since they are operating in such complex environments, organization's need to have people who have or can develop a variety of skills. Thus, there is no one *right way* to move through the organization. Cathy Benko at Deloitte calls this the lattice structure for career moves, and all kinds of nontraditional career moves are valued at Deloitte. At the same time, though, an organization could have certain paths that are considered to be faster tracks for advancement than others (e.g., brand management positions vs. HR roles at a consumer products organization such as *P&G* or *Kraft*).

In other situations, the career signals do in fact conflict. Many colleges and universities espouse that teaching is really important, yet promotion and tenure decisions show that research and publishing are what really count. As a result, many young faculty members, motivated by belief in the message about teaching invest much of their time helping students and preparing to excel in the classroom, which undermines their research productivity and thereby imperils their careers! Other examples of conflicting signals might include:

Organizations that encourage employees to work at home but give telecommuters or people on reduced-load work arrangements the least attractive assignments and lower performance ratings.

Organizations that communicate a merit-focused career culture internally but incentivize hires from elite institutions with fast-tracked career paths.

What Organizations Can Do

Although we have focused our recommendations thus far on job candidates and employees, there are some clear implications for action at the organizational level. Perhaps one of the most obvious implications is for organizations to consider being more strategic and consistent with career signals so as to avoid the adverse potential consequences of mixed signals (e.g., confused, frustrated, and/or resentful employees).

Managers might usefully strive to identify competing signals and work toward aligning career signals, consistent with the mission and values of the organization. For example, professional service firms often send mixed signals between an apprenticeship and meritocratic culture—new hires are given the promise that they will be developed and mentored to be partners, but in actuality, only a few are eventually selected and promoted. Given that professional firms have thrived for decades sending such mixed signals, human resource leaders within them might strive to mitigate potentially adverse effects on individuals by helping them to understand and navigate the apparently incongruent messages they receive.

The diagnostic tools that we have suggested for employees could also be used by senior leaders and HR practitioners to identify how they perceive the organization's career culture and career signals. Organizations can also make good use of an array of new media communication tools to provide clear and consistent signals of a career culture, aligned with the organization's priorities. The benefits of doing so may be not only internal, by fostering employee commitment, but also external, by attracting potential hires with whom the organization's career culture resonates.

Organizational leaders could use the model and tools we have provided to be clearer about what *career culture* they think their organization should have. Then they could conduct a gap analysis to see where the biggest deficiencies are between the desired and the actual career culture. Next they could engage employees in all parts of the organization to identify action steps to make any desired changes in the career culture and culture-related practices. As we know from recent work by David Sikora, Gerald Ferris, and Chad Van Iddekinge, there is movement in a lot of organizations' HR systems to create development processes that are less punitive and more supportive of a learning goal orientation. Sikora and colleagues also found that line managers' human resources competency and political skills were critical factors in how they interpreted the company's career culture and approached career and performance management work with their employees. This suggests that work on career culture and career signals could be a fruitful area of training and development for managers.

CONCLUSIONS

In his classic article on *Managing Oneself*, Peter Drucker, notes that beyond the value of self-awareness and building on one's strengths, a capacity for "*knowing where one*

belongs makes ordinary people...into outstanding performers.'' The capacity of knowing where one belongs builds on a foundation of self-awareness but also requires an ability to diagnose organizational cultures. In this paper, we have focused on the latter and how this understanding can be developed through an informed awareness and attunement to organizational signals. We recommend considering how these signals are congruent or dissonant with individual career preferences. A strong alignment between career signals in an organization, and between organizational signals and personal orientations, would be most conducive for higher levels of career development and success. In contrast, mixed career signals can engender unnecessary psychological ambivalence, with an adverse effect on career motivation and behavior.

If an organization wants to have an engaged, empowered, and high performing work force, *consistency* in career signals can help achieve that objective. Consistency should be informed by clarity about the organization's career culture and an alignment of career messages and practices, to signal a clear path toward employee career success within that culture. As Drucker noted, *culture eats strategy for breakfast*. A well-aligned career culture can go a long way in ensuring that an organization's talent strategy and its best resources — motivated employees — are empowered (and not devoured) by the organization's career culture.

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