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# Corporate culture: its value as a resource for competitive advantage

Andrew Klein

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## 1. Introduction

This research looks at how firm leaders can manage their business strategy while simultaneously developing appropriate corporate cultures, all the while acquiring knowledge on how corporate culture and performance are related. An appropriate alignment of strategy and culture can help firms create value and generate revenues. It can also lead to motivated and committed employees and high-performance work teams (Klein, 2003).

Organizations are sets of critical resources that enable them to compete (Barney, 1991). Within this framework, performance differences across firms can be attributed to variations in their capabilities and resources, which include corporate culture. If an organization's resources are VRIO (i.e. Valuable, Rare, difficult to Imitate, and Organization-wide), they can provide the basis for sustainable competitive advantage. Competitive advantage, in turn, should promote effectiveness and generate above-average returns for the firm.

However, organizational contingency theories and strategic choice models (Child, 1972), posit that resources and type of strategy interact to produce results. Pfeffer notes, for example: "The conventional wisdom, taught in numerous human resource courses in business schools and frequently stated in articles, holds that management practices need to be contingent on the firm's particular product strategy" (Pfeffer, 1998, p. 56). Following this conventional wisdom, organizations employ both tangible resources, such as financial and physical assets, and intangible resources, such as human resources and corporate culture, in the formulation and implementation of their generic strategic type (Porter, 1985; Miles and Snow, 1978). Intangible are more likely than tangible resources to yield a competitive advantage because they tend to have VRIO characteristics – they are valuable, rare and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1986; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). Socially complex resources such as corporate culture are unique. Thus, managers can tailor their practices and create a corporate culture that complements their chosen generic strategy. Though not necessarily endorsing this approach, Pfeffer summarizes the position as follows: "Firms pursuing a 'high-road' strategy based on service, quality, or product differentiation need to follow high involvement or high commitment sets of management practices; those firms pursuing a strategy based on cost-minimization should pursue a more control-oriented, Taylor-istic strategy" (Pfeffer, 1998, p. 56).

This research paper explores the issue of "fit" between strategy and culture, especially considering the feasibility of specifying and measuring culture so that it can be examined alongside business strategy. The research asks if there is a type of corporate culture that is VRIO across organizations, or if it depends on the type of business strategy deployed. Managers are expected to lead their corporate cultures and are justifiably perplexed as to how to proceed with this difficult to manage but important concept. I hope this paper can shed some light on the topic.

**“This unique feature of culture is what is inimitable, such that one firm cannot copy all the dimensions of another’s culture. You can’t reverse engineer a corporation culture like you can an i-Pod.”**

## 2. Research question

If a firm’s culture can be considered a VRIO resource, what type of culture would be appropriate for alternative business strategies, or is there an optimal corporate culture type regardless of the generic business strategy chosen by the firm?

This question contrasts a classic “contingency perspective”, i.e. the culture depends on the “fit” with the type of strategy deployed, with a “universalistic” approach, which argues that there are certain types of corporate culture which are superior regardless of the type of strategy pursued.

## 3. The research process and research model

The problem explored in this article asks if business strategy and organizational culture interact in a systematic way. To analyze this issue, I collected data (see section 4) that examined the specific alignment between strategy and culture on the basis of shared features, including coping with environmental uncertainty. The level of uncertainty in the firm’s environment should partially shape a firm’s strategy (Govindarajan, 1988; Miles and Snow, 1978). Similarly, the type of culture a firm possesses is one of the resources available to help it cope with uncertainty in terms of environmental change and complexity (Kotter and Heskett, 1992).

Past research (Miles and Snow, 1978, 1984) concluded that firms with prospector strategies tended to face a more unpredictable environment than those with defender strategies. Govindarajan (1988) suggests that the same relationship exists for Porter’s model; firms with differentiation strategies tend to operate in less certain environments than low-cost competitors, with the source of uncertainty arising from complexity and uncertainty.

Following Kotter and Heskett’s (1992) seminal study of corporate culture and performance, adaptive cultures are more appropriate not only for dealing with uncertain environments but, by extension, also for implementing the prospector/differentiation strategies that tend to be adopted in uncertain environments. Unadaptive cultures, with behavioral norms supporting control and consistency, are more likely to be accepted in organizations facing relatively simple and stable environments and adopting low-cost or defender strategies.

I collected data for secondary analysis from over 2,600 ( $n = 2,662$ ) members of more than 300 ( $n = 311$ ) organizations. The sample included organizations from a broad spectrum of industry groups, in both the manufacturing and service sectors, ranging in size from sole proprietorships with a few employees to major corporations with tens of thousands of employees. The surveys collected data on the operating cultures of the units within which they worked and examined the determinants and outcomes of the cultures in question, and separately established the types of generic business strategies adopted by their organizations.

## 4. Measures

The Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI), which assesses culture in terms of 12 behavioral norms clustering into three factors, was used to measure operating culture. The three clusters are:

1. constructive;
2. passive-defensive; and
3. aggressive-defensive.

The inventory includes 120 items, ten associated with each of the 12 behavioral norms. The validity and reliability of the scales are well established, having been assessed and reported in a number of studies and journal articles (Cooke and Szumal, 1993, 2000; Klein, 2003; see the Appendix for a description of the 12 styles and three factors of the OCI).

I created a separate "Executive Manager Interview" questionnaire for follow up with senior managers of the subject work units. This was used to measure business strategy along three primary dimensions:

1. differentiation versus cost leadership strategy;
2. product service range; and
3. new product introduction.

The items and scales are available from the author.

## 5. Underlying theories: firm resources and competitive advantage

Barney (1991) proposed that a valid approach to understanding competitive advantage is to examine them as either weaknesses or strengths, and then apply the classification to the firm's opportunities. This "resource-based view" extends the traditional external focus on opportunities and threats, or the "environmental view." Barney (1991) suggests that resources can offer an organization a competitive advantage if the resources are helpful in confronting environmental threats, are also rare in the competitive marketplace, and cannot be easily imitated or substituted for by competitors (VRIO). I have attempted to apply this conceptual framework to analyzing corporate culture as a critical resource. This general VRIO approach to firm resources can also be extended to other human resource management practices and activities in the firm.

## 6. Generic business strategies and organizational culture

It is a fundamental characteristic of anthropology that all cultures are to some extent unique. This unique feature of culture is what is inimitable, such that one firm cannot copy all the dimensions of another's culture. You can't reverse engineer a corporation culture like you can an i-Pod.

Based on their assessment of competitive opportunities and internal resources, firms select so-called generic business strategies in order to compete. Porter's (1985) model suggests that firms may adopt a generic strategy of being a low-cost competitor or a differentiator, while Miles and Snow's (1978) framework offers prospectors or defenders as their corresponding generic strategies. Both models propose "middle-path" alternatives, plus situations where firms fail to select a clear strategy at all.

These generic business models imply that there are optimal ways for firms to compete in their environment given their internal characteristics. The generic strategic types comprise the basic business strategy with which a firm chooses to compete in a given product market.

**"Managers are expected to lead their corporate cultures and are justifiably perplexed as to how to proceed with this difficult to manage but important concept."**

**“... the cliché ‘culture eats strategy for lunch’ seems to have some support.”**

By combining the external and internal perspectives, we are able to see how external forces shape strategic choices.

In the context of strategic choice, a firm's culture can be considered valuable if it rewards risk taking and creativity and is in an industry where it is important to be an innovator and new product developer. For example, Sony, 3M, Motorola, and Apple compete in an arena where innovation is a primary key to survival, and the firms would be served by developing corporate cultures with behavioral norms that encourage innovation (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). If the firms combine the right innovative behavioral norms with technological skills, they should be adept at responding to new environmental opportunities; In this sense, then, their cultures (behavioral norms that encourage innovation), would count as “valuable” strategic resources.

In recent decades we have witnessed numerous examples of firms in similar industries with wildly disparate results. Where Apple thrived, Sony floundered. Where Nucor and Wal-Mart prospered, USX and Sears struggled to survive. The resource-based view would argue that these low-performing firms (Sony, USX, Sears) possessed strong, tradition-bound cultures that prevented them from recognizing and exploiting new opportunities in their industries. Their successful competitors (Apple, Nucor, Wal-Mart) were able to foster lean, flexible and entrepreneurial cultures that recognized and implemented new strategies.

In determining the relative value of an organization's culture as an internal resource, it is necessary to link the firm's internal resources and capabilities with its external opportunities and threats. Thus, organizational resources are most valuable when they help us exploit external opportunities and neutralize threats. By combining the generic business strategy model with the resource-based view, we can examine a resource such as culture in terms of its potential strategic value. From a practical perspective, the results could help firms isolate potential opportunities and threats that can be exploited by leveraging the characteristics of a valuable resource. This is partly due to the fact that cultures are, as mentioned above, socially complex internal phenomena that are difficult to imitate, and thus somewhat unique. Socially complex assets include non-patentable resources such as reputation, trust, teamwork, collaboration, and friendship. These dimensions are hard to duplicate and managers could potentially benefit from new approaches that help them to create appropriate cultures, ones that can function as a powerful and enabling capability to exploit environmental opportunities and threats (Barney, 1986).

## **7. Strategy and culture: contingency perspective versus universalistic perspective**

This research enables us to examine how different types of business strategy are associated with distinct corporate cultures types. As noted, the basic premise underlying the contingency view of organizations is that firms embracing a particular type of strategy require cultural norms that are different from those required by organizations adopting alternative types of strategies (Joyce and Slocum, 1990; Delery and Doty, 1996). Contingency means “it all depends,” which requires a “fit” between the dimensions under consideration. In the contingency perspective managers would act according to the prescription that organizations that achieve congruence or fit between their culture type and strategy type would out-perform firms that do not (Arthur, 1994). In this case, managers would create or modify systems and structures to install and reinforce the kind of culture needed to effectively implement the type of strategy selected.

Managerial initiatives in this direction would be based on the kinds of interpersonal relationships and task-related behaviors required by a given strategy. For example,

Hewlett-Packard, which pursues a “prospector/differentiation” strategy, might consciously develop a culture which emphasizes risk-taking, individuality, and innovation. In contrast, Emerson Electric, which competes on the basis of low cost, might pursue a “defender/low-cost” strategy and pursue a culture that emphasizes frugality, attention to detail, and discipline (Miles *et al.*, 1993). In each of these cases, based on the contingency model, the corporate cultures would need to be consistent with and support the choice of strategy.

The methodology for aligning strategy type and culture would involve:

- diagnosing the current operating culture;
- comparing the cultural behavioral norms and expectations to the tasks and leadership style required of managers in order to implement the strategy type; and
- developing organizational approaches to respond to incompatible features in the strategy-culture relationship.

This methodology and the resulting linkages should, in theory, result in a desirable match between culture and strategy type (Badovick and Beatty, 1987).

An alternative to the above-cited contingency approach is the “universalistic” approach, which proposes that there are certain types of cultures that are generally superior, regardless of the generic strategy pursued by the firm. The basic distinction between contingency and universalistic perspectives has remained a valid topic of discussion and debate in the management field for some time.

## 8. Results, discussion and application of the framework

This research focused on organizational culture and firm performance in consideration of the types of strategies adopted by organizations. Two potentially competing theoretical perspectives were considered in designing the study; universalistic approaches, which posit that adaptive/constructive cultures are optimal regardless of the strategy used by the organization), and strategic management theories (which contend that different types of culture are appropriate for different types of strategies.) The research design enabled me to explore the relationship between culture and firm effectiveness based on the type of business strategy employed by the firm. This enabled me to reach conclusions about whether different types of cultures are appropriate and strongly related to outcomes in the context of different types of strategies, or whether a single culture type would be optimal regardless of strategy.

The research data were analyzed statistically and I am summarizing the results here. The research focus was on strategy moderating the relationship between culture and firm outcomes, such as product quality. The results indicated that the type of generic strategy was not as important a factor in explaining the relationship between strategy and outcomes, as was the type of culture deployed. Constructive cultural norms (see the Appendix for a description of cultural types) appear to be positively related to quality, and defensive norms negatively related to quality, regardless of the type of strategy adopted.

Overall, this research produced some noteworthy findings that support the general proposition that first, “culture matters”, and that the cliché “culture eats strategy for lunch” seems to have some support. This would argue that organizations would be advised to manage their cultures as a strategic resource by establishing flexible, adaptive, constructive cultural norms regardless of the type of strategy being implemented. Thus, constructive cultures are not only suitable for firms with differentiation/prospector strategies, they tend to outperform Defensive cultures even with firms pursuing low cost/defender strategies.

This suggests that, to become a high-performance organization firm leadership needs to, first, understand their business and industry and apply this knowledge to developing an appropriate strategy and, second, create an adaptive, Constructive culture, all the better to implement whichever strategy type is pursued.

## 9. Study limitations and future research

The management field is still at odds in terms of how organizational culture plays out in helping organizations respond to market signals, create organizational unity, and executes strategy. My research results suggest that culture is created and disseminated through multiple mechanisms, including job design, leadership styles, human resource practices, the distribution of power, and other determinants. These findings suggest that culture management has high-impact potential and that managers need to understand how to manage culture, given that certain cultural norms may be either functional or dysfunctional regardless of the firm's strategy.

The study's findings seem to provide more evidence supporting universalistic theories, which argues that there are certain practices, principles and programs that are preferable when it comes to managing people and organizations (Pfeffer, 1998). This research was not intended to resolve the contingency versus universalistic debate *per se*, but instead sought a middle ground between the two. The approach taken here assumed that there is a core of universals (Constructive Versus Defensive Cultural Styles) that combine with situational contingencies (e.g. differentiation versus low-cost strategy) to influence work and organizational outcomes to varying degrees. Both theories seem to combine in practice instead of compete with one another.

One of the obvious limitations of this research has to do with the nature of the outcomes selected as the criterion variables: they are behavioral, not economic or financial. The data on revenue growth were available for only a small sub-set of the sample and were not sufficiently robust to include in the outcomes. Thus, I was not able to measure financial or economic outcomes, only perceptual and behavioral.

### Keywords:

Organizational culture,  
Management strategy,  
Resource management

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## Appendix. The 12 organization culture styles, as measured by the Organizational Culture Inventory

### Constructive norms

Constructive cultures, in which members are encouraged to interact with others and approach tasks in ways that will help them meet their higher order *satisfaction* needs, are characterized by achievement, self-actualizing, humanistic-encouraging, and affiliative norms.

*Achievement.* An achievement culture characterizes organizations that do things well and value members who set and accomplish their own goals. Members are expected to set challenging but realistic goals, establish plans to reach these goals, and pursue them with enthusiasm (pursuing a standard of excellence).

*Self-actualizing.* A self-actualizing culture characterizes organizations that value creativity, quality over quantity, and both task accomplishment and individual growth. Members are encouraged to gain enjoyment from their work, develop themselves, and take on new and interesting activities (thinking in unique and independent ways).

*Humanistic-encouraging.* A humanistic-encouraging culture characterizes organizations that are managed in a participating and person-centered way. Members are expected to be supportive, constructive, and open to influence in their dealings with one another (helping others to grow and develop).

*Affiliative.* An affiliative culture characterizes organizations that place a high priority on constructive interpersonal relationships. Members are expected to be friendly, open, and sensitive to the satisfaction of their workgroup (dealing with others in a friendly way).

### Passive/defensive norms

Passive-defensive cultures, in which members believe they must interact with *people* in ways that will not threaten their own *security*, are characterized by approval, conventional, dependent, and avoidance norms.



*Approval.* An approval culture describes organizations in which conflicts are avoided and interpersonal relationships are pleasant – at least superficially. Members feel that they should agree with, gain the approval of, and be liked by others (“going along” with others).

*Conventional.* A conventional culture is descriptive of organizations that are conservative, traditional, and bureaucratically controlled. Members are expected to conform, follow the rules, and make a good impression (always following policies and practices).

*Dependent.* A dependent culture is descriptive of organizations that are hierarchically controlled and non-participative. Centralized decision making in such organizations leads members to do only what they are told and to clear all decisions with superiors (pleasing those in positions of authority).

*Avoidance.* An avoidance culture characterizes organizations that fail to reward success but nevertheless punish mistakes. This negative reward system leads members to shift responsibilities to others and avoid any possibility of being blamed for a mistake (waiting for others to act first).

### *Aggressive/defensive norms*

Aggressive-defensive cultures, in which members are expected to approach *tasks* in forceful ways to protect their status and *security*, are characterized by “oppositional, power, competitive, and perfectionistic norms” (Cooke and Szumal, 1993, p. 1302).

*Oppositional.* An oppositional culture describes organizations in which confrontation and negativism are rewarded. Members gain status and influence by being critical and thus are reinforced to oppose the ideas of others (pointing out flaws).

*Power.* A power culture is descriptive of non-participative organizations structured on the basis of the authority inherent in members' positions. Members believe they will be rewarded for taking charge, controlling subordinates and, at the same time, being responsive to the demands of superiors (building up one's power base).

*Competitive.* A competitive culture is one in which winning is valued and members are rewarded for outperforming one another. Members operate in a “win-lose” framework and believe they must work against (rather than with) their peers to be noticed (turning the job into a contest).

*Perfectionistic.* A perfectionistic culture characterizes organizations in which perfectionism, persistence, and hard work are valued. Members feel they must avoid any mistake, keep track of everything, and work long hours to attain narrowly defined objectives (doing things perfectly).

(Sources: Cooke and Lafferty (1983, 1986, 1987). © 1987 by Human Synergistics, Inc. Adapted by permission.)

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