

Rethinking “Square Pegs in Square Holes” : Exploring the Impact of Job Fit and Culture Fit on Performance

While there has long been concern about “pigeon-holing” and “stereotyping” people, current I/O Psychology research is discovering (or rediscovering) the value of “good fit” or “square pegs in square holes.” This approach which was well developed in the 1930-1950 in Industrial Psychology research and practice fell out of favor as the nature of work changed in industrialized countries. As work became less about making and moving goods and more about service and knowledge work, it became more difficult to see how measuring a person’s personality characteristics would help “fit” them to a work process. What seemed quite clear about job analysis when dealing with staffing manufacturing lines and production processes became fuzzy when considering work that often did not produce tangible output. Simultaneously, there were diverse cultural concerns that contributed to the disfavor with “square peg” approaches. However, contemporary I/O psychology research and practice indicates that it may be time to reconsider the square peg approach and develop methods to apply it to knowledge and service work. Organizations are beginning to discover significant benefit in improved job performance and improved subjective well-being as demonstrated by employee engagement and retention when “job fit” and “organization fit” are considered.

Job Fit: Job Fit leads to finding work that is naturally self-renewing and energizing. When our job requires us to use behavior that is very different than our natural style or personality characteristics it costs us energy to adapt our behavior and responses to the different requirements. When that cost is excessive, it may become difficult to replenish our energy given the demands of a busy life. On the other hand, when we have a good job fit, our job allows us to use our natural style in the fulfillment of our daily work activities so we are not spending energy adapting to different behavioral requirement but are able to spend more time in a “flow” state which replenishes energy and sustains performance.

Organizational Fit: The same energy equation is true with organizational or cultural fit. The degree to which our natural style or personality characteristics are a good fit with the cultural expectation for behavior is the degree to which we are likely to feel comfortable and sustained by the environment. When the organizational environment or culture requires behavior different than our natural style, the energy cost may be great.

Achieving world-class performance: The Gallup Organization has been researching the factors that are necessary to produce world class results at the level of individual performance. In their research, they have discovered that job fit is essential to world class performance. In other words, to generate world class performance an individual has to have naturally the occurring strengths or talents that are required for performance in that position. If someone does not have the naturally occurring strengths or talents, they may be able to generate “good enough” performance with adequate training, coaching and effort but not world class performance. This is likely to occur because the energy cost for adapting to situations that are not a fit to our natural style, strengths or talents does not leave sufficient energy to sustain consistent performance at a world class level.

Why job and cultural fit are critically important in knowledge and service work: When the measurement of performance is difficult due to the intangible nature of the work, it becomes even more essential to have employees who are “engaged”. The difference between a phone call that is handled adequately (call time, etc.) and a delightful customer experience may mean the difference between a lost and a retained customer experience. Yet, it is difficult to measure the “intangible factor” that contributes to the difference in

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performance because the difference comes from the employee’s willingness to perform at a world class level simply because it please them to do so—because it is a “good fit” and naturally self-renewing.

An Energy Model of Individual and Organizational Performance Management

When we look at the changing conditions of work: the nature of work has changed from production of goods to service and knowledge work, flattened organizations, increased time demands, work-family life balance, universal access to information, full employment, and job mobility, we see that we need to rethink our approach to job and organization fit.

If we look at human systems as energy systems, we can begin to identify the best uses of energy in applied practice. In a simple four-vector system, we can also identify four major areas of energy drain or nonproductive use of energy. The primary consumer of energy that is non productive (does not lead to the results we desire) is conflict. We can look at these four areas and identify sources of conflict.

1. Me versus Me Conflict: Intra-personal
2. Me versus You Conflict: Inter-personal
3. Me versus the Job: Personal-job conflict
4. Me versus the Organization: Personal-organizational conflict.

We’ve spent a lot of time in training and development dealing with issues in the first two categories, intra-persona and inter-personal. Now, we are beginning to develop applied practices to address the second two categories by developing methodologies for assessing job fit and organizational fit.

As we think about the consequences of these categories of conflict, we may need to rethink our approach to training people to adapt their behavior to situational or role requirements by “stretching” and “redirecting”. This approach, in support of egalitarian values was created in the spirit of “all people can do all things”. A bigger question now might be that while everyone probably can do everything, *should they?* Is it the best use of their energy and talents?

Questions that may be more relevant to a new understanding of Job Fit are:

- How much energy does it cost to adapt?
- When is how much too much?
- If World class performance requires a Good Fit between the role/job requirements and the person’s natural style so that all the person’s energy resources are directed toward the performance outcome, then what level of performance do we get from adapting?
 - If there is a Good Fit, then all of the energy resources are directed toward the desired behavior resulting in higher levels of performance.
 - If someone is “stretching” and “redirecting” to meet the needs of the role, then they have less energy available to use in the role than someone who has a good fit.

And, then, there is an even more critical question about the sustainability of self-reinforcing, natural behavior versus self-depleting, adaptive behavior.

- What is the cost and depletion when a role expectation is 180 degrees from a person’s psychological home (natural style)?

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- If that is the case, will the role behavior rewarding in itself or does it require higher-level motivation?
- How can people replenish their energy resources given the pace and complexity of our lives?

Energy Cost Calculations

There are some important questions to consider when asking for a change in behavior:

- What is the potential energy cost of the behavior change we are asking a person to make?
- Can we assess how much of a displacement the new behavior will be from their natural behavior (psychological home) in the situation?
- What is the range of motion possible before the energy cost is noticeable? (Most people can comfortably handle about a 70 degree range of motion although they often think they can handle as much as 180 degrees)
- How can people replace the energy consumed in adapting when the demands on their time are excessive?

Relationship Accounting

Many people have observed that in our relationships we are either depositing in the account or withdrawing based on our behavioral transactions. This approach to Earning and Losing Points also can be used to asking important questions in relationship accounting or the maintenance of relationship well-being:

- Did my behavior result in making a deposit in my relationship?
- Did my behavioral response make a withdrawal?
- Are my behavioral responses earning interest or adding value in the relationship?
- Is the return I receiving in the relationship worth the investment of energy in adapting my behavior?
- Am I maintaining a minimum balance with my behavioral responses?
- What’s the equity in this relationship?
- What is my overdraft allowance—how much behavioral dissonance might be allowed before the relationship is ruptured?
- What’s my credit rating in my relationships? If damaged, what will be necessary to reestablish credit (credibility and trust)?

Building a Technology for Fit Assessment:

If we take a simple two dimensional personality model, we can begin to see how we can operationalize a technology for “fit management”. Let’s consider a 2400 year old model of personality or temperament that describes two dimensions and 360 degrees of behavioral expression that we can use as a compass to navigate this territory.

The first dimension (East-West) is Affiliation which defines the degree to which a person seeks to become either closely involved or separate from others. This dimension has two preferences: a preference to affiliate and a preference to detach. Someone who has preference to affiliate will be likely to:

- Be involved in doing things with others
- Talk, share, exchange ideas with others

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- Reveal, disclose, share information with others
- Seek approval from others
- Value getting along with others and belonging to a group

Someone who has a preference to detach is someone who is likely to:

- Create and maintain secure boundaries
- Create and maintain a separate identity
- Value personal space and privacy
- Value independence and autonomy
- Value being original and creative

The second dimension (North-South) in this model of behavior is Control which is defined as the degree to which someone seeks to become either the one who exercises control in the relationship or the one who adapts to the one in control. This dimension also has two preferences: a preference to control and a preference to adapt. Someone who has a preference for control is likely to be someone who:

- Assume responsibility for others, outcomes, results
- Set example for others
- Lead, guide, teach
- Advise, support, protect
- Encourage and direct others

Someone who has a preference for adapt is likely to:

- Trust and respect others
- Rely and depend upon others
- Seek direction and guidance from others
- Feel comfortable in adapting to others

These two dimensions combine to form 360 degrees of behavioral expression. We can see how these dimensions play out in intra-personal and interpersonal conflict and they are also significant in understanding job and organizational conflict.

Mapping Behavioral Preferences:

We can further define the map of this territory by adding some behavioral descriptors to the 360 degrees of the DISC-in-the-Round Map. Let's look at where a few observable behaviors fall:

- Outgoing
- Reserved
- Approachable
- Distant
- Accepting
- Questioning
- Competitive
- Cooperative
- Patient
- Demanding
- Private
- Sociable

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- Tactful
- Outspoken
- Serious
- Optimistic
- Peaceful
- Argumentative

Mapping Role Expectations

This same model can be used to understand Job Fit if we now place role behaviors on the DISC-in-the-Round Map. We can locate behaviors describing approaches to the following activities:

- Problem-solving
- Decision-making
- Communicating
- Delegating
- Motivating
- Coaching/counseling
- Managing Time
- Developing others
- Managing Stress
- Behavior in conflict situations

Mapping Observed Behavior

We can also apply this DISC-in-the-Round understanding to mapping observed behavior which has important implications and applications for performance management, coaching, team and leadership development

While everyone might use these each of these behaviors occasionally as a learned adaptive response, there are styles that are likely to perform a specific behavior more frequently because it is their natural response. This would be behaviors that are easy to do for the person to do and almost require no conscious thought because the behavior comes so naturally. The reason this is important is that it costs us energy to perform behaviors that are not natural for us, so we need a way to acknowledge this expenditure of energy in ourselves and others.

Earning and Losing Points

The concept of “getting points” has been introduced to acknowledge this energy expenditure. In other words, when I use behavior that is quite natural for my style, I don’t get any points—I’m just doing what comes naturally. However, if I am using behavior that not only is not naturally occurring but is quite different (180 degrees away) from my natural response, then I get points A great example of this in my case is when I’m showing “patience” because that is not a behavior that comes easily for someone with my style. However, after years of negative consequences for displaying impatience and a lot of learned adaptive behavior, I can display patience in many situations, but it costs me a lot of energy to do so! For someone else, patience may be much closer to their natural response, so they don’t get any “points” for doing what comes naturally.

When we have in ways that are natural to us we get *no points* for our behavior. When we behave in ways that are very different than our natural approach we should get *extra points*.

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When we use our natural behavior and the situation or role requires something different we *lose points*.

We judge other people’s behavior incorrectly when we don’t know where they are “coming from” on the Map. This is because we cannot determine how far the observed behavior is from their natural response.

In order to implement the “earning points” practice, we need to know where behavior occurs on the DISC-in-the-Round Map so we know which is a natural response and what is an adaptive response and how much energy the adaptive response might be costing.

Also, each behavior can be a strength or a limitation depending on the needs of the situation and how the behavior is used. By exploring the behaviors on the whole DISC-in-the-Round Map, we can develop clearer statements of behavioral expectations in performance discussions. We can contrast several different responses for the same activity, such as problem solving or delegating.

