

## Communicating Your Organization's Culture to Job Candidates

By Commongood Careers

In our daily conversations with nonprofit hiring managers, we constantly hear how cultural fit is one of the most important criteria for hiring. A challenge for some nonprofits, however, is communicating organizational culture in every stage of the hiring process. Can a hiring process genuinely reflect an organization's distinct personality and values? The answer is yes, provided the organization is aware of its organizational culture and makes an intentional effort to demonstrate the various attributes of its culture to job candidates.

### Attributes of Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is characterized by the attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values of an entire organization. In the social sector, an organization's culture is closely tied to its mission and programs.

The attributes of an organization's culture can be **tangible**, such as dress code, or **intangible**, such as shared values. When trying to describe your organization's culture, think about the following questions:

- **Mission connect** – How important is it that all staff are highly committed to the organization's mission? How do individual staff members contribute to the advancement of the mission?
- **Leadership/management styles** - How are staff managed? Is leadership a core value of the organization? How are decisions made and problems solved? Is the process collaborative or individual?
- **Reporting structure** – What does your organization chart look like? Is your organization hierarchical or flat?
- **Language and communication** - Is there internal language or terms used and understood by staff? Are there specific terms or key messages used in external communication? How would you describe your organization's communication style?
- **Physical work environment** - Does your organization have offices, cubicles, or open workspaces? Are there common areas like reception, a kitchen, or a lunch room?
- **Staff Diversity** - Is diversity of backgrounds, experiences, or beliefs important to your organization? Is it essential that staff share racial, ethnic, or economic backgrounds with the communities your organization serves?
- **Interpersonal dynamics** - How do staff interact? Is the environment highly structured, intense, impersonal, or collegial?
- **Titles** - Are staff titles important and meaningful? How do titles affect how staff perceive their own role and others' roles?
- **Traditions and celebrations** – How does your organization acknowledge personal successes and other milestones? What social rituals are institutionalized across the organization?
- **Work pace** - Do staff work at a fast, moderate, or leisurely pace? How would you describe the work/life balance for staff?

It is important to think through the various attributes of your organization's culture before launching your search. To find examples of how cultural aspects are demonstrated, look to existing materials, such as annual reports, grants, and marketing collateral. Speak with staff across the organization and probe on their opinions about the attributes listed above. Observe the physical and interpersonal environments. Most importantly, look to how your organization's mission and values are translated across the overall culture.

### Communicating Your Organization's Culture

Communicating aspects of your organization's culture begins well before you meet a candidate in person or they observe the organization firsthand. There are opportunities to share information about your organization's culture at every stage of the hiring process. For example:

When developing a job announcement/posting:

- Include your full mission statement in the introduction or footer.
- Offer an explicit description of the organization's culture and/or values, such as, "We work in a collaborative, team-based environment. There are no private office walls at our organization and camaraderie is a value shared amongst all staff."
- When listing job requirements, use language that mirrors specific values such as "Collaborate with..." or "Produce results on..."
- When listing candidate qualifications, include specific values you are seeking, such as "entrepreneurial" or "flexible."
- If being results-oriented is an important aspect of your organization's culture, share statistics of program successes or other results.
- If diversity is an attribute of your organization's culture, make sure that is communicated throughout the job posting. At the very least, include your organization's "equal opportunity employer" statement on the job posting.
- When posting the position, choose channels that reflect your organization's culture whenever possible.

When interviewing candidates:

- Use a manner of outreach that reflects the organization's communication style. Some organizations use formal language in emails and some organizations use less formal language; maintain the appropriate style for your organization.
- Reflect your organization's culture in your office décor, particularly the reception or waiting area. Display photos, annual reports, constituent artwork, or other collateral materials for candidates to peruse while waiting.
- Conduct the interview at the location where the new hire will work, such as in the office headquarters, field office, or program sites.
- Probe on candidates' fit with your organization's values in interview and follow-up questions, but be careful not to "lead" candidates. For example, to probe on the value of teamwork, inquire about their past experience working in collaborative environments, including asking about the challenges that they faced.
- Share candid information about work/life balance, work pace, and other realities of the work environment.
- Give or lend videos, marketing collateral, or other materials to candidates for them to take home.
- Practice what you preach! If you pride yourself on being a friendly organization, give candidates a warm welcome and introduce them to other staff. If your organization values multi-input decisions, have a variety of staff interview and weigh in on candidates.
- For organizational cultures that highly value results, share important organizational data, such as budgets, strategic plans, and outcome evaluations, with the candidate.

When conducting interview follow-up and extending offers:

- In the period following the interview, invite candidates to external events such as fundraisers, speaker panels, or other gatherings, if possible.
- If they haven't already done so, allow candidates to visit program sites or other places where your organization's services are delivered. Even for non-program roles, it can be very helpful for candidates to see programs in action in order to get a better grasp on organizational values and culture.
- When communicating regrets to candidates, make sure you do so in a way that reflects your organizational culture.

- For candidates still in consideration for the role, make sure they have multiple points of contact within an organization in case they have questions or want to follow-up.
- If candidates are returning to the office for additional interviews or meetings, schedule some informal time for the candidate to spend with other staff. At the very least, allow the candidate to meet his/her direct reports or peers if this didn't already occur.
- When making an offer, present the offer in a style that reflects the culture.
- After a candidate accepts an offer, provide information about any tangible attributes of the culture, such as dress code, rules for common areas, and other common policies. See Commongood Careers' [onboarding article](#) for best practices in this stage.

### **Case Study: Massachusetts Public School Performance**

For Massachusetts Public School Performance (MPSP), an educational nonprofit that helps school leaders use real-time data to improve instruction and increase student achievement, the ability to produce results sets the tone of its organizational culture.

"Our culture is results-driven," says Executive Director John Maycock. "The school clients place high performance demands on their students and expect to see results. We try to set the same expectations for our staff."

To communicate these attributes of its culture during the hiring process, MPSP starts with the job description. "When we write each job description, we make sure to clearly state the results-driven nature of our organization. This is the most important aspect of our culture for applicants to understand," says John.

In addition to focusing on results, John describes the organization's culture as "growth-oriented, team-driven, and non-hierarchical."

Each job description tries to convey the teamwork and non-hierarchical aspects of the culture by listing responsibilities such as "work on multi-functional teams across the entire organization" and "collaborate with all staff on projects."

During the interview stage, MPSP involves the entire team in the process. "It's important for everyone to get a sense of the candidate and vice versa," noted John.

The interview also includes direct questions posed to the candidate about their experience in results-oriented, deadline-driven environments. Candidates are asked to talk about scenarios that demonstrate their ability to handle multiple projects, meet deadlines, and deliver results. In turn, the interviewers try to be as transparent as possible about the results-oriented aspects of MPSP's culture; candidates are given access to growth plans, and challenges and success to date. "The interview process is not only about evaluating the position-specific and overall cultural fit of the candidate, but also helping the candidate understand as much about our organizational culture as possible," explains John.

In the period from extending an offer through onboarding the new hire, MPSP makes an effort to continue to make their organizational culture transparent and accessible. Top candidates are matched up with staff and encouraged to schedule informal conversations. When a new hire comes on board, they are given an outline of workplace expectations and are also integrated into the team from day one.

As John put it, "We expect our staff to be integrated into our results-driven and solution-oriented culture from the get-go. Making them feel part of the team helps to promote that organizational expectation of high performance and results, a quality which characterizes our entire culture, our clients, and the students we serve."

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