The Character of Organizations

Using Personality Type in Organization Development
by William Bridges
Davies-Black, 2000
158 pages

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Take-Aways
- Organizations differ in size, structure, purpose and character.
- Each organization has different characteristics that are suited to different purposes.
- The Organizational Character Inventory (OCI) establishes an organization's character.
- The OCI is based on four pairs of opposing tendencies adapted from Carl Jung's work as the individual Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator, but it is not adapted from the MBTI.
- The pairs of opposing tendencies are Extraversion/Introversion, Sensing/Intuition, Thinking/Feeling and Judging/Perceiving.
- Combining these dimensions allows you to identify 16 types of organizational character.
- They are expressed in 16 combinations, such as ESTJ, which stands for extraverted, sensing, thinking and judging.
- Different subdivisions of an organization have different character styles.

Rating
(10 is best)

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Review

The Character of Organizations
Organizations have their own personalities, as William Bridges demonstrates by applying the most popular personality test ever devised for humans to groups of people working together. Bridges developed the “Organizational Character Index” (OCI) from the ubiquitous Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator. While OCI thus far lacks the rigorous testing of hundreds of certified Myers-Briggs trainers, intuitively the model makes sense. Bridges provides a useful way of thinking about organizational styles and tries to understand the nature of departments within organizations. Abundant examples, lists and charts help illustrate the principles. getAbstract.com recommends this book to managers and human resource professionals seeking insight into the nuances of organizational development, provided that they are willing to spoon through a certain amount of alphabet soup. (Note: Though this book has a 2000 copyright date, with the exception of a new forward by Sandra Krebs Hirsh, it is a republication of a work written in about 1990.)

Abstract

What Is Organizational Character?
Organizations differ in size, structure, purpose and character. An organization’s character or personality is only partly comprised of the personalities of its people, as reflected on the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator (MBTI). Often, a distinction exists between the qualities of the people themselves and the way the organization expects them to be.

An organization is also made up of differences between the styles of various departments, such as the contrast between finance and human resources, regional sales and central marketing, or executives and middle managers. If you know about organizational character, you can better understand how different approaches will work with different organizations.

You can understand organizational character by comparing organizations to pieces of wood. Each one has a different grain, can take more or less pressure, and is varyingly soft and hard or light and heavy. Thus, some wood is more or less suited to a particular purpose, although each one is well fitted to some purpose. You might also think of character as an organization’s climate or personality. However you regard it, an organization’s character is what makes it distinctive; character makes an organization “feel and act like itself.”

The Organizational Character Inventory
The Organizational Character Inventory is the instrument that establishes the character of an organization, much like the MBTI describes an individual’s personality. However, unlike the MBTI, the OCI has not been validated through statistical measures. It uses the four pairs of opposing tendencies that Myers and Briggs adapted from the work of psychologist Carl Jung. Think of OCI as an experimental tool that can help you understand organizations. More specifically, the pairs of opposing tendencies in organizations are:

• Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I) – This is the way the organization is oriented toward reality and gets its energy. If it is extraverted, it is oriented outwardly toward...
markets, competition and regulations. If it is introverted, it is primarily oriented inwardly toward its own technology, culture or the dreams of its leader.

- **Sensing (S) or Intuition (N)** – This describes how the organization gathers and perceives information and what it pays the most attention to. A ‘sensing’ organization is primarily focused on the present and on the details and actuality of a situation. An ‘intuitive’ organization is more focused on the future, big picture or situational possibilities.

- **Thinking (T) or Feeling (F)** – This indicates the organization’s way of processing information, judging situations or deciding. A ‘thinking’ organization engages in these activities in a more impersonal way, based on principles such as consistency, competence and efficiency. A more ‘feeling’ organization engages in these activities in a more personal way, based on values such as individuality, creativity and the common good.

- **Judging (J) or Perceiving (P)** – This describes how the organization relates to the external world in using judging functions (thinking or feeling) or perceiving functions (sensing or intuition). A more ‘judging’ organization prefers to reach firm decisions, clearly define matters under consideration and seek closure on issues. A more ‘perceiving’ organization seeks more input, leaves things loose and keeps its options open.

To determine the character of your organization, you can use the OCI instrument in which you ask a series of 36 questions. Each one has a four-point scale in which you choose a range of applicability between two polar opposites. Afterwards, total up the scores on each of the four polar dimensions (E/I, S/N, T/F, J/P) to determine which characteristics are more common for your organization. Each result will be a four-letter combination (i.e. ESTJ for extraverted, sensing, thinking and judging), which describes your organization’s character.

**Applying OCI**

You can see how OCI works if you compare two organizations, such as UPS and Federal Express. They are both in the package shipping business. Yet their organizational characters are quite different. UPS has an introverted-sensing-thinking-judging (ISTJ) character, whereas Federal Express has an extraverted-intuitive-thinking-judging (ENTJ) character. This difference is reflected in the way UPS tends to look within – rather than to customers – when it establishes policies and procedures. In contrast, Federal Express tends to be much more customer-oriented in making its service decisions.

Differences also exist among any organization’s departments. For example, marketing is, by definition, very extraverted. People in marketing focus on customers and competitors, so they look outward for feedback and data when they have to make decisions. By contrast, people in accounting are very introverted, and look only within the organization.

Other differences occur among organizations performing similar functions, but for different types of customers. For instance, both a college and elementary school are involved in teaching, but they have very different students. As a result, a college tends to be more thinking oriented, an elementary school more feeling oriented.

Still another key factor shaping an organization’s character is its history and its leadership’s personal style. A founder can have a great influence when an organization is launched, though over time, other leaders will contribute to shaping the organization’s character.
The organization’s stage of life also has impact. In the beginning, an intuitive quality may inspire the organization with big-picture visioning. But as the organization gets larger, it needs people who pay more attention to detail, so a more sensing style is appropriate.

**Identifying the Character of an Organization**

While the OCI instrument can be helpful in identifying organizational characteristics, you can also perceive these qualities just by observing an organization. More specifically, you can characterize an organization along these dimensions by evaluating these factors:

- **Extraverted or introverted** – Extraverted organizations turn outside for guidance, have open boundaries, allow access to decision making, collaborate on decisions, act quickly, encourage interdepartmental cooperation and trust oral communications. By contrast, introverted organizations look within for guidance, have closed boundaries, prevent access to decision-making, reach consensus after deciding, suffer interdepartmental mistrust and trust written communications.

- **Sensing or intuitive** – Sensing organizations tend to be best with details, handle masses of data, like regular routines, prefer incremental change, emphasize targets and plans, and trust experience and authority. By contrast, intuitive organizations tend to be best with the big picture, are good at spotting emerging trends, are sometimes lackadaisical about routines, prefer transformational change, emphasize purposes and vision, and trust insight and creativity.

- **Thinking or feeling** – Thinking organizations tend to make principle-based decisions, think in terms of rules and exceptions, encourage criticism as a path toward efficiency and encourage employees to meet expectations. By contrast, feeling organizations tend to make value-based decisions, think in terms of particular human situations, feel support helps employees become more effective and encourages employees to do their best.

- **Judging or perceiving** – Judging organizations tend to push toward making decisions, set specific standards, define many things in detail, may be weak in gathering information and are often moralistic. By contrast, perceiving organizations tend to keep their options open and look for more information, set general standards, leave many things vague and undefined, may be weak in making decisions, and are loose and fairly tolerant.

**Organizational Character Types**

When you combine an organization’s primary characteristic on each of these four dimensions, you get 16 different organizational types. You can also use this procedure to determine the characteristics of a particular department or division, in your firm or in others. The 16 different organizational types are:

- The ESTJ organization – Extraverted, sensing, thinking and judging (such as many big manufacturing companies, like Kodak).
- The ESFJ organization – Extraverted, sensing, feeling and judging (such as many family owned companies, like Hallmark, or consumer product companies, like Proctor & Gamble).
- The ESTP organization – Extraverted, sensing, thinking and perceiving (such as a company that responds quickly, like Red Adair’s oil well firefighters).
- The ESFP organization – Extraverted, sensing, feeling and perceiving (such as a fashion-oriented company, like Mary Kay Cosmetics).
• The ENTJ organization – Extraverted, intuitive, thinking and judging (such as a very competitive, destiny-focused company, like Pepsi in its competition with Coca-Cola).
• The ENFJ organization – Extraverted, intuitive, feeling and judging (such as companies very concerned about customers, like Nordstrom).
• The ENFP organization – Extraverted, intuitive, feeling and perceiving (such as a trend-spotting organization like W.L. Gore, developers of GORE-TEX).
• The ENTP organization – Extraverted, intuitive, thinking and perceiving (such as a research and development organization, like the Palo Alto Research Center).
• The ISTJ organization – Introverted, sensing, thinking and judging (such as a very stable company, like Sears or General Motors).
• The ISFJ organization – Introverted, sensing, feeling and judging (this organization uses quiet decision-making, like a hospital, school or an insurance firm, like Met Life).
• The ISTP organization – Introverted, sensing, thinking and perceiving (such as a start-up organization or new product team).
• The ISFP organization – Introverted, sensing, feeling and perceiving (such as a group that promotes creativity and works best if it is part of a larger organization).
• The INTJ organization – Introverted, intuitive, thinking and judging (such as a systems-oriented, high tech company, like Lucent).
• The INFJ organization – Introverted, intuitive, feeling and judging (this organization encourages employee involvement, like Johnson & Johnson).
• The INFP organization – Introverted, intuitive, feeling and perceiving (this organization promotes individual empowerment and growth, like Apple Computer).
• The INTP organization – Introverted, intuitive, thinking and perceiving (this organization is especially concerned with systems and change, such as Polaroid).

You need to understand these basic dimensions and organizational types in order to apply the OCI model to organizations. Then you can use this to look at different issues, such as organizational growth and change over the organization's life cycle. This will help you understand how different organizations go through transitions. Then, too, this insight will help you look at the relationships among organizations with different characteristics and individuals with different personality types.

About The Author

William Bridges, Ph.D., principle of Williams Bridges & Associates, has been a leader in transition management since the 1980 publication of his best-seller Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes. Bridges and his company have provided assessment, training and consulting services to hundreds of organizations, including Amoco, AT&T, Intel and Motorola. His other books include Managing Transitions, JobShift and Creating You & Co.

Buzz-Words

Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator / Organizational character / Organizational character inventory / OCI / Personality type