



SOUNDZIPPER

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02.202 Organizational Processes
Case Study Report

Low En

James Raphael Tiovalen

Filbert Cia

Therese Lau

Cheah Siew Ru

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Introduction

This report covers the organizational processes adopted by Soundzipper. In summary, Soundzipper has a relatively flat hierarchy with a Product Line Structure, driven by culture through various physical artifacts and rituals established by the founder. While espousing freedom and responsibility as core values, Soundzipper is relatively founder-centric.

Our Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKEGSz87BSs>

Brief Summary of Organization

Company Background

Established in July 2011 by Adrian Lo (the CEO and Mission Director) Soundzipper's core business is providing end-to-end acoustics consultancy services, and brands itself as the "fine dining of sound".

The Team



Discussion

Espoused Strategy/Mission

Soundzipper's mission is to "make life sound better" - first espoused by Adrian, who gained a passion for acoustics when he dabbled in music after resigning from his previous job.

Analysis of Structure

Organizational Structure

Soundzipper adopts a flat, product line structure with a pyramid-like hierarchy.

Product Lines

Within each product line, there are sound engineers, acoustic designers, and a product manager with a marketing unit consisting of a technical salesperson and a business development manager on top of all product lines. However, employees often take up different functions within the product line, or the same function across the product lines.

Hierarchy

Soundzipper has a tiered, pyramid-like hierarchy, with its director at the top, followed by the managers of each product line and executives within each product line.

Alignment Mechanisms

One-to-One Meetings

Adrian conducts informal, biweekly one-to-one meetings with employees for casual conversation or to explain his perspective as a non-financial alignment mechanism.

Analysis of Culture

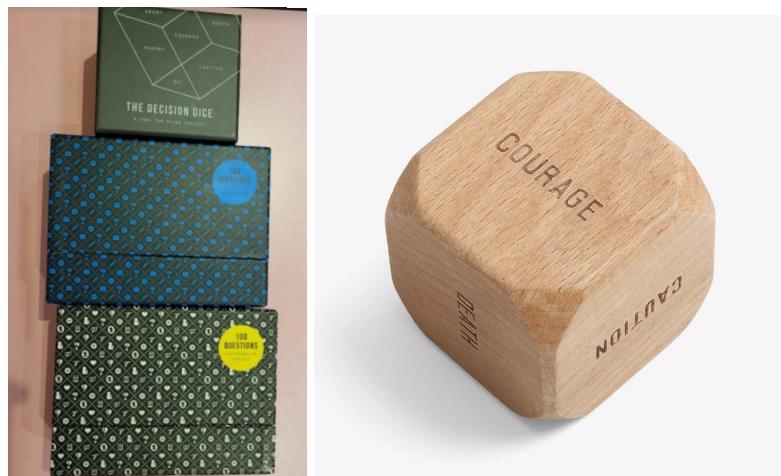
Soundzipper's culture is mainly influenced by its founder.

Espoused Values

Soundzipper's overarching values are Freedom and Responsibility - broken down into Trust, Friends, Fun, and Freedom (T3F). Adrian does attempt to provide significant autonomy and freedom to his employees. However, freedoms have been curtailed in rare instances whereby Adrian exerts his power to handle certain situations.

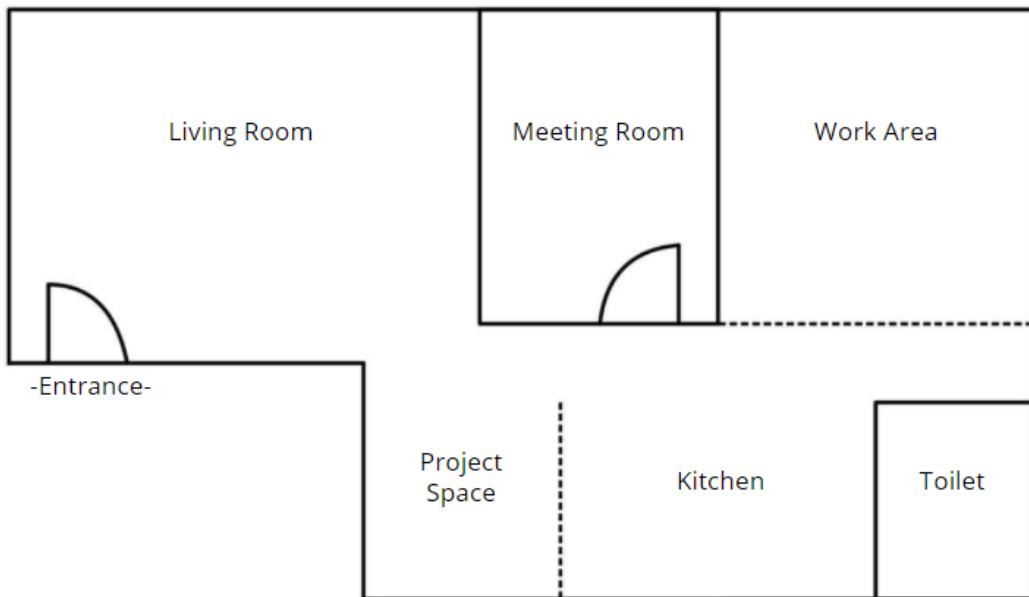
However, Freedom comes with Responsibility; some ex-employees were retrenched for being cultural, but not strategic, fits. The digital ecosystem implemented creates the expectation of contactability, reducing personal freedom.

Artefacts & Rewards



Adrian uses communication cards and an ideation dice to help elicit more honest conversations with employees, during discussions or feedback sessions (e.g. one-on-ones).

Office Layout



Broadly speaking, the office space creates a familial setting intended to facilitate honest communication and help employees feel more comfortable while at work. (Appendix A)

Conclusion of Our Cultural Analysis

From the artefacts identified, we can distill the assumptions Adrian has about creating an office's cultural ecology:

1. It is important that employees feel relaxed and comfortable in the office and around their co-workers.
 - a. Homely environment, beer and games in the office.
 - b. Having bi-weekly one-on-ones between employees and the CEO.
2. Employees should be friends - having close relationships and fun together.
 - a. Cohesion activities every last Friday of the month.
 - b. Espoused Values - Fun; Friends.
3. Happy employees who enjoy their work benefit the company the most.
 - a. Remote Wednesdays, allowing employees to work from home.
 - b. Assigning work based on employees interest, not the job scope of their position.

Analysis of Politics

Soundzipper has a moderately strong relational power between employees, albeit in an informal setting. Adrian's influence is prevalent, and can be felt at almost every level of the company.

Hierarchy

Despite the informal office setting and laid-back employee attitude compared to larger companies, power in Soundzipper is actually deceptively centralized, as despite the autonomy employees have in decision making, Adrian still has the power to take over a client project when things do not go according to plan, demonstrating the extent of his executive power.

Flow of Feedback

Bi-weekly anonymous pulse surveys are conducted to provide feedback to management, however, because Soundzipper is small, anonymous feedback can easily be traced through the tone of the text.

Extent of Alignment/Change to the 'New Normal'

While client projects decreased, Adrian claimed that COVID-19 "accelerated their culture" - no significant changes to the organizational model needed. Owing to government-mandated work-from-home policies, Adrian was able to implement his digital transformation workflow¹, again showcasing Adrian's extent of influence.

Comments/Opinions on Key Findings

Soundzipper is very founder-centric - the three lenses reinforce each other in pointing out that the company is mainly driven by the CEO.

In the strategic design lens, keeping the company small with high centralization and low formalization could be a deliberate decision to maintain absolute control. The constant influx and outflux of employees and the fact that Adrian's time in the company vastly exceeds everyone else's demonstrates that Adrian is actually comfortable with the current setup.

In the cultural lens, most of the physical artefacts and rituals were established by Adrian and they continue to be adapted and followed without much changes. Adrian

¹ This includes using software like Asana (progress checking and project management) and other Slack-linked applications

sustains these values and principles - they can be considered Adrian's culture, instead of the organization's culture.

And finally, in the political lens, power and politics within the company clearly revolve around its founder and CEO.

Conclusion

Soundzipper is a founder-driven organization with a flat hierarchy, product line structure and a concentrated culture, all heavily influenced by the founder's power within the company. There is clearly a high degree of personal investment and interest by Adrian in the company, since he is the main force pushing the entire organization forward. While Adrian claimed that the current company size is a perfect fit for Singapore, this may prove unsustainable. Ultimately, if Adrian leaves the company, it is almost guaranteed that Soundzipper would be shut down along with it; such is Adrian's centrality. He is the essence of the company. Soundzipper is a one-man organization, established by Adrian for Adrian.

References

Soundzipper Website: <https://soundzipper.com/>

Textbook M1-27 Mapping Your Organization Questionnaire

Textbook M2-72 Underlying Dimensions of Organizational Culture

Textbook M2-43 Stakeholder Mapping Tool

Appendix A - Office Layout Details

Living Room



The living room features a large screen with speakers, cozy warm lighting and a comfortable sofa. This setting further emphasizes that employees should see their colleagues as friends and having fun at work as well - two espoused values of Soundzipper. This encourages employees to feel and act in a company-benefitting way.

Meeting Room



The meeting room feels more serious, with its white lighting and hardtop furniture. The benches and low tables are atypical of normal conference-style rooms. The whiteboard with scribbles shows the collaborative space is used for brainstorming and idea-sharing.

This room is likely intended to be an open and safe space to debate different ideas, but having only one whiteboard is strange. The CEO makes it a point to get employees to share their feedback and opinion, making them feel valued and listened to, but at the end of the day, he wields the marker, ultimately deciding what gets written down.

Work Area



The most 'office-like' area of Soundzipper is the work area situated at the back. There is no clear divide between individual spaces, and the upkeep, such as having a random drill in the same space as an asymmetrical shelf full of documents, follows the boundaryless and informal environment of the office. This 'no doors, no locks' space shows the trust employees are expected to have in their co-workers, another espoused value of the company.

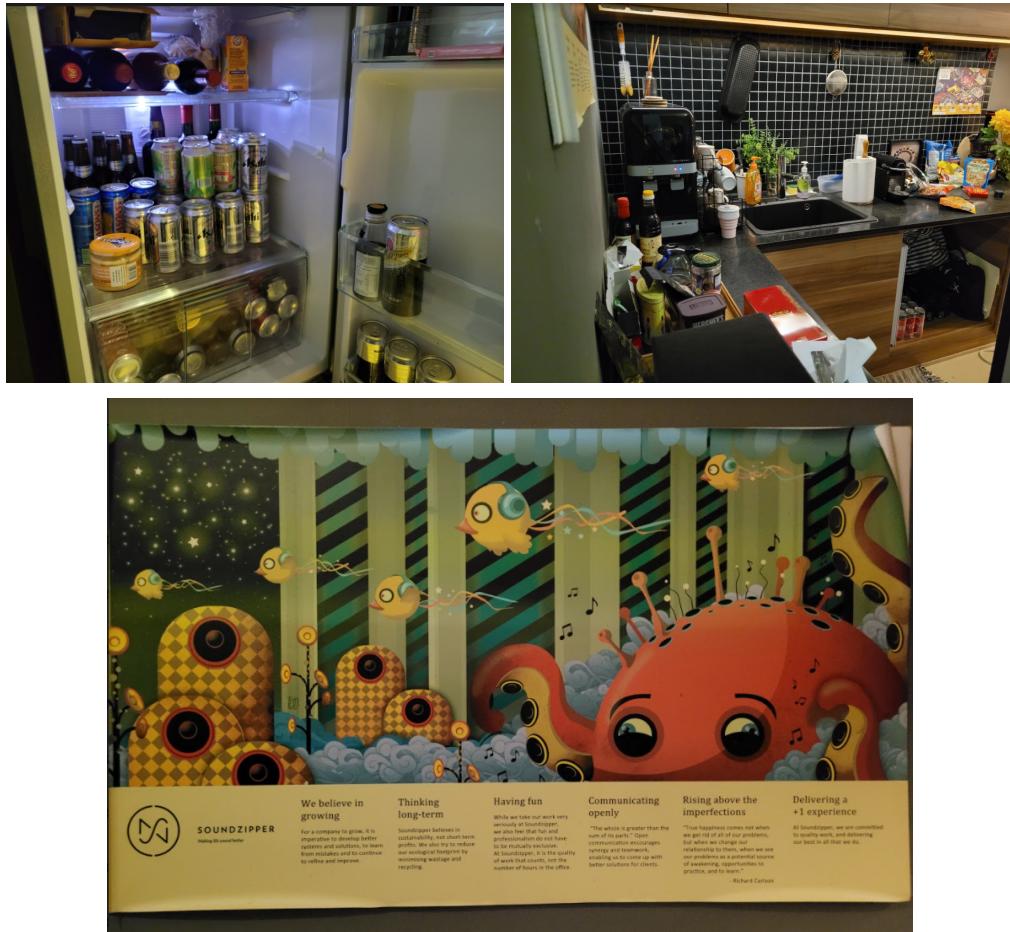
Toilet



The space with the highest concentration of encouragement in the office, the toilet door is filled with motivational posters that remind individual employees that they make a difference and to try to make a difference. These invoke a sense of responsibility and drive employees to push the company further.

Such displays, symbolising motivation, risk taking, individual differences and responsibility, build a culture supporting Soundzipper's non-traditional and flat structure. It connotes that there is little status difference between employee and employer, in hopes of improving inter-level relationships and communication.

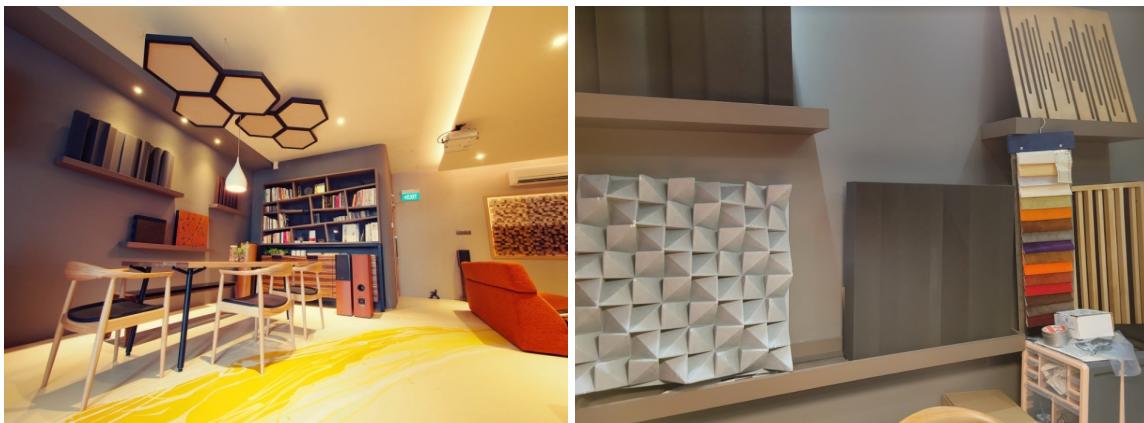
Kitchen



A well-stocked fridge with beer, shows how much the CEO cares about maintaining the laid back environment and about the employee welfare. Having a well-equipped kitchen instead of a small pantry area adds to the homely setting of the entire office.

Company identity - 'once identity is established in the workplace, the pressure is on to live it even if it means sacrificing one's individuality to do so'. Values and beliefs act as a 'template' which employees are expected to follow. Hence printing it out and having it at a common place aims to show employees what is their expected behaviour.

Project Space



The dining area looking project space is decorated with a trophy-like display of acoustic panels the company uses.

Hence, the display of acoustic panels serve as a reminder more than motivation, the standard employees are expected to meet. The dining area look of the place, especially since it is opened and right next to the kitchen and living room, further emphasizes the homely interior of the office, showing how much the CEO wants his employees to feel at home while they are at work.