

Case study: Balancing company culture and strategic goals

As you’ve learned, **organizational culture** refers to the values employees share and an organization’s values, mission, history, and more. In other words, organizational culture can be thought of as a company's personality. A company’s organizational culture can help drive its internal and external success. When a company’s culture is aligned with its corporate strategy and goals, the level at which it can perform is impressive. When researching a company for a possible new job, understanding the company’s culture can help you decide if it is a good fit for you and your priorities. Also, understanding a company's culture as a project manager can help you make informed choices about when you want your actions and decisions to fit within the culture or when you might choose to intentionally push back against the culture to effect change or create improvements. Let’s explore an example of a positive organizational culture and how a project manager fits into that culture.

The Family Java culture

The Family Java coffeehouse has over 2,000 stores worldwide. The Family Java’s culture is closely linked to their strategy and capabilities—this is what they feel sets them apart from other coffee shops. The company has invested in a relationship-driven, employees-first approach. Their culture establishes that the employees are what makes the company unique. This helps foster a warm, comfortable, and calm environment for both employees and customers alike. Because The Family Java’s organizational culture has cultivated employees who genuinely care about the company and their jobs, those employees create the same environment for their customers to enjoy.



The Family Java’s mission and values speak to this approach directly:

Mission

- To provide a welcoming environment where our employees become our family and our guests become our friends

Values

- To create a place where everyone is welcome
- To always give our best and hold ourselves accountable for the results
- To treat others with respect and kindness

The Family Java has worked hard to be able to create the structure to put their mission and values into practice daily. They practice these values, all while achieving new levels in sales and growth. For example, The Family Java believes in expressing their employees-first value by spending more on employee healthcare than on coffee beans! Each employee is crucial to the success of the company and their ability to fulfill their mission and adhere to their values. In turn, the company makes their employees feel valued by offering substantial training, education scholarships, assistance with daycare, and growth within the company.

The Family Java is able to capitalize on the critical link between culture and strategic goals to achieve optimal performance. When evaluating their organizational culture, the company focuses on their positive attributes and adapts to what works and has proven to be beneficial. By taking the time to perfect what the company does well, The Family Java has created a culture that drives out negativity, empowers employees to be their best selves, and aligns with their strategic goals.

A project manager’s relationship to organizational culture

Learning the company’s values

Avi was excited to begin his role as a project manager at The Family Java. He had asked questions about the organization’s culture during his job interview and was told about the company’s people-first approach. Avi’s previous company prioritized profitability over teamwork and mentorship. While his previous company was very successful, it was difficult for Avi to engage meaningfully in his work because the culture was so focused on financial results rather than on their employees’ job satisfaction. Avi felt like The Family Java’s approach better aligned with his own values.

Clarifying the company’s expectations

Avi’s manager at The Family Java said that his role would involve a substantial emphasis on team building and keeping morale high. When he began, Avi asked his manager to clarify the time investment expected by the company in order to accomplish team- and morale-building goals. He also asked for suggestions and guidance based on what had been done at the company in the past. If Avi had made incorrect assumptions about the company’s culture and tried to manage projects with his previous company’s culture in mind, he might have emphasized speed over collaboration and communication. Avi now knew that he would need to carefully balance expectations related to The Family Java’s culture with the project workload in order to meet project timelines and achieve the desired outcome.

Applying organizational culture to a project

Before beginning his first project, Avi planned a team lunch to get to know everyone at The Family Java. Then, he scheduled one-on-one meetings with each of his team members to learn more about their working style and professional goals. He also asked how he could help support and remove any barriers for them. One of Avi’s team members, Miguel, said that he needed to start his workday early because he picked his children up from school at 3:00. After hearing this, Avi avoided scheduling team meetings in the late afternoon. Another team member, Elisa, told Avi that she preferred face-to-face or phone conversations to email since she felt like she communicated better verbally. When Avi needed to discuss something with Elisa, he made sure that he talked with her in person as much as possible. Avi continued to check in with all of his team members regularly as the project progressed. He also scheduled weekly “Coffee Chats” with his team, since he had learned that this was company tradition. Avi’s efforts to align his project management style to The Family Java’s organizational culture were noticed by executives and stakeholders, and he was given a lot of support in getting the resources he needed.

Key takeaway

The culture of each organization you encounter will be different and can change over time. Like Avi, it is worth your time as a project manager to learn about your company’s culture because it directly relates to your projects’ success.