



## **Navigating Your Firm's Culture**

Presented at the AIA MN'19  
Conference on Architecture

Minneapolis, MN

**EPC**

EMERGING PROFESSIONALS COMMITTEE



**AIA Minnesota**

A Society of The American Institute of Architects



# Navigating Firm Culture Workbook

Organized by

AIA MN Emerging Professionals Committee

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EMERGING PROFESSIONALS COMMITTEE



**AIA Minnesota**

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SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR "NAVIGATORS"

# Timetable

## Welcome!

- 2:00 Introduction
- 2:05 What is the meaning of work?  
Why have a culture?  
History of the 10 Qualities of Culture presen

## Step 1: Beliefs | **Know Yourself**

- 2:10 Personal Assessment on 10 Qualities of Culture

## Step 2: Values | **Know your Team**

- 2:20 Team Assessment on 10 Qualities of Culture
- 2:25 Graph Your Results & Small Group Introductions

## Step 3: Practice | **Know your Goal**

- 2:30 Small Group Discussion on Cultural Alignment / Gaps  
Small Group Discussion on Goals & Action Items

## Conclusion

- 3:15 Review Session Discussion Highlights
- 3:25 Next Steps & Follow Through

# Welcome to Navigating Your Firm's Culture

*"A Firm Culture refers to the beliefs and behaviors that determine how your team interacts and how they handle transactions inside and outside your studio environment."*

*- Mark R. LePage, EntreArchitect*

Strengthening the voice of your practice.

The Minnesota Emerging Professionals Committee is sparking this discussion by asking questions on topics that drive firm culture. This workbook has a toolkit of questions and concepts for attendees to discuss team culture at their own office after the A'19 Conference on Architecture.

## Learning Objectives

- Develop tools to define and analyze characteristics of your firm's **culture & values**.
- **Identify your mission** & set goals to shape your firm culture to nurture & positive impact.
- Identify ways to **maintain accountability & evaluate progress** to successfully use culture to align your team with your mission.
- **Define key strategies** to better align your personal values and your workplace with a narrowed focus.

Outcomes I would like to see from this Workshop:

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# Introduction

## What is firm culture?

Culture is everywhere. The cultural climate of an office surrounds individuals and shapes team dynamics. It is constantly in flux, responding to influences within and outside of the office. Culture is often an unseen force, like the wind. When at your back, it propels you forward. However a misaligned culture can cause individuals to clash with their office's cultural goals.

Culture is a key driver of "how" and "why" things happen a certain way within any architecture firm. Culture can develop into climate zones or sub-climates as teams fluctuate between daily interactions and project assignments.

## Why is culture important?

Firms and employees have the opportunity to create positive feedback loops that reinforce the values and ideals at the heart of a firm. Many types of "firm culture" exist depending on the values, organization, and mission of a project team. An effective firm culture encourages people to align their skills and energy toward office goals. This culture creates a healthy synergy between individual talents and the purpose of a firm.

## How do you define a healthy "Firm Culture"?

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## Step 1: Beliefs Know Yourself

### Self Reflection

Navigating Firm Culture starts by understanding your personal culture. Knowing your own beliefs and goals will guide you towards an office culture that aligns or compliments you. In this section, consider which qualities resonate with you. What factors improve your work process and motivate you do your best work? What office culture equips you to grow as an architect?

### Five Influences of Culture

Firm Culture creates a climate that responds to several qualities. More factors exist, but the questions related to the five qualities are meant to initiate culture conversations in your office:

- Studio Environment
- Hierarchy
- Team Tectonics
- Entourage
- Zeitgeist

Describe your work / life rhythm:

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## Step 2: Values Know Your Team

### Team Culture

Now that you have a sense of your personal beliefs, focus on your office. If you work for a large firm, your answers may differ between a local project team and larger corporate policies. Consider which level of team culture is most influential to your beliefs. If you are a student, think about your studio environment and what actions are praised or rebuked by professors.

The same drivers of personal culture have been rephrased in this section to apply to your firm's culture. When completing this form, reflect on your perspective and experience with your firm's culture.

Consider: what makes your firm unique? How does your firm describe itself to clients, the public, to prospective and current employees? What environmental factors shape the culture you experience on a daily basis?

Define the foundational values or mission statement of your firm:

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# Studio Environment

Our working environment directly correlates to our productivity. These factors may be discussed annually at employee performance reviews. However more frequent and transparent feedback on employee performance and work conditions can improve productivity.

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PERFORMANCE | PERSONAL



What is the best measure of your work performance?

1

2

3

4

5

Hours Spent Working

Slightly More Time

Equally Time + Results

Slightly More Results

Results

PERFORMANCE | OFFICE



How does the Office assess work performance?

1

2

3

4

5

Hours Spent Working

Slightly More Time

Equally Time + Results

Slightly More Results

Results

WORK ENVIRONMENT | PERSONAL

Where & when do you do your best work?

1

2

3

4

5

In the Office Fixed Hours

In the Office Flexible Hours

Core Office Hours Split Office/ Remote

Work Anywhere Fixed Hours

Work Anywhere Work Anytime

WORK ENVIRONMENT | OFFICE

Where & when does your Office permit you to work?

1

2

3

4

5

In the Office Fixed Hours

In the Office Flexible Hours

Core Office Hours Split Office/ Remote

Work Anywhere Fixed Hours

Work Anywhere Work Anytime

GAPS:

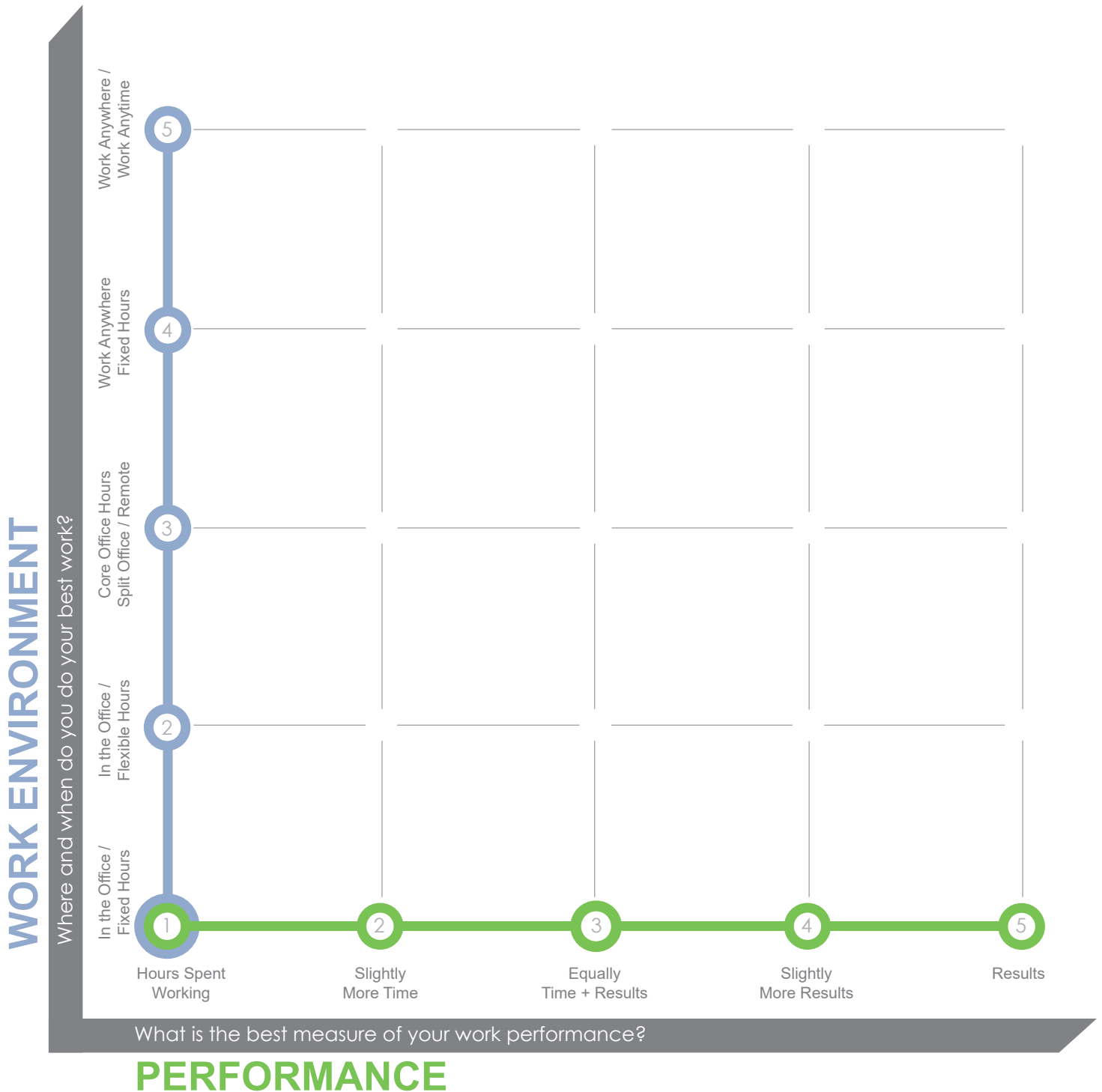
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# Studio Environment

physical environment that impacts your measurable outcomes



GOAL:

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# Heirarchy

The way a firm rewards or rebukes employee's actions enforces the firm's values and culture. The decisions, communications, and actions of firm leadership indirectly impact employee behavior and define cultural.

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**PROBLEM SOLVING | PERS.**



How do you process information and work through problems?

1

2

3

4

5

Mostly Internally


Slightly More Internally

Balanced

Slightly More Externally

Mostly Externally

**PROBLEM SOLVING | OFFICE**



How are employees expected to work through problems and process information?

1

2

3

4

5

Mostly Internally

Slightly More Internally

Balanced

Slightly More Externally

Mostly Externally

**LEADERSHIP STYLE | PERSONAL**

What is your preferred style of leadership?

1

2

3

4

5

Hands Off / Fully Delegated

Delegate with some oversight

Delegate and Follow Up

Collaborative with some Independence

In the Trenches / Work through it together

**LEADERSHIP STYLE | OFFICE**

What style of leadership is prevalent in your Office?

1

2

3

4

5

Hands Off / Fully Delegated

Delegate with some oversight

Delegate and Follow Up

Collaborative with some Independence

In the Trenches / Work through it together

GAPS:

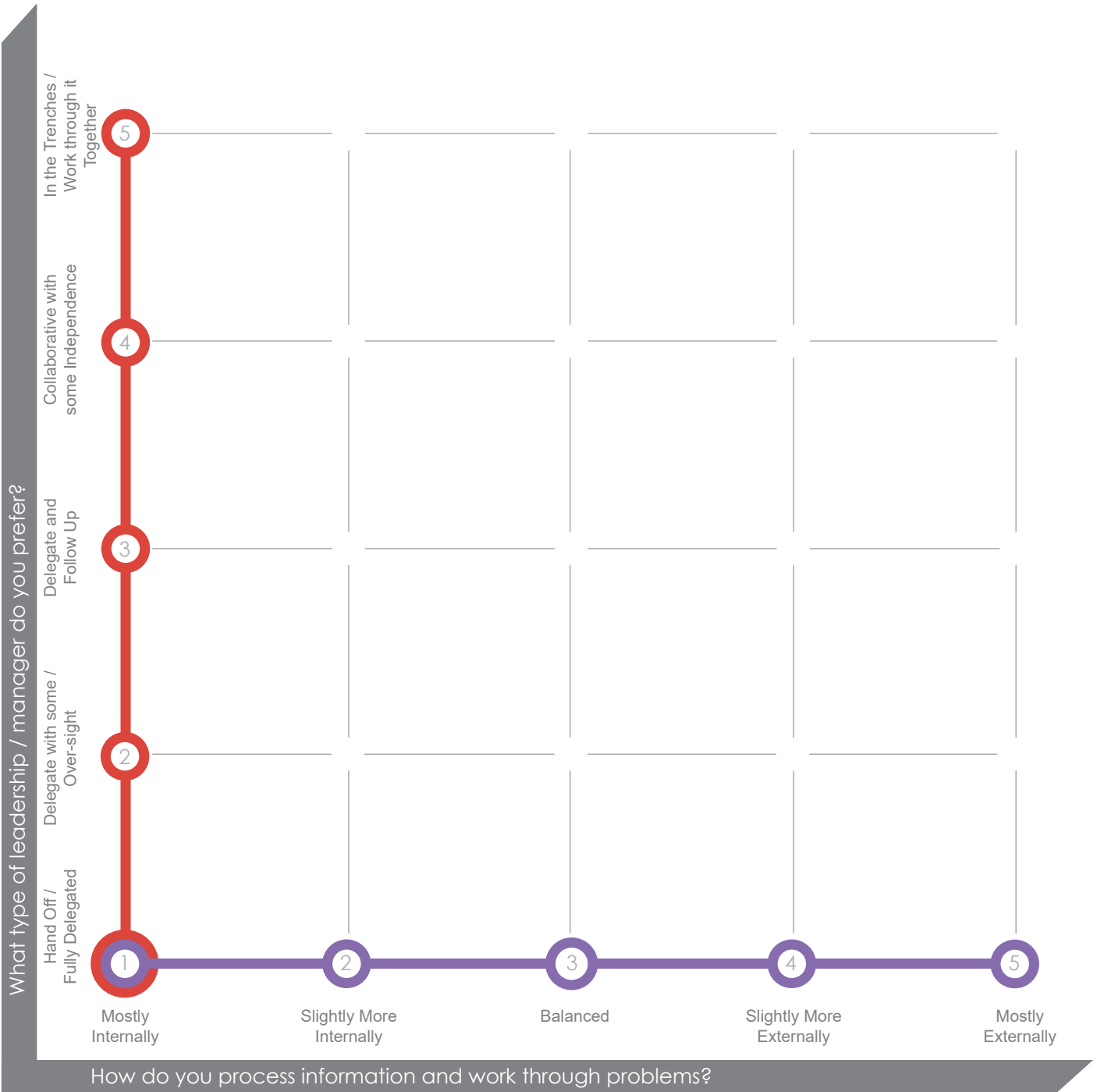
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# Heirarchy

key factors of team dynamics, coordination, & collaboration

## LEADERSHIP STYLE



## PROBLEM SOLVING

GOAL:

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# Team Tectonics

The internal team structure of a firm can reinforce the firm's culture. Organizing teams impacts lines of communication, project priorities, and how individuals within the firm relate to consultants and clients.

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PROJECT ROLE | PERSONAL



What role do you prefer within projects?

1

2

3

4

5

Project Specialist


Slight Variety of Tasks / Projects

Balanced

More Variety of Tasks / Projects

Project Generalist

PROJECT ROLE | OFFICE



How are project roles defined?

1

2

3

4

5

Project Specialist

Slight Variety of Tasks / Projects

Balanced

More Variety of Tasks / Projects

Project Generalist

ORGANIZATION | PERSONAL

How do you work best in a team?

1

2

3

4

5

Formal Hierarchical /Pyramid Organization

Informal Hierarchy

Collaborative Teams within Pyramid Organization

Informal Collaboration

Formal Collaborative / Open Source Design

ORGANIZATION | OFFICE

How are project teams organized?

1

2

3

4

5

Formal Hierarchical /Pyramid Organization

Informal Hierarchy

Collaborative Teams within Pyramid Organization

Informal Collaboration

Formal Collaborative / Open Source Design

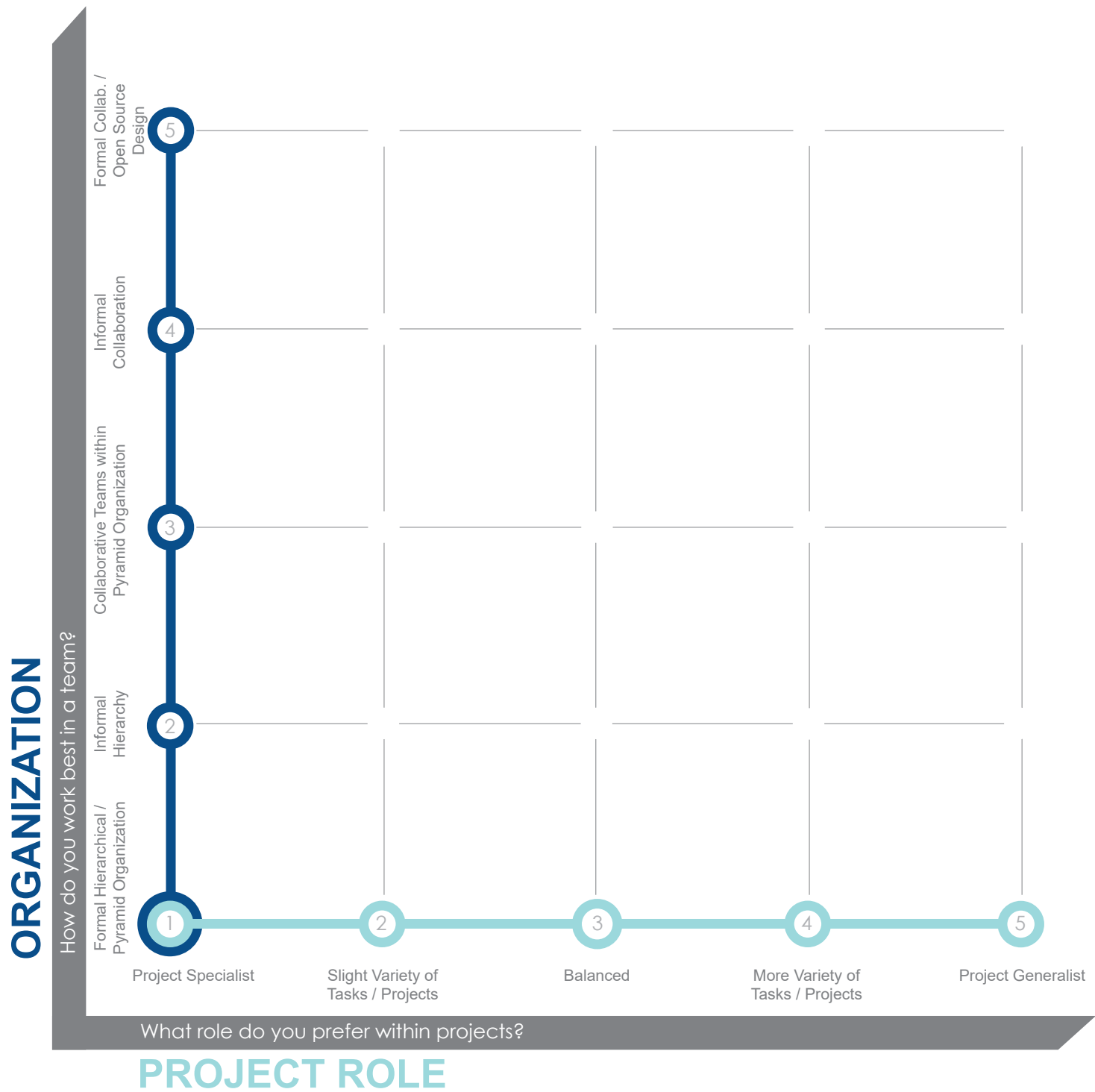
GAPS:

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# Team Tectonics

influence team member responsibilities and contributions to projects



GOAL:

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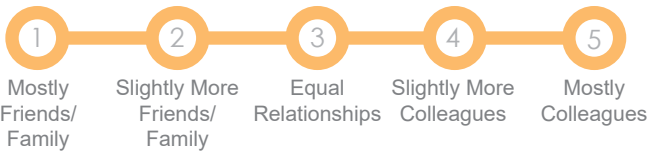
# Entourage

People are the greatest investment of an architecture firm and integral to successful teams. Every individual carries the brand of their firm, not just decision makers. A firm should select, engage and develop employees in ways that reflect the firm's mission and team values.

NOTES:

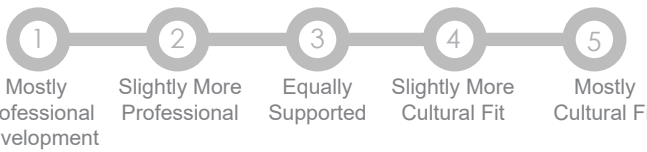
RELATIONSHIPS | PERSONAL

Do you want to spend more time developing relationships with family/friends or colleagues?



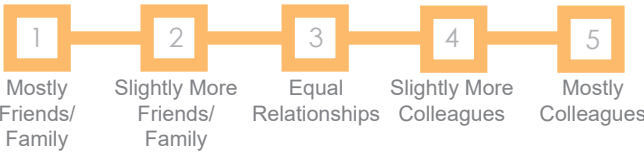
SUPPORT | PERSONAL

Do you want your Office to hire & develop employees based on professional development or cultural fit?



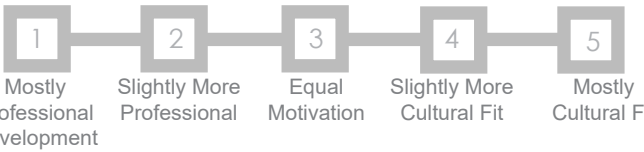
RELATIONSHIPS | OFFICE

Do Office events focus on developing relationship with family/friends or colleagues?



SUPPORT | OFFICE

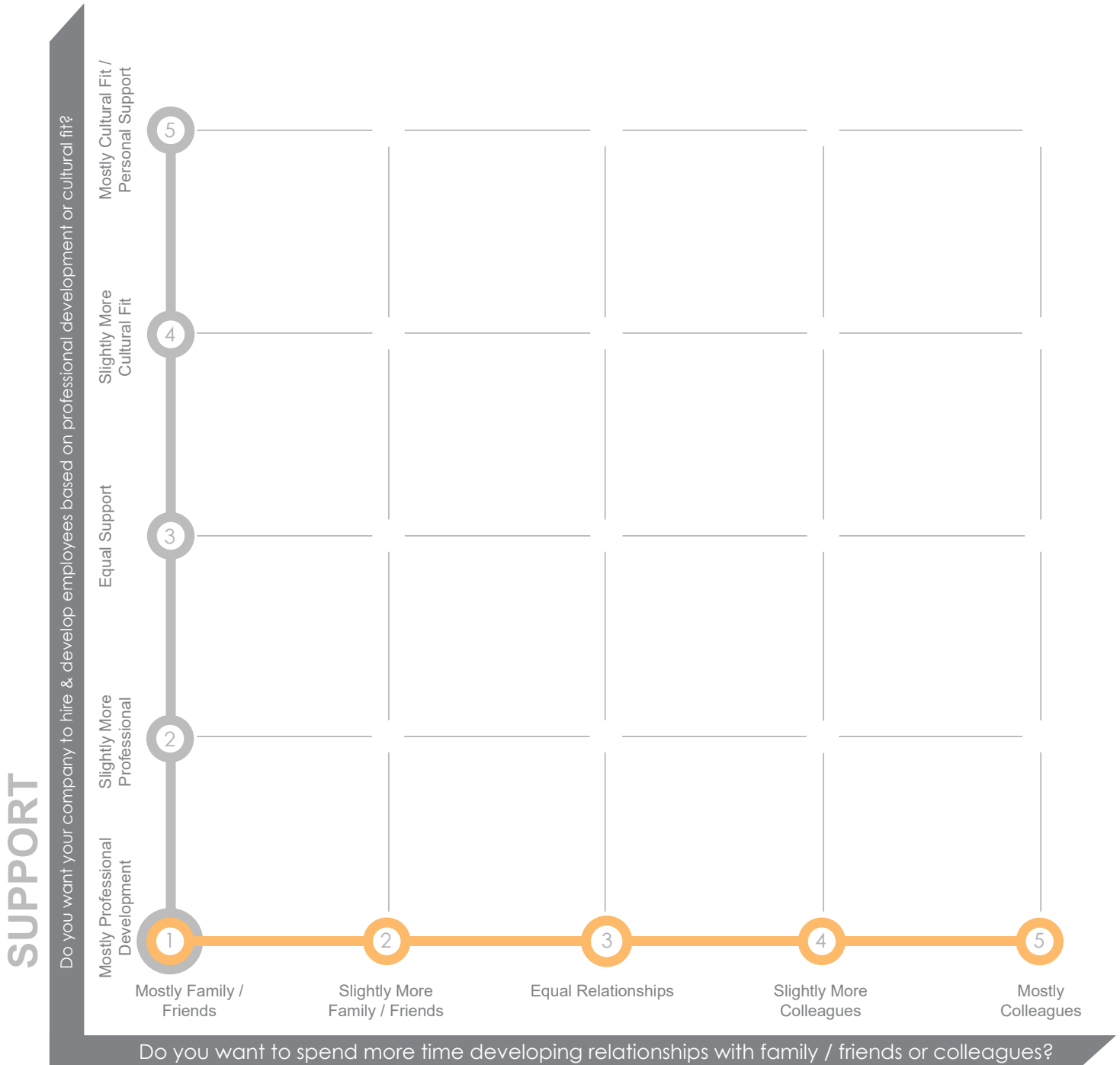
Does your Office primarily hire & develop employees based on professional development or cultural fit?



GAPS:

# Entourage

ties your personal expectations & needs from the office



## RELATIONSHIPS

GOAL:

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# Zeitgeist

Core values and rituals relate to personal fulfillment and motivation. These invisible factors are difficult to change because they tie to employee's personal identity as well as the company's core values.

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## FULFILLMENT | PERSONAL



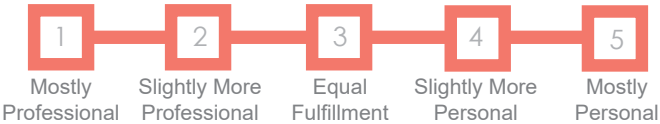
Do you gain more fulfillment in your professional or personal accomplishments?



## FULFILLMENT | OFFICE



Does your Office acknowledge professional or personal accomplishments?



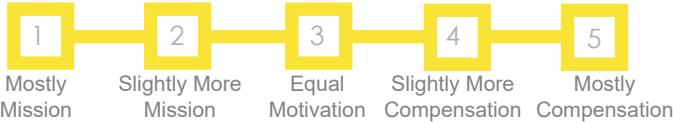
## MOTIVATION | PERSONAL

Are you most motivated to work because of your company's mission or personal compensation?



## MOTIVATION | OFFICE

Is your Office driven by mission or profit?



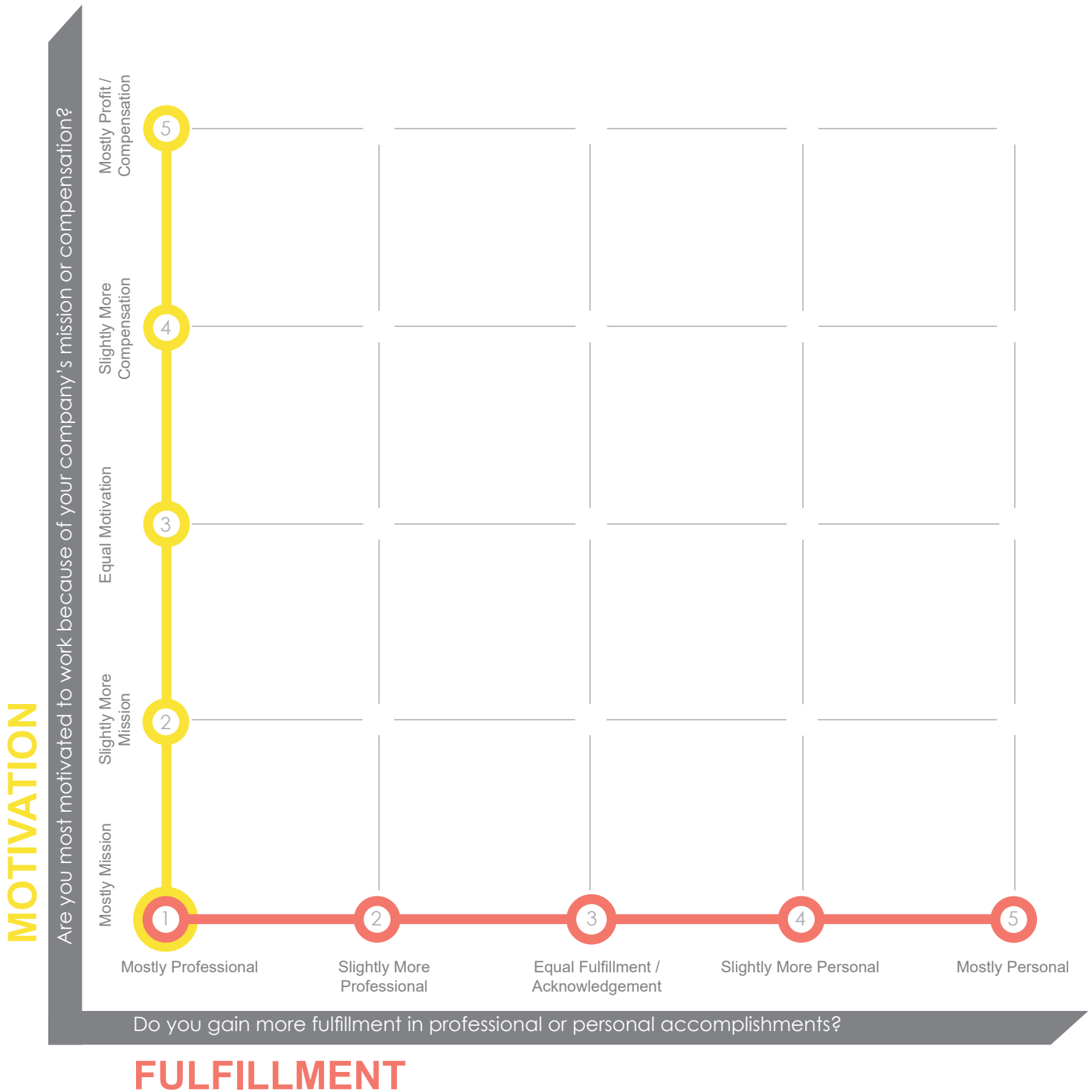
GAPS:

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relates to your personal convictions and defines why you do what you do



GOAL:

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# Ranking Values:

Use the circles at the right to rank the top three values that are most important to you, then use the squares at the right to rank the top three core values of your office or project team:



<div> <div>Studio Environment</div> <div>Relates to the physical environment that impacts your measurable outcomes.</div> </div>		<div>PERFORMANCE</div> <div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>
<div> <div>WORK ENVIRONMENT</div> <div></div> </div>		<div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>
<div> <div>Hierarchy</div> <div>Key factors of team dynamics, coordination, and collaboration.</div> </div>		<div>PROBLEM SOLVING</div> <div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>
<div> <div>LEADERSHIP STYLE</div> <div></div> </div>		<div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>
<div> <div>Team Tectonics</div> <div>Influence team member responsibilities and contributions to projects.</div> </div>		<div>PROJECT ROLE</div> <div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>
<div> <div>ORGANIZATION</div> <div></div> </div>		<div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>
<div> <div>Entourage</div> <div>Ties to your personal expectations and needs from the Company.</div> </div>		<div>RELATIONSHIPS</div> <div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>
<div> <div>SUPPORT</div> <div></div> </div>		<div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>
<div> <div>Zeitgeist</div> <div>Relate to your personal convictions and define why you do what you do.</div> </div>		<div>FULFILLMENT</div> <div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>
<div> <div>MOTIVATION</div> <div></div> </div>		<div><input type="radio"/></div> <div><input type="checkbox"/></div>



## Step 1: Beliefs Know Yourself

List three factors that most impact your work environment:

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What external factors shape and influence your values?

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What three factors are essential to your continued growth and development?

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What aspect of your growth and development correlate with your firm's culture?

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What influence do you think you can make on your firm's culture?

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## Step 2: Values Know Your Team

How are the values of your firm encouraged / enforced or not?

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What qualities of your office culture affect your productivity?

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List activities or work styles that are financially supported by your firm:

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List resources or policies of your firm that minimize stress in employees lives:

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Describe how decisions are made in project teams:

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What impact do emerging professionals have on the success of a project?

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## Step 3: Practice Know Your Goal

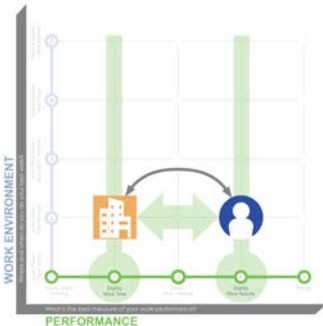
*"An organization's ability to learn,  
and translate that learning into action rapidly,  
is the ultimate competitive advantage."*

*- Jack Welch*

### Assessment

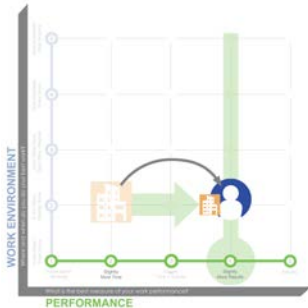
Using your five Cultural Influences from Step 1: Know Yourself and Step 2: Know Your Team, plot your responses on the five matrices. Draw a line between the blue 'personal' dot and orange 'office' dot. Read through the graph to discover patterns and clusters of desirable outcomes.

List scales or graphs that reflect a misalignment between you and your firm:



#### Assessing Gaps:

Gaps exist when your personal goals don't align well with your firm, and you may not feel satisfied with the work environment at your office. Not all gaps need to be addressed. However if the misalignment negatively impacts your work, you may identify it as an area for potential change.



#### Changing your Firm:

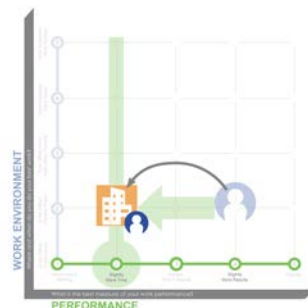
You or your firm may decide it is time to change if your office's culture isn't reflecting it's mission or your team isn't attracting necessary talent. Change can be instigated by either the firm or the individual. For example, to change a Studio Environment to be more results oriented, you may ask:



How can our office assess employee performance based on project objectives?



How do I communicate the value I bring to a team based on my experience which makes me more efficient at certain tasks?



#### Reframe your People:

If you or your team isn't acting out your office's mission, it may be time to explore re-emphasizing those values. Uniting your team can strengthen communication and help people feel more fulfilled by their work. For example, to change a Studio Environment to be time focused, you may ask:



How to communicate the importance of structured Office time in our collaborative studio environment?



How can I restructure my time to match my Office's expectations?

# Conclusion

*“If culture is like personality or character, then it matters in the sense to what extent is the culture adaptive to both the external and internal realities. If it’s not adaptive, it matters a lot. If it’s adaptive, it doesn’t matter much, people don’t notice it, they just go along their merry way. So culture really only matters when there is a problem. In the same sense that personality only matters when things aren’t working right for you. Otherwise it’s just there. It’s part of you.”*

*-Edgar Schein*

## Take Action

From this exercise, you may confirm that your firm culture is thriving. Or you may find there are aspects of your firm culture that need to shift, be assured that change can come from anywhere or anyone. Many successful changes can happen when grassroots efforts are paired with the visioning and guidance of leadership. According to the “Five Drivers of Culture” from Gallup, there are four phases to enact cultural change:

- **Understand** the current state of your culture.
- **Define the gap** between aspirations and actual culture.
- **Align** activities, initiatives, and systems.
- **Establish** accountability and ongoing evaluation.

## Be a Voice for Change

Individuals at every experience level can positively contribute to their firm’s culture to improve diversity, collaboration, and employee retention. Small actions can begin to shift a firm’s culture, improving communication and collaboration within project teams. Here are a few things to try:

- Volunteer together as a firm: Earth Day Cleanup, Canstruction, etc.
- Start a mentor program, pair emerging professionals with managers
- Track and share AXP hour progress of aspiring architects
- Provide food: Start a candy drawer, Friday treats, or bagel Tuesday
- Have weekly meetings to improve transparency of project progress
- Acknowledge achievements, awards, and newly licensed architects
- Start a contribution journal or recognition page for positive reinforcement
- Allow opportunities for shared interests: watercolor or soccer over lunch
- Do a volunteer design project: Free Little Library, Art Shanty’s, etc.
- Review an EP Friendly Firm Award Application ([www.aiancsr.com](http://www.aiancsr.com))

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*“To know thyself is the beginning of wisdom.”*

*- Socrates*

*“The bottom line is, when people are crystal clear about the most important priorities of the organization and team they work with and prioritized their work around those top priorities, not only are they many times more productive, they discover they have the time they need to have a whole life.”*

*Stephen Covey*

