The art of navigating corporate culture

(ARA) - Learning to navigate your career while grasping the culture of a company is one of the greatest challenges a new employee will face. Whether you’re a recent college graduate, or at a crossroads in your career, steering your way around a company’s 20,000 or 1,000 employees and figuring out the unwritten rules of corporate culture can be challenging and confusing.

You can’t use Google maps here

Throughout the interview process, you probably heard how great the culture is at your new place of employment, how you too can have a long and rewarding career at Company A, which offers flexibility, mobility and interesting projects. But, come day one, all you can concentrate on is getting through the first day, meeting your boss’ high expectations, getting along with your peers and hoping you made the right decision to join the company in the first place.

According to Ebony Thomas, director of diversity and campus recruiting at Prudential Financial, “New employees often find success by relying on a few simple tasks that you didn’t learn in the classroom: focus on learning your role, ask clear questions and observe how to navigate through your new organization.”

Now, you’re the professional

For recent college graduates especially, it is important to remember that you are a professional and that often means managing the delicate balance of work relationships, among peers, management and senior leaders. “Your peers are your instant support network; building strong relationships here will go a long way when working late nights and meeting tight deadlines,” Thomas says. “But, keep in mind that you now work together and, even if you are friends on Facebook and had a ‘long’ night out, you may still have to face them at 9 a.m. the next morning, so use sound judgment.”

Thomas also advocates “managing your manager” to make your life easier. “First, understand your supervisor’s expectations of your role and responsibilities. Make sure you both have clarity on tasks and ask for formal and informal feedback periodically.” Observe what motivates him or her. Once you know these things, flex your working style to create win-win situations. “If your boss is a stickler for details,
schedule a meeting and create a plan that communicates how and when you’ll deliver information. This allows you to have some control over your schedule and will eliminate constant requests for information,” she advises.

Senior leadership can appear to be intimidating, but they are most often genuinely grounded individuals who enjoy interacting with their employees. Thomas cautions one pitfall that recent college graduates may fall into is addressing their manager’s boss as “Mr./Mrs. Last Name,” even when they have asked you to address them by their first name.

“You’re a professional now,” she says. “Ultimately, you want to be taken seriously and have your contributions valued. That’s not going to happen if you can’t listen and follow directions.”

“The First 48”

“The First 48” is a popular reality series on cable TV that chronicles a group of homicide detectives’ search for clues in the initial 48 hours of a murder. They understand those initial few hours are critical in solving the crime. Similarly, the first 48 months of your new role or first job are crucial building blocks for your career.

Year one is all about learning, asking the right questions and performing at a level beyond your peers. “This is the foundational year. If you don’t get this right, then you’ll play catch up for the next few years,” Thomas says.

In year two, you still need those foundational competencies of “learn-ask-perform,” but now you can add “challenge” to the list. This doesn’t mean that you challenge decisions or instruction, but know how to push back when appropriate. The next 24 months are vital because you continue to add more and more to the list while you build on the basics.

By years three and four, you can add “evaluate” and “lead.” Evaluating at this point means you can now see and measure your progress. You may have an important decision to make. Do you drop anchor and stay awhile? Or do you set sail for a new opportunity? If you decide to leave, evaluate if it is better in terms of responsibility and potential; if not, pull into port and continue to learn.
By year four, you are now ready to lead and motivate yourself and others. Corporate circle still ask the age old question of whether leaders are born or taught. But, leaders are developed. And they are nurtured by building on core competencies, including their successes and failures.

Thomas noted that there is no clear science to successfully navigating the complexities of corporate culture. “Finding a way to balance heavy weights like performance and achievement with skills like judgment, networking and mapping your career development is a skillful art.”

The Prudential Insurance Company of America and its affiliates, Newark, NJ, are Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employers and are committed to diversity in its workforce. Prudential is an Employer that participates in E-Verify Control # 0218947-00001-00