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Managerial Stress: Organisational Cultures, Convergence/Divergence and the Fit Corporation™

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary expansion of an earlier exploratory research study undertaken by the authors. The previous study focused on how ostensibly disparate business/service organisations appear to be changing under the impact of a particular set of ubiquitous change strategies (downsizing, delayering, outsourcing, and process re-engineering). Moreover, these originally exogenous change strategies, having become increasingly internalised by organisations, were interpreted as a reflection of an apparent convergence of such organisations' formerly distinct internal cultures/ climates. This was primarily demonstrated by remarkable similarities in the characteristics and quality of stress experienced by their managers, as well as in the latters' perceptions of their contemporary work situations, irrespective of industry or sector.

With an additional sample of managers, this paper begins an on-going process of examining in greater depth salient organisational cultural/climate factors, using various instruments. The findings are related to the imposition of the particular change strategies cited above and consequent manager stress. The paper further identifies and explores organisational and individual factors that may be effective in reducing the apparent convergence in cultures and the concomitant observed similarities in stress levels/characteristics.

Specifying some of these factors is undertaken by the use of the new "FIT Profiler" ™ (The Fit Corporation™, 1998). This instrument was designed to identify individual manager and organisational characteristics that support flexibility, innovation, and the acceptance and effective use of training/retraining opportunities.

More broadly, the findings are analysed and discussed in relation to why some organisational cultures and managers are apparently capable of resisting the deleterious impact of the "convergency" trend. And in their "resistance", they consequently demonstrate their ability to avoid the related stress similarities, and therefore, in effect, demonstrate their organisational and personal "divergence" and "FITness".

INTRODUCTION

Since at least the early nineteen-eighties, organisations, initially in the private sector, but spreading rapidly to the public sector, have experienced an era of massive, unremitting, and pervasive change. This has been most vividly seen in a veritable frenzy (some might say an orgy) of downsizing, delayering/re-structuring, outsourcing, and business process re-engineering, ostensibly to improve corporate performance, productivity, and profitability through rapid, imposed cultural and structural change. The composite process has been described as the onslaught of "the four horseman of the modern organisational apocalypse" (Dietmann & Stead, 1998).

The previous generation spanning the two decades from 1955 to 1975 can be viewed as the era of the mega-corporation, the multi-national—usually American—conglomerate, implacably covering the world with Coca-Cola and men in grey flannel suits. These behemoths emphasised continuous growth, both physical and financial, in order to capture a dominant market share at any price. Such efforts were underpinned by relatively distinct, stable, supportive (both ideologically and practically) belief systems. These were embodied in enduring corporate cultures that stressed a longer-term commitment to staff, especially middle managers, explicitly promising them a corporate career ("a job for life") in exchange for loyalty, conformity, and hard work. (Dietmann & Stead, 1998) This was something people could "buy into". The work world might have been ruthless at times, but it was fairly predictable, most of the time.

In the subsequent period, organisations have apparently been transformed into something completely different. The metaphorical "four horsemen" have seen to that. More accurately, the obsessive way organisations have used them, a sort of repetition compulsion, has made the last decade or so an especially fraught, highly anxious, and insecure time to be working. And what is genuinely remarkable, this transformation occurs during a time of (for the most part) economic expansion, technological innovation, and low unemployment.   Most unusually, the related phenomena of distraught managers and rapidly mutating organisations display themselves in a broadly similar manner across a wide range of hitherto, one would have thought, different types of organisations and industries. (Dietmann & Stead, 1998) The business environment has become increasingly characterised by "lean and mean", *almost machine-like*, organisations, which have

deliberately and paradoxically *programmed* themselves to become smaller in order to grow larger in profits and power. (Ironically, mergers and acquisitions have made it possible for already downsized companies to have renewed spurts of sudden staff growth, thus permitting, indeed positively encouraging, another visit from the horsemen. In effect, further entrenching "them" as a predominant corporate cultural "cadre"/component.)

Surviving, for those who work in such places, can become, or can be perceived as, very problematic and de-motivating, if not demoralising.   The formerly idiosyncratic uniqueness and diversity of organisations, both culturally and operationally, seem to have been diminished. Major elements of their former cultural uniqueness and diversity have been severely subordinated to a limited set of novel new ones. One recent, significant and thought-provoking review of contemporary corporate cultures, in analysing the repetitive imposition of the four change strategies, bluntly states the current situation this way: "Since the early 1980's the average workplace has been stripped of most vestiges of cultural cohesion." (Deal & Kennedy, 1999)

Drained of substantive *affective* content (rituals, symbols, private jargon, beliefs) an organisation's culture becomes merely "what it is like to work here", a climatic conceptualisation. If, for brevity, corporate/organisational culture is most succinctly conveyed by the phrase, "How we do things around here", then the cultural internalisation of the four endogenous change strategies has become not merely a "bottom-line" expedient, but rather, "The (NEW) way we do things around here." (Dietmann & Stead, 1998) Any other remaining, older "ways of doing things" are perhaps then seen as subsidiary and residual, probably labelled as "sub-cultural" and suppressed when detected. What could more dramatically demonstrate the impoverishment of corporate cultures as a cohesive force which Deal and Kennedy deplore? Can anyone be expected to function competently in a culture that emphasises the expendability of staff? Who would willingly "buy-into" this worldview and for what "pay-off"?

In a word, what is being observed is corporate cultural "convergence" and its deleterious, deadening consequences across industries and sectors. Moreover, if it is highly unlikely that human beings can work creatively and effectively for long in such a climate, then what now becomes an imperative is the capacity to rebuild the "social context of work". (Deal & Kennedy, 1999) Perhaps this time from the bottom up? This necessary re-building may

even entail resisting, evading, diluting, somehow mitigating, or perhaps ignoring, the almost universal "horsemen" culture. What supermen/women are capable of doing this and how?

Obviously there must be countervailing factors, either operative within organisations, the wider society, or individual managers, which prevent " four horsemen-dominated" corporate cultures, and those who work inside them, from inevitably displaying a sort of negative entropy, i.e. a gradual seizing-up and consequent immobilisation. The simpler ones that come to mind might involve: 1. Leaving the current maelstrom, perhaps for another that appears safer. 2. Founding your own company, especially at a time when "start-ups" in IT and the Net are comparatively inexpensive, with an "ease of entry" that attracts bizarre amounts of speculative investment. 3. Establishing an organisational sub-group ethos/culture that tries to insulate and protect, but might be interpreted as subversive. 4. Identifying and supporting individual personal and organisational behaviours/characteristics/traits which, in a sense, might tend to make the pervasive "horsemen" culture somehow less malignant or, dare one say, an irrelevance.

In an extensive framework and programme of theory-building and empirical research over the past several years, Stead and Fletcher (1999) have delineated an interesting and possibly fruitful way out of the various organisational, cultural and personal dilemmas posed above. This present paper, therefore, is offered as a contribution to the process of applying the framework and theory to understanding, and thus suggesting ways of breaking-out of, the impasse in which many contemporary organisations and their managers now find themselves. The impasse is generated, in part, by the fact that successful (by most market measures) organisations, having internalised and repetitively used the four change strategies, now find that they employ (probably very competent) managers who express deep dissatisfaction with their jobs, their employers, and their own performance. (Dietmann & Stead, 1998) Some of these managers, those with longer memories, even yearn for a better, but probably mythical, past. (Dietmann & Stead, 1998). But what keeps them going now?

The complete framework and theory of "FITness" or the "FIT Personality" (the terms used to describe the constellation of characteristics which make it possible to function at a high level of efficiency in whatever situations arise, including, in this case, problematic corporate cultures) will appear in a book to be published in the Spring of 2000. (Fletcher & Stead,

2000). ("FIT" itself means "flexible", "innovative", and "trainable/retrainable".) The basic tenets of the theory as they apply and are appropriate to the research problems posed in this paper have been summarised (Stead et al, 1999) and appear below. The research instruments derived from the theory, and designed to explore its applicability and utility are described later in the section on methodology.

1. Following Maslow's lead (Maslow, 1970), the theory builds upon some of his views about "normality". He suggested that normality is "an unconscious synonym for traditional or habitual or conventional and is usually meant to cloak tradition in approval". Predictability is therefore seen as "normal" or "functional" as opposed to unpredictability which is seen as "abnormal" or "dysfunctional".

2. Traditional personality theory views the normal individual as having a personality that is stable and relatively permanent; it must therefore, by definition, be predominantly one thing and not the other, particularly *not* its polar and dichotomous opposite. To move between the any two opposites, routinely, would be "unstable" and "abnormal". Maslow, again, had a different view. In healthy self-actualizing people he speaks of the resolution of such dichotomies and suggests, for instance, that "the dichotomy between selfishness and unselfishness disappears altogether in healthy people because in principle every act in both selfish and unselfish…If the most socially identified people are themselves the most individualistic people, of what use is it to retain the polarity?" (Maslow, 1970)

3. The term, the "FIT Personality" has been coined to describe those who appear to be able to alter the way they react and behave, depending on the situation in which they find themselves. The measurement of personality needs to account for the range of an individual's responses and the environmental or practical situations in which he/she is placed.

4. A FIT person is more adaptable, and highly receptive to the environment, and in turn, finds that the environment is more receptive to her/him. He/She is able to vary behaviour and is not driven by habits and past ways of doing things. FITness allows people to discard the habitual need for polarity of behaviour, e.g. thus being able to perform effectively as an extrovert or an introvert (or at some point between) as

appropriate. This behavioural flexibility is not mirrored by the processes which drive this apparent instability. FIT people are both flexible and adaptable, yet have strong guidelines for action and development. They determine their behaviour by reference to higher principles, which, in the theory, are termed "The Five Constancies" (Awareness, Fearlessness, Balance, Morality/Ethics, and Self-responsibility), rather than by a consideration of external outcomes and an evaluation of the odds. As a corollary, organisations that contain significant numbers of FIT people, or encourage such behaviours, may become FIT themselves.

This paper records another step in an on-going research project. It begins the process of looking more closely at a particular issue/problem. Namely, how is it that some managers function effectively and efficiently (divergently) in apparently successful (profitable) companies which have impoverished, stultifying, and de-motivating ("converged") corporate cultures? And at the same time these same managers are able to assess accurately the less-than-benign nature of the corporate environment and climate in which they work.

METHODOLOGY

The data reported in this paper is in the form of two studies. Study 1 is used to confirm some broad patterns in the relationships between key variables and employs factor analysis among other statistical procedures. Study two presents the main theoretical thrust. This paper should be considered therefore as a preliminary exploration of the data in study 2. For the sake of brevity, only a selection of the measures will be analysed. An overview of the methodology is offered below:

Measures

The Work FIT Profiler™ (formerly known as the Cultural Audit/Business Audit)

The Work FIT Profiler™ (Fletcher 1989) is a tool that measures the misfit between various work factors. Each question or factor has two scales attached to it – the present

position and the ideal position. For the purposes of this study only the present position scores have been utilised. The Work FIT Profiler™ also incorporates a measures of both anxiety and depression. The Work FIT Profiler™ is made up as follows:

Work Demands (7 items)

- Job variety
- Job boundary definition
- Clarity of instructions from superiors
- Standards expected by superiors
- Pace of the job
- The level of change in the job
- Utilisation of a persons capabilities

Interpersonal Demands (3 items)

- The overall friendliness of the working environment
- The ability to delegate
- The relationship between boss and employee

Work Supports (6 items)

- Support from boss
- Support from colleagues
- Feedback
- Autonomy
- Role clarity

Organisational Goals (2 items)

- Goal definition
- Goal severity

Physical Environment (1 item)

- The various aspects that go to making up the physical environment

Job satisfaction (3 items)

- Overall job satisfaction

- Satisfaction with management

- Satisfaction with training opportunities

Work performance (1 item)

- Self-perceived work performance /effectiveness

Teamwork (2 items)

Team gel

Complimentary team skills

Communication (7 items)

Communication between staff and boss

The ability of management to take notice of what its staff have to say

Knowledge of the organisational mission

Knowledge of their contribution to the mission

The level of belief in the mission

The level of internal communication

Knowledge of what is going on in the organisation

Anxiety (4 items)

Depression (4 items)

The FIT Profiler™

The FIT Profiler is a test that takes a different approach to the measurement of individual differences. Instead of using a person's past as a predictor of future work performance - as all personality tests used in selection and assessment purport to do - it measures an individual's potential in two ways.

- Amongst other aspects the Profiler measures 'Behavioural Flexibility' or the degree to which people are likely to act appropriately in the situation they are in. The FIT Profiler measures a variety of behavioural dimensions by allowing individuals to indicate

the range of their behaviour in any given circumstance. The FIT Profiler measures the range of behaviour across 15 dimensions.

- The FIT Profiler also provides an estimate of the level of five psychological 'building blocks' (called 'Constancies') which, according to FIT theory, are responsible for performance, behaviour and individual integration. These Constancies should not vary with situations, but be developed because their integration is central to behaviour and decision-making. The Constancies are shown below with an example item for each constancy:

Self-responsibility/Determination (10 items)
- To what extent do you believe luck contributes to your success?

Awareness/Awakeness (10 items)
- Do you find yourself daydreaming?

Morality/Ethics (10 items)
- Do you feel there is a fuzzy line between right and wrong?

Fearlessness (10 items)
- Do you feel apprehensive when you are the centre of attention?

Balance (10 items)
- How important do you believe it is to be alone?

Study 1
A sample of 350 hotel managers all employed by the same hotel group. The study investigated self-reported perceptions of a number of work factors using the Work FIT Profiler™.

Study 2
A sample of 32 Managers completed both the FIT Profiler™ and the Work FIT Profiler™. The intention of the study was to investigate the relationship between perception of a host of work factors and a feature FIT Integrity.

RESULTS

The overall aim of the study was investigate:

1. The inter-relationships between the Work FIT Profiler™ work dimensions and anxiety.
2. The relationship between anxiety and the perception of these work factors.
3. The inter-relationships between the Work FIT Profiler™ and a feature of Integrity, namely Awareness.

An analysis of the data contained in study 1 was conducted to investigate the inter-relationships between the various work factors for three levels of anxiety. Individuals were classified in terms of low, medium or high anxiety where the high anxiety group scored high enough to be of clinical significance.

An analysis was undertaken to investigate the magnitude of the inter-relationships between the various Work FIT Profiler™ dimensions and the results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Mean correlation magnitude for all Work FIT Profiler™ dimension inter-relationships for all anxiety groups.

Anxiety level	N	Mean	sd
Low	45	.30	.16
Medium	45	.20	.13
High	45	.22	.17

An ANOVA tested the differences between the groups and a significant differences was found (F=5.09, p<0.007). A Sheffe test identified a significant difference (p<0.013) between the low anxiety group and the medium anxiety group, however all other differences between groups were not significant. To take the analysis one step further, the number of relationships in excess of r = .24 were calculated and are presented in Table 2 below

Table 2. Sum of all Work FIT Profiler™ dimension inter-relationships >r = .24 for all anxiety groups.

Anxiety level	N	Mean	sd
Low	45	30	.16
Medium	45	18	.13
High	45	20	.17

As is evident, Table 1 and Table 2 show a remarkably similar trend and suggest that low anxious individuals may perceive a greater number of, and also stronger relationships than those with higher levels of anxiety.

Further analysis (ANOVA) of the data revealed significant differences between levels of anxiety in terms of how individuals perceive the individual dimensions. For example, the high anxiety group perceived; demands as higher (F=5.9, p<0.003), work supports as lower (F=10.0, p<0.000), job satisfaction as lower (F=12.5, p<0.000), lower organisational commitment (F=8.9, p<0.000), and lower levels of organisational communication (F=6.7, p<0.001). The data suggests that anxiety is associated with a narrow perception of the working environment which prevents the anxious seeing the world in an interconnected way. There are quite obvious interconnections between work factors as has been demonstrated by Payne and Fletcher (1983) who suggest that a particular feature of work such as demand is not harmful as long as it is balanced by a correspondingly high level of support. It is possible that because the anxious see significantly less interconnections they fail to see the value of supports in relation to the demands and possibly focus on the demands, thereby colouring the value of the support mechanisms which surely must be in existence.

The data also suggests that the low anxious individuals see their world in a more positive manner and understand the importance of balance between the demands made upon them and the support they receive within their working environment.

One aspect of FIT Integrity is Awareness and it may be that a heightened Awareness activates a wider view of the world and what it means to the individual. This wider view

may indeed determine the strength of the interconnections between the work factors. To this end, an analysis of the Awareness Constancy was undertaken. The data is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean correlation magnitude for all Work FIT Profiler™ dimension inter-relationships for high and low Awareness groups.

Awareness	N	Mean	Sd
Low	55	.28	.21
High	55	.37	.22

Individuals were classified as either low or high on Awareness and an ANOVA was used to investigate the differences between the two groups in terms of the magnitude of all the inter-relationships between the work dimensions. A significant difference was found (F=4.4, p<0.03) suggesting that those high on Awareness do form stronger relationships between the work dimensions. Of added interest is the relationship between Integrity and demand where a significant association (r =-.49, p<0.005) was found. This suggests that those high on Integrity perceive demand as lower.

The Awareness Constancy is a global measure of how Aware people are of themselves and their external environment. The items measuring internal Awareness and those looking at external Awareness were separated to look in more detail at the above. Figures 1and 2 show the relationship between Awareness and anxiety scores suggest that Awareness indeed has a relationship to anxiety.

Figure 1. The relationship between

between

anxiety and external Awareness
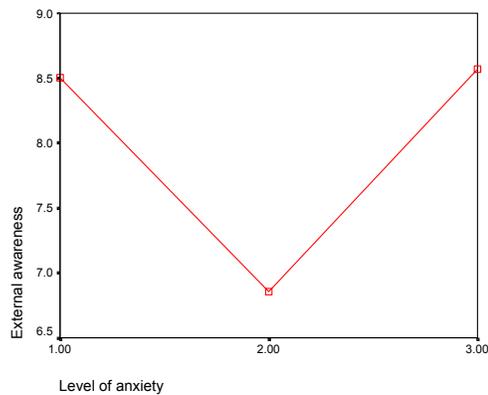
Figure 2. The relationship

anxiety and internal Awareness
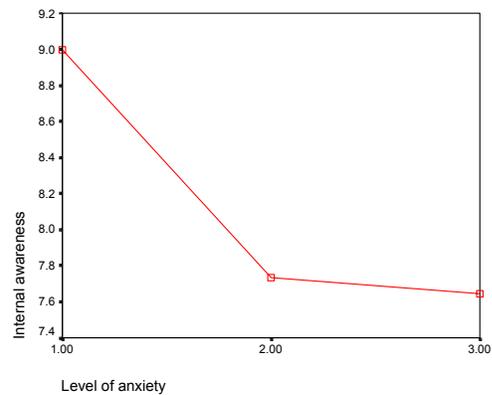
What is evident from Figures 1 and 2 is that high anxiety may be associated with a heightened level of external Awareness which is not balanced by a similar level of internal awareness. Low anxious individuals do however appear to strike a balance between the two. This finding may give support to the suggestion that low anxiety is associated with a greater number of and the stronger inter-relationships reported earlier. That is to say that individuals low on anxiety may have a clearer picture of their external environment in relation to their internal environment which results in their perceiving these inter-relationships. This may result in the low anxious/high Awareness individual perceiving these inter-relationships in a positive and productive manner.

DISCUSSION

Acknowledging the unusual way in which the issues and problems confronting contemporary managers, especially their responses to their organisations' corporate cultures/climates have been approached in this study, there is strong evidence indicating that some (effective?) managers are able to see the work situation more objectively and more personally satisfying. Their objectivity may be determined and defined by their ability to assess the work world, *by their own criteria*, and not by those offered by the so-called corporate culture and its climate. Culture, or "climate" the surviving residuum in the modern organisations, considering the impoverishment (convergence) of such cultures, may only be of use to those who require direction, boundaries, and certainty. It appears to

be the case that only those whose needs require such support "lock-into" the culture/climate, because they must; it is too frightening to do otherwise. In terms of the theoretical framework, those managers who have been identified as being able to integrate their internal and external "worlds" in the organisational work environment may be approaching FITness. And in the process they are able and willing, therefore, to make their participation in the organisation a "non-zero sum" means to mutually-defined or non-contradictory ends, not as *a priori* ends in themselves for either participant.

A brief and selected overview (see bibliography) of some of the current corporate culture and organisational change literature reveals two general, perhaps predictable, and probably contradictory trends. There exists a persistence of interest in the concepts to the point of massive reification (in the absence of unambiguous and consensual definitions), and the beginnings of a questioning of their utility in understanding what is actually going on in the so-called "real world". (Barratt, 1992; Lewis, 1998; Harris, 1998; Anthony, 1994)

The era of the world conglomerate with its emphasis on universal policy and procedural manuals, corporate careers, and submissive conformity—"The Organisational Man (sic)—is past history. Now, in the current era of massive imposed change, fragmentation, renewal, and repeated fragmentation justified by "mission and quality statements" which few actually read, respect, or even remember, managers are apparently trying to learn something. What is emerging is the knowledge that it is better to try to be "The Autonomous Man/Women", one's own person, and thus view the organisation and its culture with a grain of salt. It can be helpful, unhelpful, or simply tangential to one's needs and work activities. It is almost as if, in becoming similar and interchangeable (converging), corporate/organisational cultures have become, perhaps, merely emanations (avatars?) of the wider society's culture, which is in this case, for the most part, Western European and North American in content.

Most people take or leave major parts of this general culture as they wish or require, in an unreflective manner. Our interests and commitments determine to a large extent what parts we, mostly unconsciously, accept, overtly maintain, and actively transmit and what parts we consciously or unconsciously reject, as useless, irrelevant, or repugnant. Most of us breathe the air of our culture without hyperventilating or swim deep in the relatively clear water of that culture without apparent effort (we are able to "see through it", in

more ways than one), coming-up for air when we wish and for refreshment. Some of us have to (or are forced to) swim in a murky soup-like liquid (where vision becomes impaired), because that is how we have come to define the medium in which we are immersed, either through flawed learning or objective oppression and exploitation. (But that is another story beyond the scope of this paper.)

In a discussion of this paper with the authors, J.D.'s daughter, Antonia M. Dietmann, (a promising undergraduate Psychology student) remarked that this watery/soupy image reminded her of a Stevie Smith poem. This poem, about a drowned swimmer, and by inference all of us, contains the following lines:

"I was much too far out all my life
 And not waving but drowning."

What we all want are organisations and societies where people, when swimming, *as we all must*, are waving not drowning.

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