

Introducing the Three Types of Context



[Context is everything!](#) Well, maybe not everything, but definitely more important than most like to admit. It is much easier to think that we can craft a strategy so powerful, create a model so logical, design a process so efficient that everyone will see the brilliance in our methods and follow us to the ends of the earth. This is very naïve thinking at best and maybe even a little delusional. I am doing a lot of thinking about how we can create a more objective view of the context that surrounds us and plays such a critical role in our endeavors and how to use that context to our advantage.

It would be nice if context was simple and we could plot its effect on a single set of X and Y axes and categorize the results into a nice, simple 2x2 grid that would make it easy to understand and control. Unfortunately, it isn't that easy. So far I have identified three major categories of context. If you have other ideas, please post your thoughts.

Structural context is the context designed into the organization. It largely describes things like decision-making authority, span of control, and distribution of resources. But it also reflects the stated values of the organization's leaders on such things as risk taking, empowerment, customer engagement, and employee satisfaction. It is typically commonly interpreted across the organization. Structural context can be difficult to understand because it often reflects what organizational leaders say they want – not necessarily what they are actually producing.

Cultural context is the context we hear about most. It represents what the majority of employees believe about the organization. It can be tightly aligned with the structural context or it can be wildly out of sync. While structural context reflects what the organization says about how it works, cultural context typically is a better reflection of how it really does work. Cultural context can also be difficult to understand because most large companies are made up of many subcultures. For example, there may be very different cultures in the sales, HR, and engineering organizations.

Personal context is the context we think about the least. As we attempt to navigate the organization's structural and cultural context, we are caught up in our own personal context. Personal context includes things like our beliefs, values, past experiences, ambitions, and fears. Often the conflict between personal and structure contexts creates the biggest problems for us.

The bottom

*line:*_____

Context is all around us. We cannot avoid it and can rarely tame it. We can, however, learn to identify it, leverage it when possible, and mitigate its effects when necessary. If you are a change agent: leader, strategist, innovator, or architect, understanding each of the three contexts is critically important to your success.