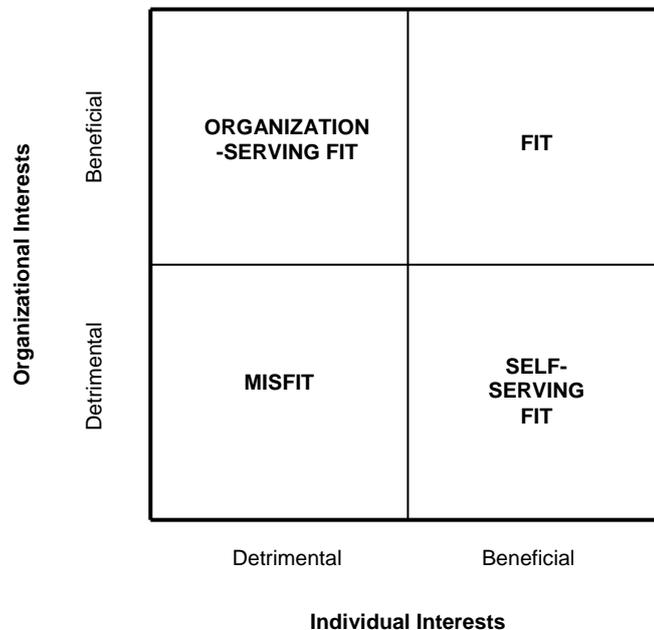


The Cooler: A Cinematic Example of Self-Serving and Organisation-Serving Fit

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Introduction

In Billsberry, van Meurs, Coldwell and Marsh (2006), my colleagues and I developed a testable model of fit that we hoped would integrate the fit literature. Underpinning this model was the idea that person–work environment fit is based on an interaction between two parties, the employees and their organisations. Both of these parties make assessments about the fit or misfit of employees and whether employees' employment is beneficial or detrimental. At the heart of this framework was a two-by-two grid that categorised four different types of fit (see Figure 1 below). The two axes are the perceptions of the employees and the employers (as assessed by influential organisational representatives), which are divided into beneficial and detrimental sections.



We defined the four categories of fit in the following ways:

- *Fit*: When the compatibility is beneficial for both parties
- *Misfit*: When the compatibility is detrimental to both parties. In other words, when there is incompatibility between the two parties that is detrimental to both
- *Self-Serving Fit*: When the compatibility is in the interests of the individual, but detrimental for the organization
- *Organization-Serving Fit*: When the compatibility is in the interests of the organization, but detrimental for the individual

The first two categories speak for themselves, although it is interesting that this way of modelling fit and misfit defines away some of the difficulties in the literature. In particular, the debate over whether fit is good or bad for organisations dissolves away

as a person cannot be deemed a 'fit' if their employment is detrimental to the organisation. So, in the oft-cited hypothetical case of an organisation with a high degree of fit causing cloning, fewer new ideas or inability to adapt, such employees would be seen as detrimental to the organisation and would hence become an organisation with a high level of self-serving fit, not a high level of fit.

Self-serving fit is the state when the employee thinks their employment is beneficial to him or her, but an organisational representative (say, the employee's line manager) thinks it is detrimental. A classic example of a person in this state would be someone who, in their winding down to retirement, is contributing very little. It would also include the person who no longer contributes but who cannot be fired (I find myself thinking of Lester in *American Beauty* (1999) as he blackmails his employer into a pay-off) and the poorly-managed lazy employee.

Organisation-serving fit is, perhaps, easier to conceptualise than self-serving fit. A very clear example would be the conscripted soldier who would rather be at home. A more common organisational example is the employee who dislikes his or her work but has no opportunity to move jobs, who continues to perform well in the role. Interestingly, we have gathered data in an empirical study that suggests that about three times as many people classify themselves as organisation-serving fits as compared to those who classify themselves as misfits.

Although I have mentioned some examples, these two new forms of fit are difficult to conceptualise. The purpose of this paper is to describe a cinematic example of these two forms of fit that may be useful in helping people understand their nature.

***The Cooler* (2003)**

Synopsis

Shelly Kaplow (Alec Baldwin) runs the Shangri-La casino in Las Vegas. He is under pressure from the owners to 're-vitalise' the casino and increase profits to compete with the new style casinos on the strip; "There comes a time to decide whether you're running museum or you're running a casino".

Shelly employs Bernie Lootz (William H. Macy). He has a knack of 'cooling' gamblers' luck just by standing close to them. Bernie gives Shelly seven days' notice after almost six years of employment. Bernie is fond of casino waitress and resident prostitute, Natalie Belisario (Maria Bello) who is unaware of his existence. Shortly after he announces he is leaving, Natalie begins to take an interest in him despite his awkwardness and an affair flourishes. Once in love, his ability to 'cool' gamblers transforms and he has the adverse effect on their fortunes. At this point in the film, an important part of the back story is revealed. Bernie cost Shelly a lot of money in a previous venture. Shelly smashed Bernie's knee with a baseball bat and an arrangement was made for Bernie to repay the debt by working for Shelly for six years. The film starts seven days before those six years are up.

Bernie's son appears with his pregnant partner. The son asks Bernie for money to buy food to nourish his grandchild. Bernie gives him \$3000, which his son uses as stake money to pull a scam on the casino in which Bernie works. Shelly finds out and takes

the son and his pregnant partner to the backroom to sort them out. To save their lives, Bernie offers to make good their debt meaning that he must continue to work for Shelly.

“I love you, Bernie.” When Shelly realises that Natalie has fallen in love with the cooler (he had wanted her to supply Bernie with some companionship to keep him happy), he tells her to end it with Bernie immediately or else. She leaves Bernie a note ending the affair and Bernie finds himself and everyone around him in loser mode again. But Natalie returns to Bernie and, lo and behold, everyone’s in winner mode again. Shelly realises what has happened and pays Natalie a visit that makes it clear to her that she must leave or face the direst consequences. When Bernie sees the damage Shelly wrought on Natalie, they decide to flee Las Vegas.

Illustrating types of fit

When effective as a cooler, Bernie illustrates a person exhibiting organisation-serving fit. He does not wish to work in the casino and wants to leave, but he is kept there by his debt to Shelly. Shelly keeps Bernie around because he is ‘the best there is’. In summary, Bernie’s employment is detrimental to him, but beneficial to the organisation.

When he falls in love, Bernie illustrates a person exhibiting self-serving fit. He is in love, he is happy and he is working closely with his partner. Although he still wants to leave, he gets benefits from work. The organisation, on the other hand, receives no benefits at all. In fact, Bernie causes them to lose a lot of money. It is interesting that when the organisation realises there is a misfit (from their perspective), they are strenuous in their efforts to remedy the situation. When Bernie perceived himself as a misfit, he could not leave or find a suitable remedy; he had to put up with his lot.

The film illustrates another aspect of fit; its dynamic nature. It shows two interesting aspects of the dynamic nature of fit. First, it shows how transitions between types of fit can happen very rapidly. Second, it shows how transitions in type of fit can stem from trigger events; in this case, Bernie falling in and out of love.

Using the film

Normally, films are used in the management education classroom by showing short scenes to illustrate particular concepts. This approach is unlikely to work with this film as the fit themes develop throughout the film and individual scenes are unlikely to be meaningful. As a result, students need to view the whole film prior to the teaching session. Options for doing this include directing students to rental outlets, supplying the film on tape or DVD, or arranging a showing, possibly via a university film club.

One aspect of this film may limit its use in the management education classroom. It is an adult movie that, according to the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), ‘contains strong sex, language, violence and drug use’. Despite this, they only awarded the film a ‘15’ certificate meaning that they decided that only people of 15 years of age and older should see the film. The film is usually classified as an ‘art house’ or ‘independent’ film and the strong sex, language, violence and drug use is

essential to the plot; it does not appear contrived or exploitative. I would not have any reservations about using a film containing this sort of content with my adult students, but this is a personal choice. Although this is a high quality film and the fit themes are strong and thought-provoking, a word of warning seems appropriate.

Reference

Billsberry, J., van Meurs, N., Coldwell, D.A.L. and Marsh, P.J.G. (2006) Towards a conceptual and explanatory model of fit. Paper presented at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting, Atlanta, GA.