ASCENT

Executive Assessment Report



Michael Alvarez

President, Organic Snacks Division
Cardinal Harvest Naturals

October 15, 2026

Cardinal Harvest Naturals is a fictitious company created by Ascent for simulation purposes for use at Stanford Directors College 2026. Any resemblance to actual persons or companies is purely coincidental.

This Executive Assessment Report has been designed specifically for this simulation exercise and, in the interest of brevity for the exercise, includes only a subset of Ascent's typical assessment content.

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Table of Contents

3 Executive Summary

4 Strengths & Opportunities

5 Past, Present, Motivation, Culture Fit

7 Detailed Results: Past Experience

8 Detailed Results: Current Capabilities

9 Detailed Results: Implicit Motivation

10 Detailed Results: Culture Contrast & Hogan's MVPI

11 Recommendations

12 Appendix

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For more on approach and assessment methodology, see appendix.

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Executive Summary

THE CONTEXT

- Cardinal Harvest Naturals (CHN) is a 50-year-old firm that has focused on fresh and healthy ingredients based on sustainable, organic, all-natural farming, growing from a couple with a pushcart in farmers' markets to become a $5b company with operations across 40 states and 7 countries.
- However, in recent years CHN has faced a number of challenges: two major recalls in 2024 and 2025, and the CEO needing to step down for health reasons, as well as getting pressure from an activist investor to replace the CEO quickly to begin addressing a declining market reputation for innovation and quality. The CEO will need to address both internal and external challenges.



Excellent fit to role based on job specification

Ex Fit to role

G Fit to role

Mix Fit to role

Ltd Fit to role

THE CANDIDATE

Michael Alvarez, President, Organic Snacks Division, CHN

- Michael is a quietly gifted operational leader, with deep experience in the natural and organic food sector in general and Cardinal Harvest Naturals in particular. As leader of one of the largest divisions, he has successfully driven increased productivity as well as growth to take advantage of that productivity.
- After receiving a BS in Psychology and Food Science, Michael moved into the natural and organic food sector, where he has been his entire career, focused initially on branding and then moving into operational leadership. Most of his career has been spent at CHN, starting in the Cereal Division and then into Organic Snacks, obtaining an MBA along the way.
- Michael has repeatedly demonstrated operational ability: stabilizing businesses dealing with volatile supply chains, strengthening underperforming divisions, and unifying silos to work together.
- In general, Michael is very comfortable working internally on multiple levels to create operational excellence and improvement; his opportunity is to move his vision outside CHN to the larger market and to potential creative partnerships.
- Michael has never served as the top-of-house CEO; he's always had someone behind him. While very capable internally, he may need to shift his outlook to become the face of CHN. Also, while experienced in brand management, it is a different task to manage an entire organization's reputation in the market and to Wall Street, so he may need some support to address CHN's reputational challenges.

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Strengths & Opportunities

STRENGTHS

Long-Term Operational Improvement
Michael has repeatedly introduced sustainable and measurable process improvements across his organization; recently, he even facilitated the merger of two subdivisions in order to create a significant increase in productivity and efficiencies through shared resources based on a carefully calculated analysis of costs and benefits. He is always searching for ways to improve operations.

Operational and Quality Excellence
Michael has demonstrated a strong commitment to quality standards and an exceptional ability to introduce changes to systems and processes; his division has the best track record for quality in CHN and has implemented state-of-the-art systems successfully more than once. He is a very safe pair of hands to maintain quality.

Team Alignment
Michael is extremely good at managing and empowering his staff; he involves them in decisions and empowers them to take the lead on projects with clear higher-end guidance rather than close management, though on occasion his strong Achievement motive drives him to get more deeply involved into an improvement project, he is careful to maintain a “team member” status rather than dictating the direction.

OPPORTUNITIES

Strategic Focus
While Michael is comfortable making plans that identify evolving priorities and contingencies for the Organic Snacks division over a year out, as CEO he would ideally need to think on a larger scale and over a longer time span, and consider a wider range of options than he does today.

Innovation
Michael’s operational improvements are significant and sustainable, but he tends to focus on creating efficiencies rather than on inventive breakthroughs or using lateral, out-of-the-box thinking. His ability to work with his team and his peers suggests that even if he is not personally innovative, he would definitely be open to the innovations of others, so long as they do not threaten quality.

Partnering
Michael is very good at empowering his team to act thoughtfully without direct guidance, and has shown his ability to be a good, collaborative team player, but at this level he would benefit significantly from being able to facilitate collaboration among different parts of the firm or to lead a partnership with outside firms.

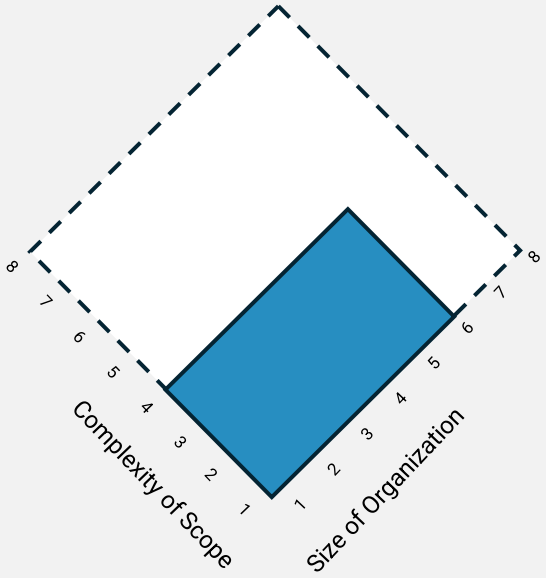
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Past, Present, Motivation, Culture Fit

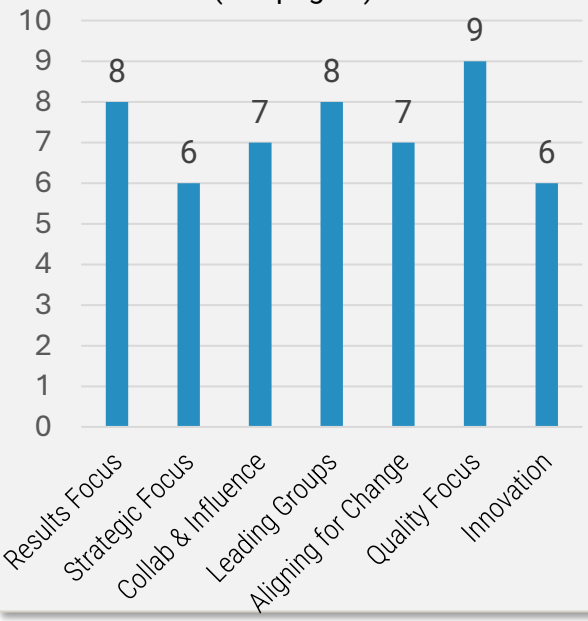
DATA SUMMARY

This page summarizes the graphs for each of the core assessment elements; each element has a page of its own going into the details of each element.

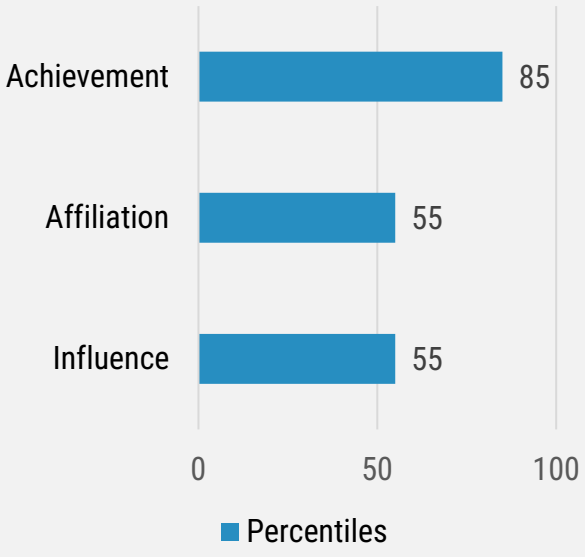
Past Experience
(see page 7)



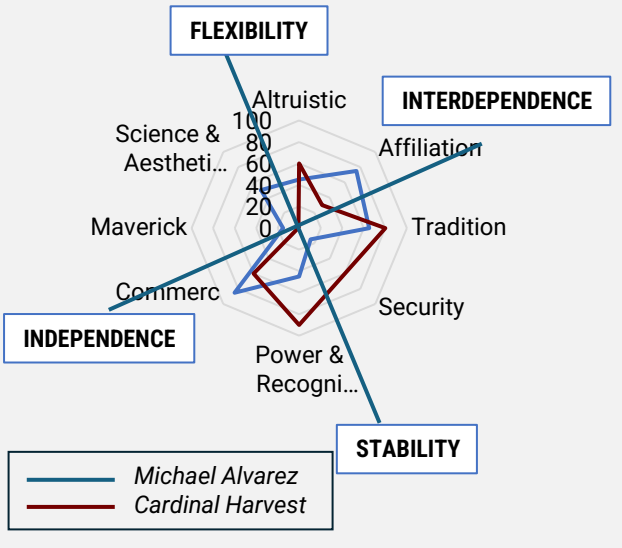
Present Capabilities
(see page 8)



Ascent Implicit Motivation Index
(see page 9)



Culture Contrast
(see page 10)



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Detailed Results

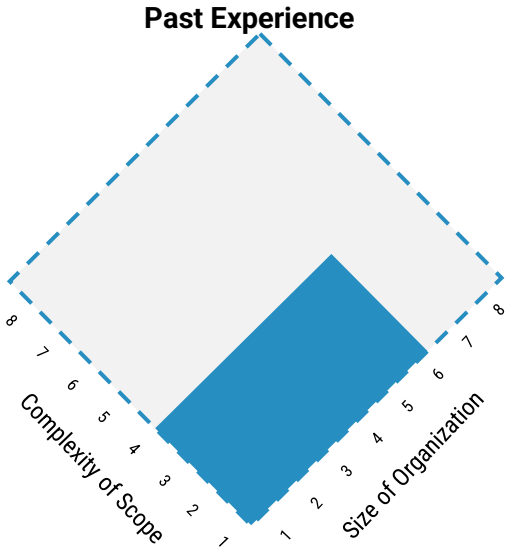
- Past Experience
- Current Capabilities
- Implicit Motivation
- Culture Contrast & Hogan’s MVPI
- Recommendations

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Candidate's Past Experience (Company Size & Scope)

SUMMARY

To date, Michael has managed an organization with approximately 12,000+ employees, as the full manager of a business unit.



Lvl	Size	Scope
1	<250	• Sub-function
2	250-499	• Function, e.g., head of HR, single country & business
3	500-999	• Multi-function single country/business or Regional function, e.g., regional CFO or Global Compensation
4	1,000-4,999	• Business head • Multi-country/regional multi-function • Global function, e.g., CFO
5	5,000-9,999	• Multi-business • Multi-country/regional • Global multi-function, e.g., Chief Admin
6	10,000-24,999	• Multi-country/regional multi-business, e.g. CEO Transport Group • Global Business, e.g., Group President
7	25,000-49,999	• Head of Global Multi-Business
8	50,000+	• CEO of Global Enterprise (~Fortune 250)

KEY FINDINGS

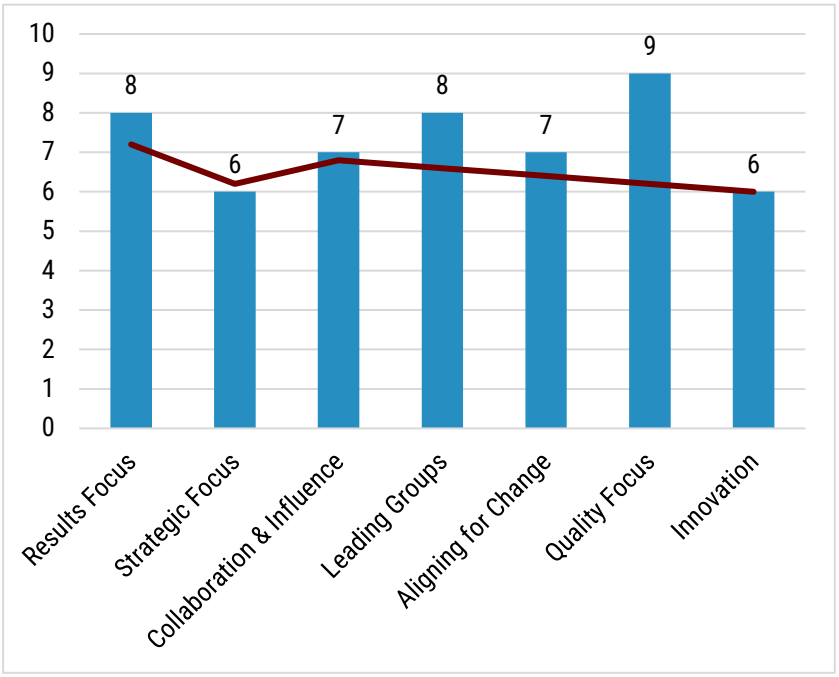
- **Size**: Michael currently manages approximately 12,000 people in the Organic Snacks division
- **Scope**: Michael is effectively a divisional CEO, running the Organic Snacks division, which is a business unit with a full range of functions

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Candidate's Current Capabilities

THE METRIC

Ascent's Executive Capabilities are behaviorally anchored capability scales designed for top leaders. The Core Six differentiate performance on virtually all senior leaders. Data are drawn from story-based behavioral interviewing.



Results Focus
8 [+.8 above F500 norm of 7.2]

Michael has repeatedly made thoughtful and calculated incremental improvements to CHN's processes and systems with measurable impact

Strategic Focus
6 [~at F500 norm of 6.2]

Michael segments the total market, adopting a longer-term perspective, articulating evolving threats and opportunities to the company over a year ahead

Collaboration & Influence
7 [~at F500 norm of 6.8]

Michael collaborates fully as a team member and compromises for win-win solutions

Leading Groups
8 [+1.4 above F500 norm of 6.6]

Michael empowers his team to deliver against strategic objectives based on deep insight into capabilities; he recruits strategically for potential and bench strength

Aligning for Change
7 [Half a Standard Deviation above F500 norm of 6.4]

Michael advocates for change with a compelling message for people to join in. He tends to focus on improving current company processes rather than radical change.

Quality Focus
9 [+2.8 above F500 executive norm of 6.2; +1 above F500 first-line manager norm of 7.9]

Michael implements new, best-in-class systems and processes to ensure and improve consistent quality

Innovation
6 [at F500 norm of 6]

Michael actively seeks new ideas from known or local sources.

BOTTOM LINE

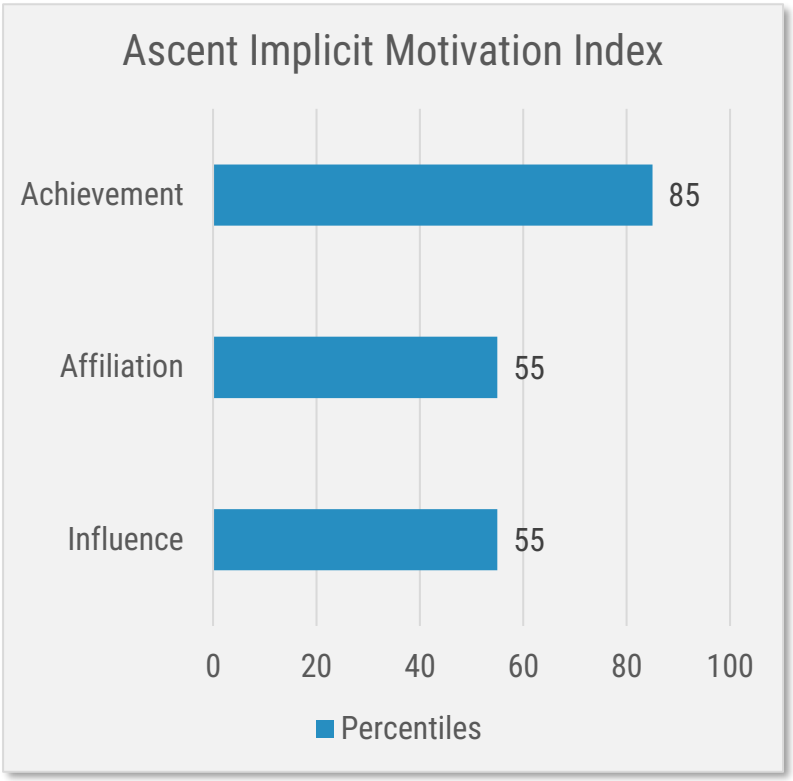
Michael scores at or above the level of large-scale executives for most capabilities, and significantly above the mean in terms of Leading Groups and Quality Focus, and borderline for Results Focus. In brief, he brings general management ability appropriate to larger organizations than he currently manages, and exceptional ability to empower groups to create operational improvements.

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Candidate's Implicit Motivation

THE METRIC

Implicit motivation is the set of deep, nonconscious emotional drives that energize people over time. They do not indicate what people can do, but what people are motivated to do. This is measured through the Ascent Implicit Motivation tool, a specialized projective test of spontaneous expression, and key evidence components in the career and behavioral interview.



KEY FINDINGS

- Michael brings a profile that emphasizes entrepreneurship and improvement through and with people.
- ***Achievement motive***: Michael shows a very strong efficiency-focused motive for improvement, looking for opportunities to beat past results and raise the bar through improvement, especially regarding efficiency and operational excellence.
- ***Affiliation motive***: Michael has average levels of Affiliation; his commitment to CHN may reflect his enjoyment of belonging to a company with a family orientation and a positive identity; it may also indicate one reason he prefers to collaborate as a team member rather than assert authority.
- ***Influence motive****:* Michael has solid levels of Influence motive, which fuel his management and leadership ability, and would support increased organizational growth over time, moderating the individualistic focus of his very high Achievement motive.

IMPLICATIONS

Michael's high Achievement motive may incline him towards a hands-on approach, potentially balanced by Influence-driven awareness of organizational impact and his cost-benefit awareness of his time; Michael is also heavily tilted towards an efficiency-based improvement, meaning he prefers fixing and upgrading the old over creating the brand-new, though he is not hostile to innovation. What moderates this hands-on approach is a significant degree of Influence motive, which leads him to want to delegate (Influence) for increased (Achievement) efficiency.

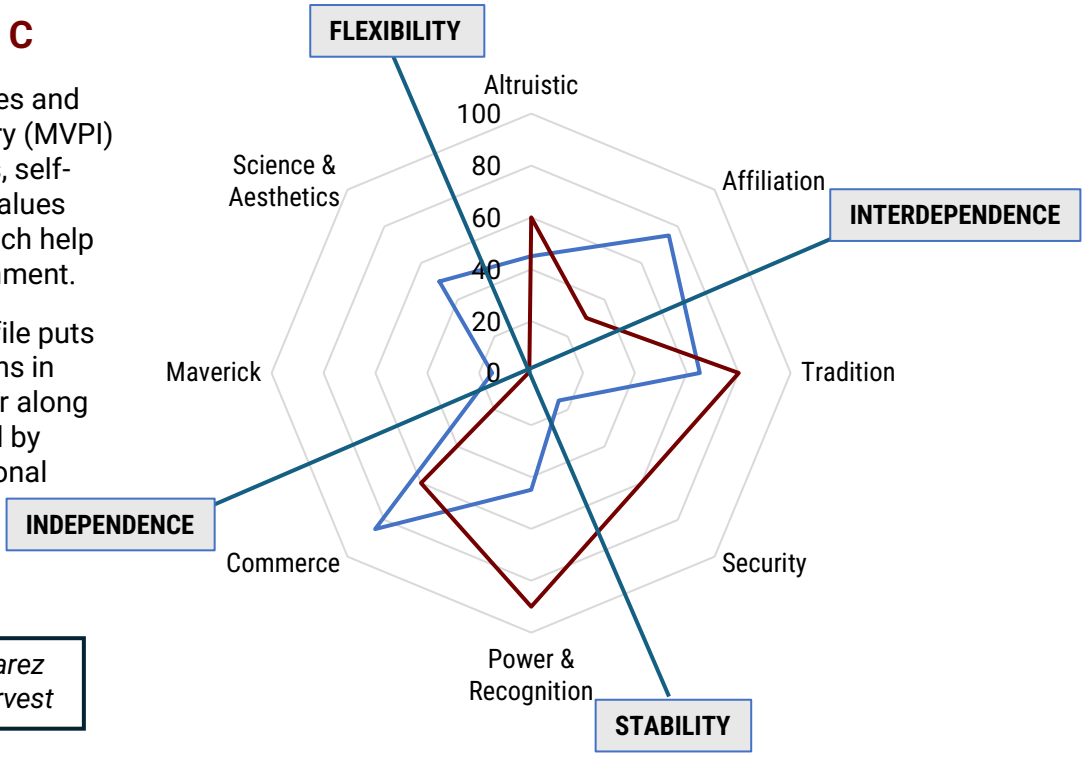
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Culture Contrast & Hogan's MVPI

THE METRIC

Hogan Motives Values and Preferences Inventory (MVPI) measures conscious, self-attributed motives, values and preferences, which help identify cultural alignment.

This specialized profile puts the Hogan dimensions in relation to each other along major axes identified by extensive organizational culture research.



KEY FINDINGS

Michael's profile is focused on the upper right and lower left quadrants, and overall more on the right, or in sum, delivering business results through collective action based on time-tested methods. Cardinal Harvest Naturals' profile is also focused more on the right quadrants, with an emphasis on being recognized as delivering an excellent product over time, in ways that benefit others.

- *Strongest alignments*:
  - Commerce: both prioritize delivering commercial results, although Michael shows stronger drive in this area, which may indicate his passion for making operational improvements
  - Tradition: both Michael and CHN strongly value group alignment on accepted approaches
  - Maverick (low): Neither CHN or Michael value operating individualistically unless focused on commercial results.
- *Largest misalignments:*
  - Science & Aesthetics: Michael has a stronger commitment to experimentation than CHN, as reflected in his approach to commercial improvement
  - Security: CHN has a stronger commitment to security, as befits the desire to deliver predictable levels of quality; Michael appreciates reliability, but does not prioritize this value
  - Affiliation: Michael has a much higher concern for inclusion and friendly interaction than CHN

IMPLICATIONS

Despite his long tenure at CHN, Michael's values appear somewhat at odds with CHN. His focus on a collective, affiliative culture is compatible with but reinforcing the Interdependence focus of the primarily Tradition-focused firm, but his meaningful levels of Science & Aesthetics and low level of Security suggest he is more interested in making improvements than worried about stability. This suggests a reasonable gap.

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Recommendations

SUPPORTING FUTURE SUCCESS

Strategic Focus: Michael's internal improvement focus means we did not see how far he might look into the future if he were in that position; he planned beyond the year and made sustainable improvements, but he would significantly benefit from raising his strategic ability to begin looking into the next business cycle in order to influence it today.

External Leadership Focus: Michael has a commanding knowledge of his own organization and how to make it better, but he needs to focus externally as well, to think about ways to impact the market beyond his existing experience in brand management, to building (or rebuilding, in the case of recent challenges) a company reputation. This would also support an increased Strategic Focus.

Engagement and Partnership: Michael is adept at collaborating with the cross-functional teams related to his division, as expected for a division president. If promoted to CEO, he will need to raise his level of Collaboration from being a good team player to becoming a facilitator of relationships among others, as a starting place to learn to build partnerships outside the firm.

Innovation: Michael is comfortable at implementing improvements to existing systems and processes, including new tools and systems; but he would benefit from applying this to his brand and marketing focus as well, to think of new products to broaden market impact.

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Appendix

Definitions

- Leadership Capability
- Implicit Motivation
- Ascent Culture Framework

Your Assessors

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Definitions: Leadership Capability

Capability	Definition
Results Focus	This competency measures a person's desire to deliver results and improvement of results. It progresses from working hard through working to meet or beat a specific goal, through the introduction of improvements to create better results. At the highest levels of the scale, a person changes what the organization or even the industry can do, creating far greater results.
Strategic Focus	This competency measures how deeply a person sees into the marketplace (Market Insight), their ability to make sense of it (Making Sense), and then creating a plan to move forward (Making Plans, Strategies) over time. At higher levels, they develop a strategy that conceptualizes and incorporates complex market issues, providing a clear concept for the future that enables people to move forward.
Leading Groups	This competency is about bringing together individuals as part of a team, guiding and motivating them to act, delegating responsibility, and holding them accountable for performance. It applies to leading virtual teams, not just formal leadership positions. At the highest levels, a person will create empowered leaders to execute efficiently through the layers of the organization and across geographies.
Collaboration & Influence	This competency focuses on the ability to connect with, influence, engage, and partner with others over whom one has no direct control or authority. People working at the highest levels of this scale will create enduring partnerships across barriers. This capability incorporates collaboration, influencing, and networking.
Aligning for Change	This competency is about bringing a message of change and getting people on board with it. It is typically found only in executives who can align not just a team but an organization around a vision or direction. At highest levels, they not only act as change leader themselves, but creates a series of change leaders to support a coordinated effort
Developing People & Organizations	This competency is about the longer-term development of people and organizations. At lower ends, it is about giving feedback and coaching to individuals, then to teams; at higher levels it is about developing the talent of an organization and influencing how development is done in a business.

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Definitions: Ascent's Leadership Capabilities (Additional)

Capability	Definition
Quality Focus	This capability measures maintaining quality, accuracy or precision, having high standards and meeting them in detail. At lower levels, it is a personal focus, with a particular attention to detail and quality. At higher levels, it is a focus on others, then a focus on enabling systems and processes to produce reliably and at a standard of quality. Note: this capability requires an attention to detail that is negatively correlated with working at the level of a Fortune 500 CEO, but manageable at a mid- or smaller level of scale.
Innovation	This competency measures experimentation as a basis for innovation: taking calculated risks with a known likelihood of failure, as long as it is possible to learn from those failures, or prevent future issues. This capability can draw on people leadership that have been proven to enhance or unlock innovation, such as tapping into diverse perspectives and types of expertise. It progresses from being open and accepting of new ideas to experimenting formally and at scale. At the highest level, this scale describes a global sparking of innovation across people and organizations.

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Definitions: Implicit Motivation

Dimension	Definition
Achievement Motive (Efficiency and Innovation)	Energized by meeting and beating goals, personally improving the way things are done, doing and learning new things, doing **better.** Subtypes: • Efficiency focus: analytically reducing uncertainty, improving performance methodically and incrementally • Innovation focus: creating major conceptual improvements, "step-change" performance improvement
Affiliation Motive (Interpersonal)	Energized by getting along with people, belonging to a group, personal relationships, engaging socially, being **friendly.** Subtypes: • Trusting: Belonging, trusting others, giving without expectation of return • Anxious: Worry about damaging relationships, hurting feelings; concern for fairness in relationships • Mistrustful: Anticipates failures of relationships, assumes inconsistency in behavior and intent
Influence Motive (Impact on others)	Energized by having an impact on or influence on individuals, groups, or the world at large, having **impact.** Stages: • Personalized Power: Having an impact on others to make oneself feel strong • Socialized Influence: Having an impact on others for the good of the whole • Empowerment Drive: Power shared as power multiplied; growing the overall power of the group

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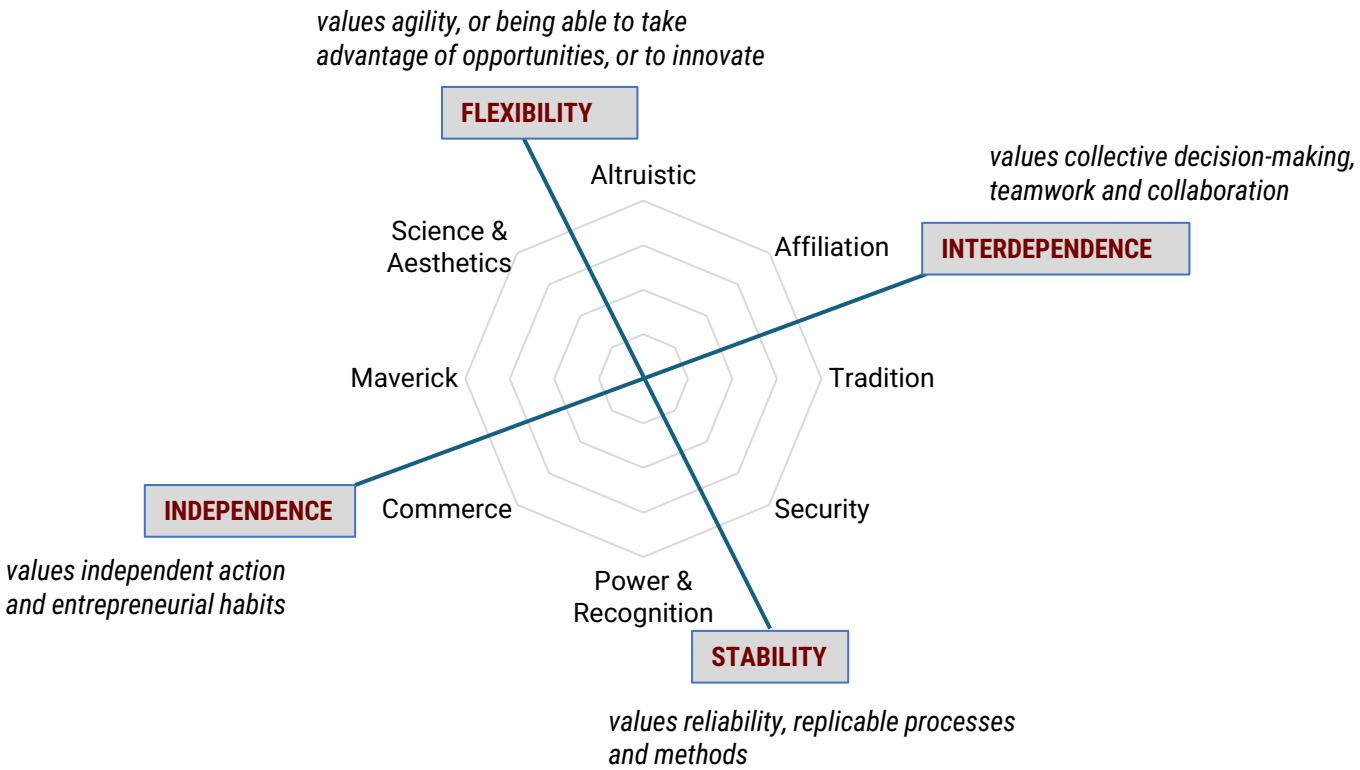
Definitions: Ascent Culture Framework (Culture Contrast)

Building on Shalom Schwartz' work on organizational culture, this analysis maps the ten Hogan MVPI scales onto a two-axis graph. Each dimension is a different expression of values, and none are inherently good or bad, nor do they preclude an organization from developing in other dimensions.

The Axes:

Independence/Interdependence: focused on ***individual focus*** (freedom of action, individual preference) vs ***collective focus*** (collective action, cooperation)

Flexibility/Stability: focused on ***adaptation/openness*** (able to do whatever works, to adapt and change) vs ***prevention/protection*** (reliability, predictability of delivering on goals, reduction of risk)



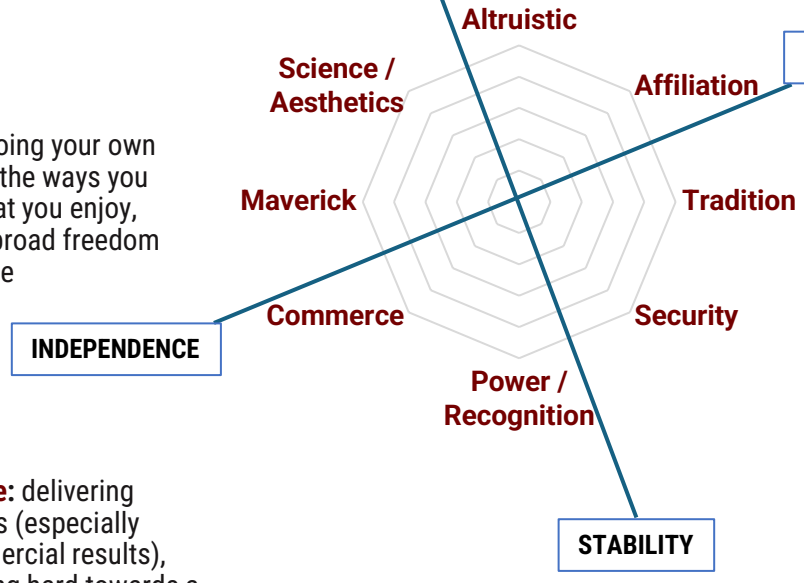
Ascent Culture Framework: Specific Values

In combining MVPI dimensions along the Schwartz model, some of the definitions of the MVPI may appear to shift, as the model emphasizes subtly different aspects of each personality dimension.

Altruism: thinking about the big picture, doing the right thing, helping the less fortunate and society

Science/Aesthetics: valuing independent experimentation, creative self-expression, exploration and learning

Affiliation: concerned with social interaction and inclusion, thinking about others, helping



Maverick: doing your own thing in the ways you like, what you enjoy, having broad freedom of choice

Tradition: working collectively in more predictable ways, valuing quality, alignment

Commerce: delivering results (especially commercial results), working hard towards a goal, being pragmatic, capable and driven

Security: valuing structure and predictability, avoiding risk through planning

Power/Recognition: being seen by others as personally successful, values their reputation, position and ability to be influential

Your Assessor:
Stephen P. Kelner, Jr.,
President & Co-Founder, Ascent



PhD, personality psychology (motivation), Boston University

EdM, Harvard University

AB, Harvard University

- Based in Boston, Steve Kelner is President and Co-Founder of Ascent, where he also oversees leadership assessment and developmental practices. He brings over 30 years of expertise in the nature of top leadership and how to evaluate and develop it, advising global firms, including creating the leadership evaluation process for the two leading executive search firms.
- Prior to joining Ascent, Steve served as the Global Thought Leader for Assessment and Development at Spencer Stuart. There he drove the advancement of all Spencer Stuart's assessment, reporting, and developmental methodology, developing consultant and corporate capability as well as consulting to global clients on assessment, CEO succession planning, transition and development, board effectiveness, and change.
- Previously, Steve developed and executed the assessment and development methodology at Egon Zehnder, including their leadership and potential assessment, development, team effectiveness, and board review approaches, all while working with clients globally.
- Before his seventeen years with the search industry, Steve was Senior Director of Services for WebCT (now Blackboard), building the consulting and training arm of the leading provider of online platforms for higher education. He came to that from the Center for Quality of Management, a nonprofit focused on mutual learning for executive leadership.
- Steve started his career with seven years with Hay/McBer, ultimately as a senior consultant and director of new products and services, including co-creating the first valid set of scaled leadership competencies.
- He has multiple publications, both fiction and nonfiction, including numerous articles and a forthcoming book on leadership: Where You Can Lead, as well as a book on motivating writers and creativity, and is a member of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations as well as the Association for Psychological Science. He is currently collaborating with fellow motivational psychologists on research to apply AI to motive scoring.

Your Assessor:
Ziva Mann
Director of Assessment & Development, Ascent



MA, Harvard University

BA, Barnard College

- Based in Boston, Ziva co-leads Ascent's assessment and development work. She designs and delivers rigorous, unbiased assessments that are predictive of performance and joy in work. Ziva interweaves assessment with Ascent's program offerings, crafting and delivering impactful, precisely targeted programs to leaders across the world, in private, public and NGO sectors.
- Thoughtful and perpetually curious, Ziva started in education and community building in New England, before joining a transformation team in Massachusetts's safety net healthcare system. There, she led a program for stakeholder engagement in data-driven change which became nationally recognized, award-winning, and spread internationally. Her work for 100 Million Healthier Lives, the Institute of Healthcare Improvement, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and PCORI has supported the development of generative, collaborative leaders, working for health, wellbeing and equity in their communities.
- Ziva has a BA (magna cum laude) from Barnard, and MA from Harvard. Author of a number of books and articles, her most recent article describes her work designing a national research network for rare diseases. She currently serves on the board of the National Bleeding Disorders Foundation. In her spare time, she is pursuing a doctorate in sustainable change at Case Western Reserve University.