
If Your Company Were a Political Party, Which Would It Be?



By Ayman Jawhar , INSEAD

Four simple questions will tell you where your organisation stands on today's wide-ranging ideological spectrum.

There's a taboo around political conversations at work. We assume work is separate from the real and sensitive politics of the external world. The state, as a proxy for a political system, is seen to be responsible for climate, collective problems, management of violence and maintenance of our human capabilities. It promotes welfare, justice, equality, freedom, peace and many other values. Meanwhile, the sole responsibility of business is to make money. Business aims for profit and it's just 'different'.

As a result, few companies actively analyse their political culture and it's often left to the board and founders to implicitly, if at all, address that topic during busy steerco sessions. As product management morphs from a discrete corporate function to **a working culture all its own**, this legacy of shunting politics to the side will have to be rethought.

Digital and informational product development enjoys a shortcut to our minds. Tech-based industries and innovations lend themselves to faster and

more direct distribution of ideas. All companies are political actors, but product-based organisations actively shape global politics.

At the moment, there is a gap between political and business values that especially affects product companies. Scaleup [Basecamp](#) recently prevented anyone from talking politics at work. [Amazon](#) is trying to crush employee unions. [Google](#) employees called out their execs to support the Palestinian struggle against apartheid. Right wing [apps](#) are opening new channels for people who feel their political voices have been stifled by Big Tech practices such as “shadow banning”.

In this increasingly ethically challenged and political world, those companies may find it useful to reflect on what kind of political systems they are nourishing within their boundaries so they can be more intentional about creating the right ones. Otherwise, as [Twitter’s case](#) shows, you might think you’re a libertarian company but find yourself promoting extreme far-right agendas. Product companies need to bring their political identities to terms with their ethical values, and especially the broader values they want to see in society. Guardrails might need to be put in place to make their identities more explicit and coherent.

Know thyself

Political transformation starts with self-knowledge. As a first step, product-company leaders should perform a basic audit of their current political culture. Wading straight into this complex topic in all its nuance will likely overwhelm you. You can start out by positioning your organisational culture according to four essential binaries, summarised below:

1. Do you care more about the collective or individual goals (collectivism vs. individualism)? Are you more like Japan, characterised by its collective spirit which stems from a long history of community farming culture or Australia, which prides itself on the efforts of the individual, on the other extreme? How much do you value team outcomes vs individual super star product managers? As a new start-up team founder, you might want all your employees to be either Swiss Army knives helping each other out, or specialising and looking out for their departmental KPIs.

2. Do you prefer the concentration of power to be in many hands or a few (democracy vs. totalitarianism)? Switzerland's dispersed and multi-level power structure in government and their democratic voting are a stark contrast to a monarchy like Saudi Arabia. How often can your PMs filibuster a product decision made by the execs? If you're shipping a feature to avoid a hefty regulatory fine, you might even need to be a North Korea in this regard.
3. Do you care more about personal freedom or about people obeying power (libertarian vs. authoritarian)? Germany's experience after the fall of the Berlin wall has probably left it more libertarian than Hungary. Do your VPs compete for their yearly budgets or does the Exec team hand them a prescribed budget? Netflix's leadership controls with context setting and treats employees as their own leaders. Amazon's focus on standard procedures and employees quickly falling in line to tackle big challenges works differently on the other end.
4. Do you care about replacing fundamental principles or traditional and incremental change (radical vs. conservative)? The United States' heterogeneous makeup makes it more radical in its social policies than Iceland. Do you prioritise products that want to change meaning in societies or do you want to incrementally improve current problems? Stripe is rethinking economic infrastructure for the internet while Microsoft, until Satya Nadella arrived as CEO, could have been seen as conservatively iterating on computer software.

There are no straightforward answers to the above questions. Most likely, you will experience cognitive dissonance between your personal and professional identities when answering them. And these questions will vary at different levels (individual, team, group, company and ecosystem).

If this audit churns up tensions, it may be a good thing. You may or may not find it necessary to reconcile the organisational ideology with the personal politics of its leaders. Again, the aim is not perfect congruence but a greater awareness of where the company stands politically and the possible risks of that stance. Theoretically, no set of political values need be "superior" to the others in terms of its impact upon the world, as long as leaders know enough to create moral and ethical boundaries, and are serious about policing them.

The alternative – political denial – induces companies to present a political face to the world that transparently contradicts their actions. An executive committee recently decided that “Health For All” is a suitable motto for one of the current giant healthcare companies. That same company refuses to share its Covid vaccine formula with countries such as India which is currently being set back multiple generations due to the pandemic. Perhaps they’re frustrated libertarians?

Culture variants

On the positive side, we see a lot of product companies and startups publish their culture decks and live by their political identities (even if they do so subconsciously). Healthy product orgs intuitively understand that this helps them develop strong communities, formulate the right boundaries for their strategy and build the right social contract between management, employees and external stakeholders.

Video game’s company Valve’s new employee [handbook](#) says a lot about the company’s deeply held political views without a mention of the word ‘politics’. In a similar way, Basecamp’s letter to employees banning politics is in itself a very big political statement. Whether you agree with their principles or not, they clearly have thought about their political identity.

Due to the [prevalence](#) of neoliberalism, one might argue that the majority of firms today fall on the authoritarian-right wing quadrant of a political spectrum (economic left vs. economic right being one axis and authoritarian vs. libertarian being the other axis). However, the capabilities (decentralisation, semantic web, trust at scale...) of Web3.0’s different variations will be the next paradigm shift that enables diversity in value-creating political structures besides the usual [pyramid structure](#) at firms.

Something we can start investing in today is understanding our political culture, as part of a broader new work culture, a [product culture](#). This might be the beginning of reconciling our political and professional identities to build a better tomorrow.

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