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*Training People, Inspiring Growth*

## Take Steps to Really Welcome New Employees

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First impressions are lasting impressions. We never have a second chance to make a first impression. These are truisms that define success in all areas of our personal and professional lives. With respect to employee on-boarding and orientation practices, they ring even more true.

Recently, I was working with new employees in an organization facilitating customer service training. During one of the breaks, a young woman came to me and said, “You really need to talk to management here. If they really want us to be engaged and deliver extraordinary service, they shouldn’t just throw us into our jobs and hope that we figure it out.” On my drive back to the office, I began to think about why managers and human resource departments work so hard to hire and select the right people and then drop the ball after the offer letter has been signed. Could it be that most managers are simply too busy to spend quality time with new employees? Maybe they believe the hard work is already done. What if they believe that quality people should be able to hit the ground running without a lot of hand-holding? Maybe they believe it is just not that important given everything else that is happening around them.

Research at Corning Glass Works revealed that employees who attended an effective, structured orientation program were 69% more likely to remain with the company after three years than those who did not go through such a program. Another organization, Hunter Douglas found that by upgrading their on-boarding process, they were able to reduce their turnover from a staggering 70% at six months, to 16%. Betty Lou Smith, vice president of corporate HR at Hunter Douglas, discovered the primary reason for their high turnover was because new employees never felt a connection to their new company. If management and co-workers act like they don’t care about new employees, it is guaranteed that new hires will stop caring about the organization and regret their decision to accept the position. A 2003 study by Hewitt Associates revealed that companies who invested the most time and resources in on-boarding enjoyed the highest levels of employee engagement.

Think back to your first day of work with a new organization. Did it feel like this? You started by sitting in the lobby for 30 minutes while the receptionist tried to figure out what to do

with you because your new manager was in a meeting. Then, you were herded into a large conference room with a group of new hires while the HR representative rushed around to get the laptop working so you could be lulled to sleep with PowerPoint chloroform. You spent the entire morning filling out forms, listening to speakers drone on about policies, and watching the obligatory sexual harassment video. Then, since your manager was still in a meeting, you were handed off to the most cynical, negative person in the department for “on the job coaching.” When your manager finally caught up with you, she took you to a spare cubicle because your work area wasn’t going to be available for a few days. She had you work on some paperwork that had nothing to do with your job to make you feel like you were contributing. People walked by you, staring and wondering who you were and if you were friend or foe. Did you feel inspired or like you had just made the worst mistake known to man in accepting this job?

According to David Lee, founder and principal of HumanNature@Work, there are four common, deadly mistakes managers and human resource professionals make when orienting new employees:

1. Trying to cram 20 hours worth of information into four mind-numbing hours of orientation. Best practices break orientation into bite-sized chunks, customize it around the new hire’s needs, and adapt the process to align with individual learning styles. They also off-load as much of the information as possible to company intranets for access when needed.
2. Running a slipshod, “fly by the seat of your pants” program. This sends the message that you are a slipshod, second-rate company. Effective on-boarding practices begin before the employee shows up the first day and are well planned with meaningful activities for months, not days. At Edgewood Tool and Manufacturing, a contract stamping company for the automotive industry, every manager who hired a new employee was required to write a 120 day orientation play for the new employee. It involved one action a day. These might include meeting the Director of Quality, calling on a customer, and having lunch with the CEO.
3. Making your new hire orientations as dull as watching paint dry. Adult learners do not learn best by lecture. Work hard to create a unique, positive, varied orientation experience that leaves the new employee feeling “WOW!” At NHHEAF Network Organizations, corporate trainer Joan Goeckel has new hires go on a “Scavenger Hunt and Tour” with a list of items and people to locate and a

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map. Besides it being more fun, it is more effective. Mark Murphy, CEO, Leadership IQ suggests that organizations send reading materials to a new employee after he or she has signed the acceptance letter. This is the time when employees are most anxious and excited about their decision. They are much more likely to read manuals and handbooks now than at any other point in employment.

Be creative and begin the on-boarding process before the employee's first day at work. Mr. Murphy suggests some simple ways to connect early in a positive way. First, send a "welcome" card signed by you and all of your employees to the new hire's home. This will make him or her feel valued and excited about joining your team. Next, assemble a roster of your current team, including photos where possible. Include everyone's name, title, years of service, one sentence about their job functions, and then something fun like their favorite movie, vacation spot, or restaurant. This gives the new employee something memorable to read and makes your team seem approachable. Lastly, be sure to tell your employees that a new person is joining the team, when they start, and ask each one to identify one thing they can do to make the new person feel welcome. How many times do you see co-workers heading out the door for lunch together while a new hire sits at his/her desk, alone?

4. Using the "sink or swim" approach to on-boarding. This sends the message to employees that management doesn't care and doesn't have any common sense. Keep in touch with your new hires as they integrate into your organization. Seek them out and find out how they are doing. Make it easy for them to tell you what's on their mind. Don't wait for them to come to you. The more safe and easy you make it for them to speak the truth, the less likely you are to hear about it in an exit interview.

When it comes to new employee orientation and on-boarding processes, think about their perceptual experience and remember that everything matters. Make them feel welcome, inspire pride in their employment choice, show them the big picture and how their work matters, make the orientation program interesting and interactive, share positive success stories, and design the entire process from the new hire's perspective. Remember and respect that first impressions are lasting impressions.