

New Employee Orientation and Training: Bore or Score?

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New employee orientations seem a bit “ho-hum”? If so, you’re not alone in your thinking. Reviewing personnel policies and procedures is a bore for both employer and employee. So let’s reconsider what the goals of effective orientation should be so that they have greater meaning to both parties.

It’s essential to accomplish two things with a new employee and fast:

- 1) Develop their competence in the assigned tasks and,
- 2) Facilitate their assimilation into the team.

If either or both of these objectives are not met, the new employee will fall short of competency, commitment or both.

A survey I conducted for a national franchise showed that most of the turnover in the units occurred within the first three to six months of a new employee’s tenure. Why? Employees who came on board might bail for two key reasons. First, if existing cliques did not welcome the newcomers, they felt like outsiders. Second, if the newbies didn’t get the proper orientation to the company’s approach to technical procedures essential for serving the customer they were perceived by others as less than competent and in fact, did not feel successful. I don’t know about you, but if I felt like a social reject or that I couldn’t do my job well, I wouldn’t want to show up at work anymore. Low confidence leads to low commitment, which leads to turnover.

If this sounds like the type of thing that would likely occur in a retail unit but not in a corporate environment, think again. Human resource specialists concur that this is a typical problem. In 50% of (mostly high-tech) businesses studied by Integral Training Systems, a California based company specializing in employee retention, turnover occurs mostly in the first year of employment.

Examples abound. A colleague of mine recently relocated for a new job he began. Nobody but his boss spoke to him for two weeks! So much for integrating him into the team. He was thinking of firing up (his still warm) resume and longed to return to familiar territory. Not a great mindset for contributing productively to the new company!

When she began a position in a new company, my friend Amy was assumed to have competence in a database program that had been customized for that company. Database programs she knew; just not this one. As a new employee

Amy was uncomfortable revealing her lack of knowledge and as a result, she wasn't able to work at the expected pace on the system.

Just short of quitting her job in frustration and humiliation, I suggested she ask her boss for training. Voila! She got the training and has gone on to be a valued (and happy) contributor there. Close call. Her boss almost lost a great employee because she didn't take the initiative to identify and provide the right orientation and training.

Moral of the story: Orientation does not start or end with a review of policies and procedures though these are also essential to impart. On the unit level, managers should be provided with checklists that include introductions to co-workers, assignment of a buddy/mentor, and specific training activities to quickly build competencies. Provide the same checklist to the new employee and encourage him or her to be proactive about getting all boxes checked in the appropriate time frame.

At the home office, HR or department managers should develop checklists including introduction to co-workers and other department personnel and discussion of corporate culture along with training for company specific or job specific tasks. Again, give a copy to the employee. Checklists insure that the job gets done and prevent having to re-invent the orientation process over and over again.

Don't stop with checklists though. Whether at the unit level or at the home office, an essential part of making new employees feel part of the team is grooming the team in advance. The more the team has been involved in the selection of the new person, the more likely they'll be receptive to them. Remind the team of their own first days on the job and encourage them to make friendly overtures to the new employee, show them the ropes, and fill them in on "how things work around here".

Finally, as a manager, touch bases early and often with someone new to **ask** what support and direction they need. If you know their needs and meet them, they'll succeed and you'll be their hero.