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Route to:

‘Onboarding’ new employees

WHY LONG-TERM RETENTION BEGINS THEIR FIRST DAY ON THE JOB

ALL WORKPLACES ARE PRETTY MUCH the same, right? Wrong.

Like a house lived in by generations of the same family, workplaces reflect the unique habits, practices and preferences of the individuals who have inhabited them and co-existed for many years in varying degrees of harmony or discord. The resulting corporate culture may seem perfectly natural to the inhabitants – but is likely to be baffling to new arrivals.

A recent issue of *Fortune* magazine pictured A. G. Lafley and Jeffrey Immelt, the leaders respectively of Procter & Gamble and General Electric, admiring each other as the smartest CEOs in the universe. However, while both men have built highly impressive organizations, their two cultures are far from interchangeable. Everything from office customs to the verbal “shorthand” with which managers communicate reflects decades of genetic development and modification that have met the particular needs of each company.

There is no simple way for an outsider to arrive one day and quickly grasp the nuances of daily life at GE or P&G – one reason why both outfits have chosen to promote largely from within. But few organizations possess either the discipline or the desire to pursue that degree of insularity. Instead, they seek outside talent at all levels, from starting positions to senior management.

If the new hire, whether fresh kid or seasoned pro, is left to flounder – that is precisely what will happen. Some will stick around and figure it out, while others will become disaffected or trapped in the

minefields of unfamiliar office politics. As *Business Week* magazine warns, employee retention is most vulnerable in the first year of employment.

The loss of even one employee whom the organization had hoped to keep is an expensive proposition. The cost of hiring includes direct and indirect recruiting costs, lost productivity until the position is filled, additional lost productivity when a new hire arrives but is not yet up to speed, training expenses, etc. Hiring is never cheap and, when demand exceeds supply, is not easy either.

What new hires need to learn

IF THEY ARE TO SWIM, NOT SINK, new hires need to master three general areas of knowledge in relatively short order:

- What’s expected,
- What’s appropriate, and
- What’s political suicide.

In the area of expectations, many employees take new jobs with scant knowledge of what they must accomplish to be deemed successful. Skill-based jobs, such as computer programming or payroll accounting, may have self-evident objectives. But those persons hired to manage projects, departments, divisions or entire companies face numerous challenges and opportunities that compete for time and may not have obvious priorities. It’s not enough to read the job description. Rather, the new hire needs to sit down with his or her management (or board of directors) and clarify what key accomplishments will define on-the-job success.

Appropriateness is an entirely different issue, closely tied to corporate culture. In one company, for example, eating lunch at one's desk may be considered a sign of hard work, while in another it may lead co-workers to wonder if the person can afford to dine out.

Likewise, etiquette in some companies requires polite chitchat before getting down to business, while other companies regard idle chatter as a total waste of time. (In the latter, state your case and get on with it.) Travel arrangements are yet another potential minefield: Does one go online and make one's own arrangements, or should that task be left to an administrative assistant? (Hint: Efficiency may have nothing to do with the "right" answer.) Last but not least in this brief litany of examples is the huge issue of appropriate e-mail behavior – about which entire books could be written. Is there any time of day or night, for instance, when the company-issued PDA may be safely turned off? What if the boss is an insomniac who fires off nasty-grams at two in the morning? Is a reply expected, and by what time?

The best thing that can be said about workplace behavior is that there is no rhyme or reason as to what is or isn't appropriate in any given organization. One simply needs to find out.

The third area of concern to a new employee is office politics, an issue that increases in importance as one moves up the corporate ladder. As in the TV show *Survivor*, there may be alliances that need to be built and others that need to be avoided at all costs. Likewise, there are bosses who welcome honest disagreement with their ideas and others who equate disagreement with insubordination; it's best to find out in advance which kind of boss one has. Murkier still is the question of whom one can trust, since loose lips have been known to sink ships. Some executives have an innate sensitivity to office politics, while others have a tin ear and need guidance from others.

Onboarding: a sensible solution

DON'T BLAME THE HR FOLKS too much for this newest assault on the English language, since "onboarding" is a pretty descriptive term for bringing a new employee safely on board.

In olden days, organizations hired new people and basically left them to sink or swim. There might

have been some procedure manuals to read, an orientation class to attend and, in larger, more sophisticated corporations, a two-week course (often with some fancy name such as "Corporate College").

Over the past several years, serious thought has been given to better equipping new employees – at all levels of the organization – to succeed not fail. From that introspection has emerged the concept of onboarding, which pairs the new hire with someone who is a peer but ideally not a competitor. That person might come from a different department or from a different discipline within the same unit. At senior levels, it might be another key executive whose own career is safe.

For some period, probably less than half a year, the experienced employee serves as mentor and more particularly as guide, explaining where the minefields are and how to avoid them. In the area of expectations, the mentor would encourage the new employee to meet promptly with his or her boss to clarify those key objectives that will determine performance rating and incentive pay. In the areas of appropriate behavior and office politics, the mentor would provide general guidance while being available for specific questions as situations arise.

A common mistake is to assign the mentoring role to an employee who seems to have the time, as opposed to enlisting the very best employee available. If there is concern that the best employee has the least time, make the onboarding assignment a key performance objective. Also, be sure to build in periodic feedback mechanisms to make sure the onboarding program is working as expected. If not, mid-course corrections can be made.

As one commentator observed, new employees feel vulnerable until they learn the ropes, and they are on high alert as to what they suspect may be shortcomings of their new employer. Slipshod orientations, accompanied by slipshod or non-existent mentoring programs, will confirm new employees' worst fears that they have joined an equally slipshod organization. From that moment on, long-term retention may be an uphill struggle.

– George Snider

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