

Employee Orientation: Getting That New Employee Off To A Good Start

Do you remember your first day in a printshop? For that matter, do you remember your first days on any job? Looking back at those days, can you say that the people you worked for gave you a proper orientation to the organization you were joining and the specific job and responsibilities that would be yours?

The process of orientation is a vital part of successful training. In fact, you might best think of orientation as a pre-training activity. It's the process of introducing a new employee to company and co-workers, making them feel comfortable in new surroundings, and communicating your rules and attitudes and exactly what's expected of this new employee in performing the job. Very few would argue that getting off on the right foot can make everything that follows in the development of a new employee go more smoothly. So here are some thoughts on providing your new people with a proper orientation.

First, keep in mind that a new employee is the outsider. That's a very uncomfortable position to be in, and it's often coupled with at least a little bit of insecurity about really being able to handle the job. An introduction to—and a warm greeting from—each current staff member will go a long way towards relieving this discomfort. Who should lead the introductions? Ideally the person who hired the new employee. It's a subtle point, perhaps, but you shouldn't consider the hiring process complete until a new person is "delivered" into the care of his or her co-workers.

For many people, one of the most difficult parts of the first days on the job is simply to remember all of the names of new co-workers. This is particularly true in larger printshops. In one well-run shop, every employee pins a name tag on for a week any time a new employee is brought onboard. This simple courtesy has proven to go a long way toward eliminating a major source of discomfort.

Expectations and Culture

What do you as a manager expect of your new employee? On the first days on the job, you must keep in mind that you know the answer to that question much better than they do! It's your responsibility to communicate your expectations clearly. Most managers do discuss their expectations during the interview, but it's a mistake to expect that a new employee will remember every point. Start right back at the beginning in your "orientation lecture." Remember that repetition is often the key to getting important points across.

No matter how large or small your organization, each person's attitudes about customers, suppliers, management, and other employees will contribute to the corporate culture that your new employee will be exposed to. As a manager, it should be an ongoing concern that this culture reflects healthy and consistent attitudes.

Sadly, thousands of people each day start out on new jobs hearing more about what's wrong with the company, the boss, or a fellow worker than they do about what the company does well and what the company really stands for.

If your culture is not what you want it to be, you'd better explain that to a new employee before turning that person loose. Explain the problems. Explain what you're trying to do to solve them. (Perhaps the new employee is part of your solution!) Don't simply let the existing culture swallow up a promising new employee, causing you still another problem.

In Writing

It's a good idea to get your orientation program in writing. If nothing else, make yourself a checklist to be sure that a new employee sees and hears all the critical elements. Most experts believe in written policies and procedures, especially written job descriptions. All of those things will contribute to a new employee's comfort, and protect you from the argument later on that "you never told me that."

There's an old saying that you only get one chance to make a first impression. You also only get one chance for a good start. The key to getting new employees off to a good start is a process of orientation that builds comfort and confidence on one hand, and clearly establishes your expectations on the other.

"I'm glad you're here," you might begin. "I hired you because I'm confident that you can do the job and be a real asset to your co-workers and to the company."

"Now let me tell you as clearly as I can what I expect of you, and then we'll begin with your training."

It's frightening to guess at what percentage of new employees get "dumped" into the workflow each day without a proper orientation. It's almost certain that a disproportionate number of the problems and failures come out of that group. Before you even begin with training, get your people off to a good start. Anything less than a solid orientation is a missed opportunity...and an invitation for trouble.