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Bringing'em Safely Onboard: Launching New Employees Successfully

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Learn how to facilitate onboarding of new hires and how to keep the relationship productive for all.

It's late on a Friday afternoon, tomorrow you have a day off scheduled (finally!). You kick back in your chair after receiving the phone call you had been hoping for — the new sales manager you have been recruiting just accepted your offer. Life is good and you can enjoy your weekend! She starts in a couple of weeks and you know she will hit the ground running — just get her here, show her the office, and get out of her way! She's a go-getter with a great track record, and you know she is the perfect fit. Yep, your work is done on this one. . . .Wrong, wrong, wrong!

As any experienced manager knows, hiring the right person is simply the first step to a productive employer-employee relationship. What you do both before and after the hire will have a huge impact on whether you have an employee who “delivers the goods” or whether you lose them in a few months out of frustration — yours and/or theirs! With the war for high-quality talent raging, and great hires more difficult to find all the time, the idea of “onboarding” new employees has likely never been more important. (“New employee” here can also mean an existing employee moving into a new position.) What steps can you take as a manager to make sure that the great new hire is launched successfully in your operation? We'll take a careful look at the question in this month's Manager's Notebook.

Before you hire

We won't spend much time on this as we have written on the topic of hiring before (see Manager's Notebook “Finding Great Employees: Winning the Battle for Talent” October/November 2006). But, if you don't have a well developed job description for the position you are hiring, no onboarding strategy will work. Your new employee will have the wrong expectations. You and your staff will have the wrong expectations. Right person, wrong job is a recipe for a quick exit and a lot of frustration. A well developed job description, along with a carefully developed set of capabilities and characteristics you are looking for in your new hire will go a long way toward making sure you have the right person and that everyone is on the same page as the new hire joins your organization.

As an aside here, don't forget the role internships can play with younger talent. Working with a young man or woman, in high school, community college, or college, can give them, and you, a trial run — telling you much about whether or not the person will be a good fit for your company, and vice versa for the intern.

What does a new hire need to know?

OK, your new hire will start in a couple of weeks. You will give her an hour upfront, she will spend the morning with some of the other sales team members, and then she'll tour the facilities. Next day, get out of her way! Of course, we know this form of "new employee training program" is more typical than we want to admit. The "data dump" approach is quick, easy, and in general, very ineffective. But, we also understand the realities that drive us to such "one day training programs." Who has time for coaching, mentoring, or even thinking about what an onboarding program should look like? We would argue that given the challenges involved in finding great people, we can't afford not to take onboarding seriously. And, that means much more than a one day data dump training program.

Start by thinking through what the new hire needs to know. Some of this will be really obvious: Who are her direct reports? Who are key customers? What are the reporting relationships? What are the important company policies, etc.? But, it is important to get these things down on paper — once captured, you can use the list again in the future. Also, think through this employee's background.

Are there important gaps that need to be addressed? For instance, is this person a first-time supervisor? Maybe a people management/supervision course is in order.

Is this person in a new sales role? Maybe a distance education course on selling would be of much value. Are there any professional licenses, or certifications, the new employee will need? Clearly, you should be thinking about and planning for such needs upfront. Get these included in your onboarding plan.

However, you need to also get beyond these more obvious factors. How will you help your new employee understand the culture of your feed and grain business? What was the culture of the organization this new employee came from and how does it differ from yours? How will you integrate this employee into the social/informal network that exists in your organization? Maybe even more important, are there any pressing issues that this individual will need to address quickly to earn the trust of customers and other employees?

For example, perhaps the previous sales manager was a popular guy, just "one of the boys." Customers loved him. You had to let him go for reasons that were not completely obvious, but his departure was not popular with his direct reports or customers. How will you help your new employee establish her credibility in this situation? Addressing such barriers to success head-on will likely be far more productive than the "go get 'em tiger" strategy.

As you think about what she needs to know, don't forget about your current employees and what they may need to know about the new hire? Are there any changes in reporting relationships/responsibilities that need to be communicated by you?

Clarity here is a big deal. We have seen new hires run into real trouble early on simply because existing employees were told things like, "this won't affect you," when in fact, the new hire did affect their role.

Again, working to think through the land mines here is important, and only fair, to your new employee before they are blindsided with an unexpected problem that could have been dealt with up front.

Your onboarding strategy

OK, you have your carefully crafted list of "what they need to know" — one good, well-focused day of training should do it! Hardly. Think back to those times when you have started a new job. We bet that you can think of times months later when you ran into something, thinking it was brand new — only to find out it was covered during the "one day data dump" training program you went through.

We are all only human, and when everything is new, there is just so much anyone can absorb at one time. And, for an employee coming to you from outside, it is all new. So, things as simple as where to park, how to dress, names of employees, customers, community leaders, mandatory paperwork — getting on top of all this chews up significant mental energy. The vivid metaphor "drinking from a firehose" comes to mind!

So, take your list of what they need to know and start breaking it down. What does the new employee really need to know day 1? What can wait at least a little while?

Such a schedule should incorporate the appropriate timing of any training courses they employee might need. Then, start thinking about who should be involved in sharing this information with the employee and what the best way is to

share the information.

Maybe it is a one-on-one meeting, or a series of one on one meeting. Maybe something less formal over lunch would be preferred. Usually showing is better than telling, so perhaps a tour or tours would be most productive. Perhaps you should set up a shadowing program, and let this person work side by side with employees whom she should model their performance after. Or, maybe you need to rotate this person through all eight of your branches over a two month period. Keep in mind the need to balance “getting them up to speed quickly” with the human capacity to absorb information.

One tip here: No matter how much we encourage new hires to ask questions when they don't know, it isn't easy for a new hire to say “I don't know” when they are trying to make a good impression. Building in the time for such questions, and formally encouraging him or her is good practice. Telling the employee — keep track of key questions during the week and we will address them Friday at noon — sends the message that such questions are just part of the getting up- to-speed process, and are certainly not a sign of poor performance.

Next, give some thought to who should be involved in onboarding your employee. In some cases, the answer will be obvious: your accountant, your safety manager, etc. In other cases, it may take more thought. Do you want to structure a formal mentoring relationship for your new employee? If so, who should be the mentor? What expectations do you have of that mentor? Does he or she have the training and personality it takes to be a successful mentor? Make assignments and make sure those involved in the onboarding program understand their role. And, recognize that such “training” takes time away from normal duties. A modest bonus, or a thank you will go a long way in helping your staff take this role seriously and sending the message that you value their service.

Revisit those special circumstances you outlined earlier. How will you address/help your new employee address these? You personally may need to spend some time paving the way in cases where a new employee is replacing a long-time, favored staff member or some other similar circumstance exists. Of course, your new hire ultimately has to deliver, but she at least deserves a fighting chance.

Finally, what about your role in the onboarding process? What can you do to make sure this new employee understands your organization and gets off to a great start? Helping your new employee understand your culture, helping her understand where the rough spots are likely to be, showing genuine interest in her success, investing some personal time to check back on the employee — all of these can go a long way in helping an employee get off and running.

Give them some time – then follow-up

As mentioned above, so much is “thrown” at a new employee in a short period of time that it can be overwhelming. Many employees and their employers find it helpful to schedule a session six to nine months after the new hire starts to discuss how things are going, address any questions and review what their new employees should be learning. Some employers hire an employee with some sort of “probationary” period — typically three or six months. This period can have a definitive status to it if you as the employer desire — meaning that you truly evaluate a probationary employee and decide whether to continue to employ them or not. However, many employers just utilize this period to signify that the employee is learning the job, and provides an opportunity to meet, ask questions and air concerns.

Expectations

Finally, give some careful thought to your expectations for the new employee. In some cases, a few weeks may be enough to get the employee up to speed and to see real impact. For some jobs, maybe in more senior management positions, it may take a full year to really master the role. Give some thought to where this employee should be in terms of customer visits, training attended, sales, plans developed, goals set, etc. at different points in time. Periodically reviewing these milestones and taking remedial action early can help catch issues and put that new employee back on track. At the same time, we know that while it takes time to get up to speed, market realities are just that, market realities; you can't wait forever for an employee to deliver — the individual must hold up their end of the bargain.

Upshot

If all of this sounds like work, it is! But we all know just how much work also goes into the hiring process and the

uncertainty it brings. Investing in a carefully designed onboarding process can give that prized new hire every opportunity for success. In today's battle for talent, the investment in onboarding is one well worth making.



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