

A Simple Approach to Orientation - Remember Your Manners

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It's late on Friday afternoon after another hectic week. Suddenly, you think of the new employee who will be starting on Monday morning. You worked hard to find the right person but what should come next? You don't have a formal orientation program. After all, you aren't some huge corporation; you only hire a couple of people during an average year. You go home feeling slightly uneasy about getting things off to a good start. You have good reason to feel uneasy. The first few days for a new employee often set the tone for the future.

We've all heard the saying, "You only have one chance to make a first impression." Up to this point, candidates were trying their best to impress you. Some of them didn't and they aren't coming to work for you on Monday. Finally, you chose someone and now it's your turn to make a good impression. Take some time to prepare for the new employee's arrival.

First, you need to review your hiring "mistakes." Get your yellow pad out and think about someone you hired who didn't stay a year. List things you could have done better, things you did wrong and things you probably should have done. List things the employee did or didn't do and things you noticed but chose to ignore. Then think about hiring successes and make a list of what went right. If you are honest with yourself, this little exercise should give you some insight on how to bring a new person into your unique group.

Second, you must make a distinction between "orientation" and "training." Orientation means integrating a new person into your company. It involves helping the new employee "fit in" with your unique company culture, establish good working relationships with co-workers and build a personal commitment to your industry and company. Training is learning to do the job for which they were hired and, in some cases, developing skills that could lead to advancement.

Here are some **SIMPLE** steps to starting out right:

Remember your manners. A new person may arrive early. If you cannot personally meet them, at least tell other employees that they should expect a new associate and give them some basic information about the new person. That way, someone can at least say, "Hi, _____. We were expecting you. Come in and have a cup of coffee with us." Isn't that a better first impression than someone saying, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

Show them their workspace first. Most of us spend more time at work than we do at home. Workspaces are more important to people than we may think and a new person will appreciate a space that is, at a minimum, neat and tidy. Set up a small stack of necessities. This "care package" could include safety equipment, pen, paper, coffee cup,

etc. It's the thought that counts. This gives your new person a psychological "home base" and a safe place to put things they may have brought.

Make introductions easy. A new person often spends part of the first day being shown around and introduced to everyone. Consider that current employees must remember one new name; the new person may feel overwhelmed thinking they must remember all those names and match them to faces! Tell the new hire that you don't expect them to recall everyone's name and, at the same time, encourage each employee to take a moment to get acquainted with their new co-worker.

Get the paperwork done on the first day. Forms like the I-9 and W-4 must be completed in a timely manner. I think it's best to schedule this meeting mid-morning rather than the first thing on the first day. Let the new person relax and look around for a bit but let them know that these business matters must be handled and when and with whom they will be meeting. This meeting is also the time to dispense a copy of the employee handbook and information about benefits. Give them the required Summary Plan Descriptions for health insurance and the retirement plan; it's one less thing you have to worry about later. Plus, the new person can read those things at home, at their leisure.

Assign a buddy. New employees often think they are asking "dumb" questions and would prefer not to look foolish in front of their supervisor or manager. A buddy is a resource a new person can turn to for assistance. It's an informal, peer relationship intended to last for a relatively short time. When you ask someone to act as a buddy, be sure they understand that they are not expected to supervise or train the new person. Their role is simply to be a friend for the first few days or weeks.

Stay in touch. No matter how busy you are, once the new person is on board, don't just throw them into the briar patch or dump them on a buddy. They trusted you enough, personally, to take the job. At this point, you are probably the only person they feel they know. Take time to check in on your new hire frequently in the first few weeks. If things are heading off course, you want to know as soon as possible rather than months later when problems turn into a crisis.

These things are very simple and to many of you remain obvious. Unfortunately, over the years I have seen too many new employees flounder. Not because a formal orientation program was flawed or training was inadequate, but because simple courtesy and consideration were lacking.