

Help New Hires Succeed

July 08, 2008

Effective onboarding drives retention, morale, and productivity

By Caela Farren, Ph.D.

Chances are, that new boss in the office could be gone&hellipbefore you know it. A recent survey by the Institute of Executive Development and Alexcel Group found that after two years, nearly one-third of senior-level executives who joined new companies do not perform well enough to keep their jobs. This is the same fate for 20 percent of bosses who are promoted from within.

And the success rates for new hires across the board are not much better:

- 22 percent of staff turnover occurs in the first 45 days of employment. (The Wynhurst Group)
- 46 percent of rookies wash out in their first 18 months. (Leadership IQ)
- Companies that leave executive onboarding to chance experience failure rates in excess of 50 percent when it comes to retaining new executive talent. (Egon Zehnder International, 2007)

Considering that the cost of losing an employee in the first year is estimated to be at least three times salary, the value of a company's onboarding program cannot be underestimated. While it typically takes six months for an employee to really know the job, turnover rates show many employees leave in the first 90 days—and some leave even faster. Research shows that new employees decide whether they feel at home or not in the first three weeks at a company, and 4 percent of new employees leave a job after a disastrous first day. On the flip side, the Wynhurst Group found that new employees who went through a structured onboarding program were 58 percent more likely to be with the organization after three years.

HR's Role

Human resources professionals can make a great difference in helping recruiters, managers, and new hires in three specific areas:

1) Tell the truth about the job from the beginning.

Top talent in the labor market is educated, connected, discerning, and has access to information that can either validate or refute a company's employment value proposition in a heartbeat. Managers and recruiters must tell the truth about what's really expected. If the job has been overstated, the talented people will walk. Don't risk that possibility. You'll lose time and money and seriously damage your organization's reputation.

According to Novations research, 48 percent of those interviewed said their departure was hastened by unrealistic expectations of the job—something employers could and should have avoided with an honest and open recruitment process. HR professionals, hiring managers, and search firm personnel need to work together in carving out a clear position profile. Either overselling or underselling will hurt the long-term retention of new hires. Bring the abstractions into concrete reality. Both the manager and new hire need this kind of clarity. This sets the stage for ongoing feedback, course correction, and frequent expectations exchanges.

What MANAGERS can do: New hires, like everyone else, want to succeed. Managers need to be coached to put their expectations in measurable terms: Test so many software systems; Negotiate X contracts of Y amount; Close Z amount of new business and renegotiate X amount of existing contracts. They must be urged to create a draft of accomplishments that fits the position description. Review it with the team. Involve and engage the new hire. Improve and enhance expectations. Agree on when and how regular check-ins will be done. Time spent before the hire, to assure the right person is picked, will pay off in the tenure of the person chosen.

What INDIVIDUAL NEW HIRES can do: Get in the habit of having quick but clear expectations exchanges with key people—managers, colleagues, customers, etc. Ask three questions and listen well to the answers.

- What are the major results you expect me to achieve in the next few weeks?
- What results are most important? This gives each of you a shared sense of priorities. When something "has to give," the new

hire chooses in the best direction.

- What changes do you see happening this quarter or next quarter that will shift the priorities?

This can be a quick 10-minute conversation, but allows managers and new hires to stay in sync with changing expectations and priorities. After a while, new hires can start sharing the way they see things are changing, what new results appear important, and what they see as priorities. This will demonstrate an understanding of the changing work dynamics and give new hires credit for taking initiative in thinking through priorities and success factors. As managers and new hires begin to see they're on the same 'wavelength,' trust builds and a sense of accomplishment follows.

2) Assure a Good "Fit"—Values and Interests

Help managers see the importance of looking at the whole person, not just skills. In describing the job, don't limit the description to competencies and skills. Describe the values and interests a successful incumbent would bring to the job. You want to be able to hook the passion and vision of a new hire.

Assure that the new job is intrinsically fulfilling to the new hire—that what they'll be doing is motivational. Move discussions beyond prior experiences and competency sets to find out their interests, passion, purpose, and values. Doing so will determine if they really "fit" the job and engage them for the long term. Remember: Skill means you can get the job done. Interest means you want to get the job done. There's a big difference.

"Fit" also has to do with personality style and cultural values. We've all had the experience of walking into an organization for a job interview and having the air literally sucked out of our guts. This is an example of a cultural mismatch. "What counts," our values, lives in the air we breathe. Our bodies feel excitement (innovation), boredom (rule-bound regulations), dishonesty (people have smiles on their faces but not in their eyes), or respect (we'll create a work-around so you can honor your commitments to your family).

Cultural values—not what's posted on the Website but what's lived in the corridors and boardrooms—are known instinctually to us. This sense of "connect" or "disconnect" may be hard to decipher or discuss in the short term, but this lack of synchronicity or "fit" accounts for a large number of new hires who leave shortly after joining an organization. The job is right, but the culture is not. "It just didn't feel right to me. I want to be myself."

What MANAGERS can do: Help new hires learn the "culture"—the informal rules of the organization. Talk with new hires about the organization's values. What counts for success? Talk about some of the consistencies and inconsistencies between the written values and the lived values. Help them look around to see how the culture really works. What are the personality traits and style of leaders—innovative, by-the-book, decisive, cutthroat, bottom-line driven, fair, diverse, etc.? Discuss ways successful people "get ahead."

What INDIVIDUAL NEW HIRES can do: Ask the question, "What counts for success around here?" to your manager, colleagues, co-workers, mentor, etc. Listen for the words that keep coming up and then put together your own list of "what counts" in this culture. Compare the "lived culture" with the "written culture" and begin to figure out the potential pitfalls.

3) Foster a Sense of Belonging and Connectedness

The pace of organization change, technology, and customer requirements demands a strong network of help for all workers, but especially new hires. According to Tim Vigue, "not developing a sense of belonging ranked among one of the reasons for failed hirings" ("New Hires Seek a Quick Divorce," March 9, 2007, Management-Issues.com). This is true not only emotionally but also organizationally. Connections to a variety of resources in the industry and organization help guarantee work success. Knowing where to turn for quick answers and all manner of resources increases new hires' chance of success and feelings of confidence.

What MANAGERS can do: There are a variety of ways to help new hires (grads or executives) build strong networks of support. Connect new hires to each other. Build opportunities for organization-wide learning and collaboration. Provide early and meaningful exposure to the CEO. Hook up new employees with a mentor or buddy.

What INDIVIDUAL NEW HIRES can do: To build a network in your profession, ask colleagues what trade publications they read. Find out what associations they belong to. Learn the names of the key players and the leaders in your profession. Find out the names of the key people in your own organization (e.g., the best salespeople, electrical engineers, software designers, project managers, scientists, etc.). Networking in your profession will help you continually increase your expertise and extend your influence. Use your "new" status to ask lots of questions and meet lots of people in your profession.

All new hires—whether they are grads, new hires from other companies, position changers, new managers, or executives—want the same thing: success! If you incorporate these practices into your onboarding, assimilation, or orientation programs, you are likely to beat the odds of losing valuable new hires.

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