



FRONTIER ASSOCIATES, INC.  
MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS

## **Case Study #2: The Case of the Opportunistic Orientation**

### **The Situation**

A.J. Jones Enterprises<sup>1</sup> is a world-wide franchisor of business services. The company had been steadily declining when it was purchased by a group of entrepreneurs. The new owners' plans for substantially expanding and growing the company were based on providing an extraordinary quality of service to the franchisees, and through them to their clients. While the economic bleeding had been stopped, the existing culture would not support these plans. For example, integrity was sorely lacking – promises were frequently made to franchisees with no intention of keeping them. Personal expenses were openly charged to the company credit card. Gossip and rumors were rampant, with the inevitable interpersonal conflicts and poor performance.

### **The Goals**

Frontier Associates (FAI) was engaged to help the senior management alter A.J. Jones Enterprises' organizational culture to one that would support the company's strategic plan for quality service.

### **Our Analysis**

As part of the turnaround, the FAI consultant worked with senior management to design and implement a New Employee Orientation Program<sup>2</sup> that was to play a major role in creating and sustaining the turnaround and a targeted new company culture. This new culture was characterized by integrity, unreasonable results, extraordinary service, world-class quality, fun, making a difference, working as a team, open communication and certainty. The Program was designed to not only cover needed information, but to be itself a reflection of the intended culture. The client understood that people would be influenced by words that were backed up by actions, more than they would by words alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Client names have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> See *Leadership #16: Principles of a New Employee Orientation Program* and *Leadership #17: An Example New Employee Orientation Program* for more information on the design of the program.



## The FAI Solution

Every aspect of a new employee's interaction with the company was designed, from his or her first contact as a prospect to the third day as a new employee. For example, the offer letter described the employee's accountabilities (the results the employee was expected to produce and for whom), rather than a job description (what the employee was supposed to do). The purpose of this distinction was to communicate the cultural value of *service*. The letter also included exact directions to the company from the employee's home, typical company attire, and who to ask for on arrival, in order to communicate the cultural value of *certainty*.

Unbreakable rules were that their workplace and their mailbox had to be completely prepared in advance and their name had to be added to the company's telephone and e-mail directories. The intention was to communicate the cultural value of *teamwork*, and to actively demonstrate to the new employee "You're already on the team."

During the three days of the Program the new employee had no other responsibility other than to learn about the company. One person coordinated each individual's program, and was the central clearing point for any changes to that program (as compared to typical situations where no one knows who to call when unexpected changes are required). Every moment was planned in advance, including lunch with people who the new employee might not normally encounter. They were trained in how to use all appropriate facilities, including the telephone.

In addition to their superiors, peers, and subordinates, new employees had unstructured time with senior managers a number of levels above them. The culture of the company was covered in detail - how things really work around here. And every new employee, within three weeks of their first day, spent at least two hours with the president, where they were enrolled into the company's vision and mission, and their role in fulfilling the long and short term future and strategic plans of the company were discussed.

The new employee's final assignment in the Orientation Program was to write an analysis of the Program itself. Besides giving the company valuable feedback for future changes in the Program, this gave the new employee time to reflect on and bring to a conscious level what they had experienced.



## **The Results**

Participants' analysis reports written at the end of the Program were uniformly favorable and enthusiastic. Because they were done immediately at the end of the Program, suggested changes were particularly useful.

New employees internalized the desired company culture and became allies in its ongoing creation. Even if people subsequently told them otherwise, they believed in and supported the culture that was communicated to them during their first days, and it took a lot to change their opinions. (First impressions are hard to change.) Of course, management was walking the talk, even if some of the employees who had been with the company before it was purchased were not yet aligned with the culture its new owners were working to create.

More than just being told that this company cared about service, new employees experienced being served themselves. Feeling cared about and important made it easier for them to care for and serve others, resulting in very high customer service marks and effective team-building. Years later, employees said that the New Employee Orientation Program was one of the most impactful experiences of their work life. They felt that it was so unusual, and such a pleasant experience, that it reinforced that they had made the right choice in coming to work for this company.

There were many other notable outcomes of the New Employee Orientation Program. During the culture change initiative, which can be a time of uncertainty and frustration for employees, A.J. Jones Enterprises experienced almost zero turnover. Employees remained engaged while increasing their productivity. And perhaps most impressive of all, the company changed its culture from one of gossip, broken promises, conflict and poor performance to one characterized by results, service, teamwork and fun – in just eight months.

## **Summary**

A carefully designed and implemented New Employee Orientation Program can be a powerful tool in maintaining an existing culture, and a highly effective tool in altering an organization's culture.