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Leadership #15: The Lost Opportunity Of New Employees

By Dr. Ivan M. Rosenberg

The Critical First Days

During the first few days with a new company employees receive many impressions and make, mostly unconsciously, many critical decisions that will have a major impact on their subsequent behavior and attitudes. Yet most companies leave to chance what occurs during this critical time, resulting in a more lengthy and costly integration than if things were consciously planned. This is a significant lost opportunity for building the culture and work force the company desires.

This article suggests that consciously implementing a new employee orientation program can pay off dramatically in higher productivity, lowering costs, and in creating a committed, aligned, and productive staff.

The Typical First Days

A new employee's first day is often one of concern, prompting questions such as:

- How do things really work around here?
- What do I need to do to be successful and happy here?
- What are the dangers I need to look out for? I don't want to make a mistake that will sour my career here before I even get started.
- Who can I trust?
- Who has the real power here and how did they get it?

The employee's subsequent behavior and experience is highly correlated to the answers the employee develops during these initial days. As the employee's tenure at the company proceeds, he or she will tend to gather and interpret data that reinforce initial impressions; contradictory evidence tends to be discounted. Initial impressions are increasingly difficult to alter once established.

How do employees typically learn the answers to their questions? Unfortunately, rather than being carefully designed and effectively delivered, this process is usually left up to chance. Answers are derived from informal conversations, initial experiences with and the already formed perceptions of existing employees. Such random events may or may not result in an accurate reflection of the company as a whole. And if the organization is in the process of actively



changing its culture, the new employee's conclusions are unlikely to be consistent with the intended outcomes of that culture change.

Many new employee orientation programs handle only the legal issues. Often the company is unprepared - the employee's desk is not clean and fully furnished, work assignments and training are not ready. There is rarely formal instruction on the basics, e.g., using the telephone, copier, fax, mail room, etc. Even more rare is a formal introduction to the company's norms and culture. Employees delegated to help may feel this is an interruption to their own (more important) work, and therefore the new employee experiences being an interruption to his or her colleagues.

What impression does this leave? The company looks to be unprepared and reactive. New employees learn that they must look out for themselves, because the company hasn't demonstrated an interest or willingness to do so. Taking care of new people seems to be an interruption to the company's more important work. It would not be a surprise if new employees develop tentative or even disloyal attitudes as a result. Motivation to give one's best to the company may be compromised, even at this early stage.

The Role of the New Employee Orientation Program in Reinforcing or Changing Corporate Culture

A company's culture is a critical determinant of its success in being able to accomplish its goals. For example, a company with a culture that punishes any deviation from following established rules is going to find it difficult to implement a strategy that involves creativity, breakthroughs, and flexible customer service.

In aggregate, the answers employees derive during their initial days determine the culture of an organization. A New Employee Orientation Program is a powerful tool to help a new employee learn the culture the company has and thus reinforce it. Likewise, a program designed to consciously teach and demonstrate a new culture can ensure that new employees are a major force in causing and supporting an organizational culture change.

Summary

During their first days a new employee forms many impressions and makes many decisions that are determinant of their subsequent attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs about the company. Most companies appear to leave the formation of these beliefs to chance. We suggest that the implementation of a carefully designed New Employee Orientation Program can produce significant net



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benefits in terms of ease of employee integration and adoption of beliefs, and therefore behavior that supports the company's future plans,