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Leadership #16

Principles of a New Employee Orientation Program

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Introduction

In *Leadership #15: The Lost Opportunity of New Employees*, we proposed that a New Employee Orientation Program can be a very effective tool for strengthening an existing organizational culture, or for helping to bring about a culture change. In either case, it is important to proactively insure that the employee makes the appropriate decisions and forms supportive attitudes about how the company operates, rather than leaving these formative organizational influencers to chance.

The purpose of this article is to suggest principles and guidelines for such a program. See the article *Leadership #17: An Example New Employee Orientation Program* for the details of an example program and *Case Study #2: The Case of the Opportunistic Orientation* for an illustration of its application.

General Guidelines

The purpose of the New Employee Orientation Program is to ensure that employees be thoroughly “bought in” to the desired cultural values and behavioral norms of the organization. That means that each new employee owns such values and norms as his or her own, rather than as something imposed by external forces. By “desired” values and norms, we mean those intended by the leadership to be an appropriate expression of the desired culture of the organization, whether that culture currently exists or is in the process of being established through a culture change initiative.

The intended results of the program are that each new employee have a direct and clear experience that the organization believes in and practices each of the desired values and behavioral norms, owns these values and norms as their own, and is unlikely to change these views despite the existence of some possibly contrary evidence. Thus, after such a program, even if someone should say “That really isn’t the way it works around here”, the new employee is unlikely to change his or her mind.

Before beginning the design of the program, decide on the values, principles, and attitudes that you want the employees of the organization to have. In general, this is a relatively short list (10 or so items).



The program should not only include a description of these values, but should be itself a reflection of the culture it says is present. When new employees see principles in practice it makes a deep and lasting impression, particularly if such practices, even though welcome, are unusual when compared to other companies. For example, one company made sure that every new employee had a mail slot with their name on it before their first day of work.

There are no compromises with an organization's core values¹. Likewise, there should be no compromises in the program designed to communicate and instill those values, or what you will communicate is that compromising the values is OK. This is a level of perfection that is unusual for many organizations.

Thus, ultimate responsibility for the program must be at a very high level, typically with the leader of the organization. Without such clout and the attention of the leader, the clarity of the New Employee Orientation Program is likely to be compromised by the short-term needs of managers, e.g., not giving a new employee the time to go through the entire program or short-cutting the guidelines. Likewise, all the senior managers must be completely supportive of the program, and conscious of lower level managers who may not be. It is critical that disconnects between what the New Employee Orientation Program espouses and the attitudes and behaviors of a new employee's manager be carefully managed.

During the entire program, beginning with the prospective employee's first contact with the company and continuing through the hiring and integration process, every aspect of these interactions should be designed and made consistent with and supportive of the intended results.

In summary, the New Employee Orientation Program should be considered one of the more important programs of the company, with attention, participation, and monitoring by senior management. For after all, everything that an employee does, and thus the future of the organization, is in large part determined by these first impressions.

Operational Guidelines

The program should begin no later than the offer letter itself, and preferably should be part of the employee selection process. That is, the selection process

¹ See *Strategic Planning #3: The Role of Vision, Mission, and Values* for a discussion of core and goal values.



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should include discussion of the importance of such values, and the offer letter should be consistent with the values.

Each value should be communicated by at least one, and preferably many, aspects of the program. This communication is most powerful when it is an expression of the values through action rather than just words. For example, having the new employee's office and desk fully ready and supplied could communicate "We are proactive" and reinforce the importance of service.

Ideally many people should have operational roles in the program so the new employee sees that the values are a characteristic of the company, not just of one individual. Preferably these are employees who already own the desired values and norms.

Summary

We have suggested some fundamental principles and guidelines for the design and implementation of a powerful New Employee Orientation Program. From such a program, employees emerge with a clear experience of the organization's desired cultural values and beliefs. Readers are invited to suggest additional guidelines and best practices that have contributed to the success of their New Employee Orientation Programs, which we will be pleased to add to this article.