

A New Look at Orientation

We usually view orientation in terms of helping new employees. But, as the following two articles suggest, successful orientation has benefits for the organization as well.

The First-Line Supervisor: A Natural Extension of the Training Department

Contributed by Dave Day, assistant professor in the department of business and economics at Columbia College, Columbia, South Carolina.

Most first-line supervisors tend to view the training department as bearing primary, if not total, responsibility for teaching, coaching, and helping. They generally believe that the function of the training department is training and education, the function of first-line supervisors is to oversee the production of a product or the provision of a service, and never the twain shall meet.

True, the words "functions as a teacher, coach, or helper" don't appear in many first-line supervisors' job descriptions. But who is really in a better position to function as teacher, coach, or helper than the first-line supervisor? After all, it's this individual who interacts with employees on a daily basis, who is the first to notice employees' job-related training needs, and who often possesses the skills necessary to help employees improve facets of their job performance.

The first-line supervisor can be of particular help to new employees. Although it's common for new employees to spend their first few days on the job with the training department, this three- to five-day orientation period doesn't always fully prepare employees for their new job duties. For some new employees, how they are welcomed and integrated into the work group by the first-line supervisor is every bit as important as the time spent with the training department.

The problem

Consider the following true experiences of three new employees.

■ The receptionist in the outpatient clinic of a large general hospital described her first few weeks on the job in the following manner: "I've been working in this clinic for three weeks. So far, I've not been given a tour of the rest of the hospital. I have yet to be introduced to all of the staff who work here. I had to learn how to complete and process various medical forms from the patients themselves. Yet the hospital is quick to let me know how important it is for me to have a good attitude since I am the first point of contact with patients!"

■ I was in a donut shop the first day that a particular young woman worked the counter by herself. As she waited on the customers, it became apparent that she couldn't properly work the cash register. Embarrassed and frustrated, she made another attempt to get the register open. By now almost in tears, and with several impatient customers waiting to pay, she finally got the register to open. She began taking the customers' money and simply placed it in the register without recording the sales on the register. Several days later, when I asked where the new employee was, the shop owner replied, "I guess she just wasn't cut out to work in a busy donut shop. She didn't come back the second day."

■ A teenager arrived home having spent the first day on her first job. "Well how did it go?" inquired her father. In an agitated voice she responded, "I worked all day without any lunch. I was first given the policy manual and told to familiarize myself with its contents. Several hours later I was told to go out and observe how so-and-so worked the register. A couple of hours later someone else came along and told me to go do something else for a

while. So I spent the whole day without anyone telling me when I could go to lunch!"

While these three negative incidents may seem a bit extreme, the unfortunate truth is that new employees often have such experiences. What might the first-line supervisors have been able to do to prevent these situations from occurring, or at least significantly reduce the likelihood of their occurring?

Supervisors and orientation

New employees are often flooded with information the first few days on the job. This information covers everything from pay, insurance coverage, benefits, meals, parking, ordering supplies, job procedures, and the like. Supervisors should review the amount and flow of this information and determine whether it's really critical that the employee receive all this information on the first or second day on the job. Perhaps some of the information could be spread out over the first week so the employee will be more apt to understand and retain all the data.

Companies often ask new employees to spend their first morning on the job reading and familiarizing themselves with the contents of the policy manual of the department or company. This is not the best policy. For one thing, the contents of the policy manual mean virtually nothing to the new employee at this point. Plus, isolating new employees while others are actively going about their work is mentally fatiguing. Predictably, this lowers the new employee's enthusiasm. Supervisors should review the policy manual to determine which parts are truly important for a new employee to be successful and direct newcomers to read only those parts at first.

It is also fairly common for the supervisor to sit down with a new employee on his or her first morning and review the requirements of the job with the employee. This seems the natural thing to do, but an *in depth* discussion on the first day may be premature. New employees certainly require some initial input from their supervisors in order to begin learning and doing the job. Supervisors should consider the question, "What does this new employee need to proceed satisfactorily through this first week?" Supervisors should let the answer to this question be the determining factor in how they structure the initial session with a new employee. This first session should give new employees the information they'll need to proceed successfully through their first week.

Then—and this is critical—supervisors should arrange to meet again with each new employee at the end of the first week. This accomplishes several objectives:

■ One week on the job gives employees a feel for what they will be doing. By the end of this week employees are much better equipped to discuss the duties and requirements of their job over the long haul.

■ It usually takes about a week before job specifics will have any meaning for an employee. If there are certain parts of the job that the supervisor wants the employee to pay special attention to, the employee is now able to “hear” and respond appropriately to such requests. Again, given the tremendous amount of information new employees get on the first day, they probably wouldn’t retain specifics on the first day.

■ The supervisor now can discuss with the employee the evaluation policy of the company and, specifically, the basis on which the employee will be evaluated.

Training needs of new employees

It’s fairly common to match the new

employee with one of the other better employees who can show the new employee the ropes. This approach has several advantages. First, supervisors have a limited amount of time they can devote exclusively to new employees. Having a fellow employee act as the “sponsor” of the new employee insures that someone is available to answer questions and help. Secondly, sometimes new employees find it easier to get acclimated to the new job and company if they can relate to a peer.

There are, however, some drawbacks with using employees to *train* newcomers. Just because an employee is a top performer is in itself no guarantee that he or she will be a good teacher. The seasoned employee may be adept at showing the new employee how to perform a certain task, but unless the new employee gets a chance to try to perform the task, he or she will probably soon forget what the seasoned employee demonstrated. This is particularly true when the task is complex or technical in nature. This word of caution should not totally discourage supervisors from using seasoned employees in training new ones. But because an employ-

ee’s first week is so critical to his or her future success, it may be best for the first-line supervisor to function as the *primary* trainer for a while.

What? Me a trainer?

Granted, most supervisors have no formal training in teaching techniques, learning styles, or preparing lesson plans, let alone lesson presentation. But these aren’t significant concerns or problems for what I’m proposing here: a one-on-one coaching relationship. The fact is, the role of coach is ideally suited for the first line supervisor. A coach basically goes through the following four steps when helping an employee master or improve upon a certain skill:

■ **Explanation.** The coach explains to the employee why a particular task is critical to the success of the employee, the department, and the organization.

■ **Demonstration.** Once the coach explains the importance of the task, he or she demonstrates for the employee exactly how to do the task. If the task is complex, the coach may walk through it several times. Note that in these first two steps the emphasis is on the actions of the coach,

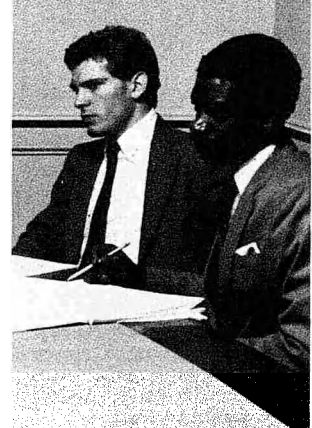
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Training 10

with the employee as an observer. The focus shifts in the next step, with the emphasis on the employee's actions.

■ **Practice.** Now comes the opportunity for the employee to try out the tasks. The employee should practice each task several times so he or she gradually gains more confidence and moves closer to mastering the skill the coach is attempting to teach.

■ **Feedback.** As the employee practices each task, the coach should provide verbal feedback concerning the employee's progress. Feedback may vary from total praise to walking the employee through a particular task again. This step is critical for reinforcing desired behaviors and, where appropriate, for helping the employee continue moving towards the desired behavior.

What's in it for me?

What advantages accrue to the supervisor willing to accept responsibility for initially training new employees assigned to his or her work unit?

First of all, supervisors willing to act as coaches insure consistency by making sure that all new employees receive comparable training. The first-line supervisor also gets some valuable first impressions concerning the expected progress of the new employee, how well he or she catches on, whether he or she likely will succeed on the job, and perceived training deficiencies.

Acting as a coach to new employees also helps the first-line supervisor establish the beginnings of his or her working relationship with the new employee. The supervisor who takes the time to train new employees not only shares his or her knowledge and skills, but demonstrates genuine interest in helping the employee succeed. This can have a very positive effect on the long term relationship of the supervisor and employee.

To suggest that the first-line supervisor assume total responsibility for the orientation and training of new employees would be naive and foolhardy. But to suggest that the first-line supervisor has no meaningful role in the orientation and training of new employees is just as serious an error. Supervisors should try to be sure that when the new employee goes home and the family member says, "Well, how did it go?" he or she will respond, "Great . . . I love it!"

Orientation—The First Step in Team Building

Contributed by Madeline E. Cohen, staff trainer with American Greetings Corporation of Cleveland, Ohio.

Many organizations spend large sums of their human resource budget on team-building seminars. But where does team building start? The Cleveland Clinic Foundation (CCF) believes it starts with a company's orientation program. The foundation's organizational and departmental orientation format can be a model for other businesses that need to review this important link to team building.

Put your money where your need is

A team, according to team-building specialists Dave Francis and Don Young, is an energetic group of people who are committed to achieving common objectives, who work well together and enjoy doing so, and who produce high-quality results. An orientation program's ultimate objective is to promote a feeling of self worth, a sense of belonging, an attitude of pride and confidence in both self and the organization, and a desire to succeed.

The proactive, insightful training department can create a blend of team-building efforts and orientation programming that is effective and financially desirable. CCF began by looking at how it transmits its team-building attitudes to its hundreds of new hires each year. Currently, the foundation employs 9,000 people. During 1985 and 1986 new employees totalled 2,475. As the general organizer of orientation programming, the training department had to find a way to deal with this onslaught of new recruits and to tie the program in with the foundation's team-building concepts.

The first step began, literally, with the front door of the human resource department, which the foundation believed should present a positive image to the new employees. Since good impressions are made within the first 30 seconds, new employees are more likely to want to be a part of a team that takes their physical and esthetic needs into consideration right from the start. Architects designed a new canopied entrance, under which new employees participating in orientation pass

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Training (1)

to enter a vestibule with posted job information. Adjacent to this area is a carpeted reception room where a full-time security guard directs the new hires to a welcoming secretary. Upholstered chairs and sofas provide a comfortable area, decorated in mauve, taupe, and teal. The feeling is inviting, and the look is impressive. Solid team building starts here.

Orientation style

The foundation requests that new hires meet in the "orientation room" on the first Monday morning of employment. They pass through the canopied entrance into the comfortable reception area. Here a welcoming staff member gives them a packet containing up-to-date and pertinent organizational information, including a map of the campus, color-coded parking areas, current compensation and benefits information, an employee handbook, and examples of intra-campus publications. New employees are free to review the material until five or six arrive, at which time they are escorted to the orientation room.

At 8:00 a.m. a member of the training department warmly greets the group and outlines the morning's events. A video presentation illustrates how each of the foundation's 13 departments functions as an integrated part of the CCF team. After this 12-minute film, the training representative asks each new employee to introduce himself or herself and to announce which department he or she will be joining. This introduction process allows new employees from the same department to meet and provides the basis for a departmental team identity to begin.

After the training representative discusses parking procedures and employees complete TB tests and security badges, the trainer leads the group on a 45-minute walking tour of the foundation campus. Interesting anecdotes and historical facts about the foundation accent the presentation as the new employees get their bearings. At the completion of the tour, the group relaxes in a quiet dining room area where coffee is available. Within 15 minutes supervisors or representatives from the various departments come to escort the new employees to their work areas.

The second part of the orientation program begins the following morning at 8:30 a.m. As with many organizations, this second phase consists of individual speakers from selected departments sharing infor-

mation on employee relations, benefits, primary and child care, and security and safety. The session ends at 11:00, and the new hires return to their departments.

Involving supervisors

This point concludes many organizations' formal new-employee orientation program. New hires join their departments and their supervisors and coworkers expect them to produce quickly. But studies show it takes at least three weeks for a new environment to become familiar and much longer than that for bonds of cooperation to form. Employees are easily influenced—positively or negatively—at the beginning of a new job. What companies need at this point is a bonding technique that works.

To fill this need, the CCF's training department designed a program for supervisors covering orientation design and implementation. During this three-hour seminar supervisors meet to discuss the importance of orienting new employees at the departmental level. Participants learn to reach orientation objectives, avoid orientation pitfalls, and review the managerial skills needed to accomplish these goals. Role play is a valuable training method that helps these long-term employees get in touch with the feelings that new hires experience.

The role-play exercise used in this seminar for supervisors has the participants act as the board of directors of an advertising agency that wants to secure CCF as a client. Securing the account is a matter of solvency or bankruptcy for the agency. To get approval the agency must create recruitment slogans that the foundation can use to increase their nursing staff. At the beginning of the role play one volunteer is asked to leave the room. After a while, when the agency members are intensely involved in their task, the facilitator introduces the volunteer as their new employee. He or she is expected to be incorporated into the team while the business of slogan making reaches its time limit. How does the new person become part of the work team? Tension increases. Feelings of frustration surface. Supervisors are confronted with the need for an organized, planned, and effective orientation process.

A discussion of the feelings that surfaced during the role play follows. It is important that supervisors understand that new employees feel better and adjust quicker when their anxieties and fears are recognized. Supervisors must create the bond that acts as the solid base for team building.

Training (1)

How orientation leads to team building

Francis and Young believe that people react very differently to the challenge of meeting new colleagues. Some are fearful and have sweaty palms and dry mouths. Others eagerly look forward to opportunities for excitement and achievement. It is with these interactions that team building begins to form. Each person is trying to find out how they fit into their new group.

The well-executed orientation process can increase the rate of development and degree of quality within a team. The following are some team-building characteristics orientation can instill:

■ **Purpose.** Group members understand and share in a purpose, and feel that purpose to be worthwhile.

■ **Attitude.** A team develops a cooperative spirit.

■ **Development.** A mature team deals with difficult questions concerning control, leadership, procedures, organization, and roles.

■ **Strength.** Team members take strength from each other.

■ **Results.** A team is capable of achieving results that the individuals who comprise it cannot do alone.

The supervisor must play the leading role in the team-building effort. He or she is the cornerstone of the team and needs to incorporate each new member in a positive, constructive manner to keep the group strong and functioning. The training department can help supervisors with this commitment by creating programs that will support the supervisor with concrete design material and consulting backup when necessary.

According to a listing in the April 1982 issue of *Supervision*, one-on-one discussions between the supervisor and the new employee might include:

■ an explanation of the organizational structure with particular emphasis on how the department fits into the total picture;

■ a discussion of opportunities for self-improvement;

■ an explanation of the communication network to ease the exchange of ideas;

■ an identification of resource people to assist the new employee in finding his or her way around the organization;

■ assigning the new person to a veteran colleague who can serve as a mentor.

Cost control

In addition to helping the supervisor and

the new employee, the training department can fortify its own *raison d'être* by tying the long-term financial benefits of orientation to the strategic planning of the organization. Businesses large and small want to keep turnover costs as low as possible. Recruiting, interviewing, and training new staff are costly. Data support the theory that well-planned, effective orientation programs create a bond that strengthens both organizational as well as departmental ties. New employees become part of the team quicker. Their desire to leave for what may appear to be better opportunities is diminished.

According to information in the December 1983 *Personnel*, turnover rates at Texas Instruments dropped 40 percent since TI put their new orientation program into place. Additional supportive evidence comes from Corning Glass Works. Two years after Corning improved its orientation program employee turnover declined by 69 percent!

To decide how your organization's orientation and team-building approach compare, answer yes or no to the statements in the box below. If you answer no to any of the questions, your company still has some room for improvement.

1. My organization believes in curbing recruitment costs by offering solid orientation and fostering a team attitude.
2. My organization creates and maintains an attractive welcoming environment for new employees.
3. My organization provides a comprehensive and planned orientation program.
4. My organization encourages effective departmental orientation programs.
5. My organization is sensitive to new employee needs and encourages supervisors to meet them.
6. My organization's training department is available for consultation and offers seminars in team building and orientation at the departmental level.

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