



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Staff Orientation - Getting Off on the Right Foot!

Effective staff orientation programs yield long lasting dividends in the form of employee retention. Employee commitment and customer satisfaction are add-ons. With so much to offer, it is surprising that more time is not spent in orientation training.

New employees somehow learn the ropes, but if this learning is not formalized or approved by management, it might come from the worst employees! The organization thus pays for the lack of orientation.

Orientation is the first training new employees receive. Orientation can be used to instill organizational values and for the purpose of getting and giving information. More importantly, it helps to make a powerful and lasting first impression.

Employees who start off right stick around longer. Low turnover means a reduction in hiring and training costs. Employee morale also gets a boost when turnover is low. But while a majority of managers agree that orientation is important, they seldom make the necessary investments. Hence, it is time to review orientation.

Moving Ahead Gradually

To be effective, orientation should be a gradual process. This means that the initial induction could take six weeks for a factory worker, or six months for a senior manager. It is not only important to make the employee feel at ease the first few days, but it is essential that he or she continues to feel comfortable.

It's Effective if it's on Time

“What are the lunch hours?”, “What is the dress code?”, “How does the computer system work?”, “Whom should I report to?” and “What is the organizational structure?” - these initial employee questions should be answered immediately. With time, the questions change to, “How will I be appraised?”, “How can I suggest changes?”, “What does the organization expect from me?” and “Whom can I see for guidance?” The new employee thus absorbs information gradually and completely.

A new employee is already under pressure to adapt. A two-day intensive orientation program will do nothing to calm his or her nerves. An extended program, on the other hand, shows that the organization understands how difficult it is to adjust and that they are there for support. It really is no wonder that a properly oriented employee never considers leaving!

Senior managers, subordinates, customers and even the new employee's family are influenced by the quality of the orientation program. This is because each group has different and genuine concerns about the employee. An effective orientation program addresses all those concerns. Lunch meets, site visits, family days and panel discussions are all methods of involving these groups.

An effective orientation programs should strive to include the following objectives:



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“Make Me Comfortable.”

A good rule of thumb for all orientation programs is to make the employee feel at ease. Increasing new staff interactions with peers, subordinates, bosses and customers can create a sense of belonging. These interactions should be both formal (management meetings) and informal (break sessions and lunches). Some organizations arrange to send their new employees over for short stints in other departments. This helps the new employee understand the entire organization and build a rapport.

“Let Me Fit in.”

New employees are more than eager to fit in with the established norms and values, but this takes time. Personal experiences and formal and informal exchanges about what constitutes organizational culture are a must. Creating a mentor or buddy team to pair enthusiastic old timers with new ones is one way of extending a positive influence. The mentor-pupil relationship requires ample support from management in terms of scheduling weekly meetings, appreciating mentors' contributions and offering awards for the best team.

“What’s in Store for Me?”

An organization should share its history and achievements with new employees. Needless to say, a new employee will ask, “What is our market position?”, “Are we expanding?”, or “What do our customers say about us?” Answers to these questions orient new employees with the “big picture.” A detailed, lively and upbeat presentation by top executives about the history and future of the organization makes orientation effective.

Senior executives are usually the best authorities to share organizational information, but they might not always be available for the orientation programs. One company solved this problem by videotaping a top executive's presentation. The manager was brought back at a later date for a live discussion.

An orientation program should also be candid about the organization's difficulties and challenges. If the program paints a glorious picture, a new employee is bound to be shocked after a couple of weeks at work. Staff that understands the realities is better equipped for work.

“What’s My Job?”

New employees should be acquainted well with their job responsibilities and the associated authority. A thorough presentation about the appraisal system with a copy of the appraisal form should be given to them. They should understand how performance is assessed and rewarded. Job expectations and possibilities for promotions should be clarified.

“Will You Help Me?”

An effective orientation program aims to gain full participation from new employees as well as old, from senior executives to subordinates. Assignment of ‘orientation’ roles to every staff member ensures organization-wide participation. Including families of new



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employees further boosts the efficacy of an orientation program. One successful organization instituted a “Meet the Company Day” for the family members of new employees. They later sent back photographs of the meet along with hand-written thank you notes.

Another effective approach is to do away with the one-way informational flow from the organization to new staff. Letting new employees explore, research and generate their own impressions fulfills the purpose of orientation. Finally, involve new employees in welcoming the newer lot! This makes them feel experienced and involved.

Summary

Orientation programs are sound corporate investments. They acquaint new employees with the flow of work and communications, allay fears and doubts and encourage friendships. Hence, they have to be carefully designed and delivered and continuously improved.