

Getting In Early: The Importance of Personal Onboarding

by Patrick Sweeney



We all know that first impressions can be lasting. As a result, most new employees fall into one of two categories.

Some are overly concerned with making a mistake, so they hold back. They are frozen in time, waiting, overanalyzing every situation. Others dive in quickly and, because they haven't read the situation correctly, make a mistake that characterizes them as "not quite fitting in." Often they're just plowing forward with what worked in the past, rather than taking time to assess the situation. As a result, they never really become part of the team.

The first few days on a new job are what you might call "the Goldilocks time." New employees are trying not to be too hot or too cold. So, how can they come across just right?

These employees are keenly aware that they are being evaluated by their new colleagues. In fact, nearly 20 percent of the executives surveyed recently by Caliper said they could tell within the first week if they had made a hiring mistake. Five percent said they realized it on the first day. The first day. That's after going through the time-consuming rigors of hiring,

including posting ads, combing through countless resumes, narrowing down a pool of top candidates and assessing their potential, conducting multiple interviews, conferring with colleagues or a consultant and making the final decision.

To make sure that investment was worth it, learning executives must help employees set the right tone in those first few crucial days on the job.

"I always think that going into a new organization is like the ball that gets launched in a pinball machine, quickly shooting around — going ping, ping, ping, trying to find its way," said Helen Slaven, Ph.D., chief learning officer for WellStar Health System, a nonprofit health care company based in Marietta, Ga.

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Cultural Expression

Slaven said one common reason new employees stumble at first is because they don't yet have a firm grasp of their new company's culture.

"For instance, every culture has a way of expressing how things are not working," she said. "There are cultures where you can be direct, others where you would not say anything at all and some where you can get your point across if you do it subtly."

Slaven recalled one instance in which a new employee correctly sized up a particular problem the organization was facing and offered an ideal solution, "but because he was so direct and forceful, it was like he was hitting everybody right between the eyes," she said. "So, while he was right about the problem, he ended up being wrong for the organization. He turned people off. He came across as a strong, opinionated outsider — as a critic

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rather than a collaborator. And he never quite recovered from misreading that first meeting he attended."

An independent coach can provide the new employee with insights and an objective perspective on what he or she needs to do to succeed. And, in the process, such a coach can send two very strong messages. First, new

employees will know that the company is committed to their success and willing to invest in their future. Equally important, new employees will sense that they are truly valued.

When given this coaching opportunity, new employees gain valuable insights into the company's culture, the team they are joining and how their manager works. They also become more aware of their own strengths, motivations and areas they can focus on developing. Mitchell Kauffman, the owner of Kauffman Wealth Services, a financial management and advisory firm affiliated with Raymond James Financial Services Inc., had an independent consultant compare his style of management and expectations with those of a new marketing director he had hired.

"The coach helped to accelerate the getting-to-know-each-other curve," he explained. "As a result, we were able to understand each other better, avoid conflicts and be very open about our different approaches to succeeding."

Kauffman added that the coach helped the executives improve their working relationship on two levels.

"First, we were able to set our own patterns of expectations rather than just allowing patterns to develop between us and then trying to adjust them afterwards," he said. "Equally important, the coach was able to reinforce my model of open communication, which is an essential ingredient to our culture here."

The Four Benefits of Early Coaching

Employees who are coached at the beginning of their new job may be able to contribute more to the team and reach their peak potential sooner. The benefits can be broken down into four categories:

1. Employees acclimate to the company culture much faster.
2. Employees obtain straightforward insights that will help them work more effectively.
3. Employees have a clear understanding of their manager's work style, so they can both work better together.
4. Employees help create their own action plan, with measurable goals, to give them a road map for success.

What Are These Coaching Sessions Like?

Typically, the coach starts off by sharing the results of the employee's in-depth personality profile with him or her. This assessment could have been taken as part of the hiring process, but now it can serve the purpose of providing the employee with insights into his or her motivational strengths as well as areas for developmental opportunity.

For instance, a newly hired salesperson

might be competitive and persuasive and have a strong need for autonomy. These qualities can go a long way toward helping the new employee succeed, as long as they are nurtured and the individual works on developing other areas.

However, this particular individual might not be adept at cooperating with others, maintaining accuracy and adapting to feedback. So, the coach might help the new employee recognize that while his or her strengths may be excellent for networking, moving an agenda forward, keeping others up to date and succeeding with minimal supervision, he or she may want to ask others to double-check his or her work and go out of the way to elicit advice and input from others. The coach will then help the new employee create a personalized action plan tied into specific goals and deadlines.

In addition, the coach will share insights into how the new team member can work most effectively with his or her new manager, fit in with the new team and understand the culture of the company.

This was the case for Diane Swain, vice president and chief operating officer for Kennestone Hospital, WellStar Health System's flagship hospital. Swain asked for a coach's assistance to ensure the newly hired assistant vice president of operations would be as effective as possible, as quickly as possible.

"I am low on organizational skills, so I needed someone who was extremely well organized [assisting me]," Swain explained. "[The new assistant vice president of operations] can create the list, get the first thing done, cross it off the list, then complete the next item on the list, until every item is crossed off the list. This is great, because it frees me up to spend my energy on the things I do well: to develop people and move toward the future.

"[However], we discovered, while discussing future plans, that our styles are very different," Swain continued. "She likes to have a meticulous order about things, while I see things bending and evolving. It became apparent, in order for us to take advantage of each other's strengths, that working with a coach would more quickly help both of us understand where we were coming from and how to work together most effectively. Otherwise, our differences would become our roadblocks."

After discussing this with both Swain and her new team member, the coach helped clarify the issue by comparing their working together to taking a trip: The new assistant VP wants to have every twist and turn of the road

mapped out and to know exactly when and where they will stop for lunch, while Swain just needs to know that they will be having lunch somewhere along the way.

"We understand each other much more thoroughly," Swain said. "It is an opportunity that we almost missed. If we had not spent time with a coach, learning to understand and appreciate our different strengths and how we can complement each other, I might have just thought, 'She's not flexible enough to work with me,' and she might have thought, 'She can't stick with a plan. I'm not going to find this rewarding.'"

"Instead, our coach helped us both come to realize that we have a great partnership," Swain continued. "I'm sure that, on some level, I must still drive her crazy. But she's smiling. And we have a great time together. And that comes from appreciating our strengths and differences and understanding how we leverage each other."

Getting Up to Speed

By coaching new employees as soon as they start their new jobs, they will get up to speed faster because they understand how to avoid potential clashes and adapt their work style to fit in with the organization's culture.

Ultimately, new hires will feel immediately more engaged when they realize their employers are willing to invest time and money in their personal development during the first few weeks on the job.

The final result is everyone's goal: Employees who are coached at the beginning of a job will be able to contribute more to the team and reach their peak potential sooner. ■

About Caliper

Patrick Sweeney is the President of Caliper, an international management consulting firm, based in Princeton NJ, which, for nearly a half-century, has helped Fortune 500 and fast-growing smaller firms hire and develop top performers.

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