In Praise Of . . . Orientation?

Insights
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Faced with an article on new employee orientation, the reader may have one or more of the following thoughts: "Has this writer read a newspaper in the last year? Isn't he aware that nobody in America is hiring? In fact, we're not even sure if we won't need to have more layoffs just to get through this economic whirlpool. Any article about new employee orientation is grossly premature and impossibly out of touch with reality."

While consideration of a process to optimally introduce new employees to the company may be swimming upstream just a little, consideration of a carefully-crafted orientation program is not at all out of place. For one thing, it's easier to think about this subject when new employees are not flowing through the doors in large numbers. For another, orientation programs which communicate to new employees the values, beliefs, culture and history of the employer are and will be more important than ever as expectations increase, as they must, in the "new economy" in which employers as well as employees are going to have to achieve more with fewer resources.

A thoughtful introduction to the company is essential if you believe there is any correlation between employee commitment and company performance. We strongly believe that there is a very high correlation between employee involvement and company achievement. We also believe that a well-structured orientation program is an effective and very necessary first step in taking your company out of the low-hanging-fruit category for union organizers, in a rapidly changing environment where management will very likely have much less time to oppose union marketing efforts than it had in the past.

Starting On The Right Foot

It's true that employee orientation does not have any slick, new-age moniker which makes it sound like it's a new idea or somehow smarter and more relevant than it was in the past. It's also true that the concept has been around for a long time and is not particularly helpful to consultant marketing or branding initiatives. But if you think about it, a careful introduction to your company just makes sense.

In almost every case, new employees know very little about the company – they probably know next to nothing about the company's history or its key accomplishments. They have no idea about their co-

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workers, about their supervisors, about top management, about their job responsibilities, your expectations, how you measure contribution, or what is really important to the company. Orientation is your chance to tell them what you really, really want them to know and understand about the company. There will never be a better opportunity to shape impressions and expectations than you have at the beginning of employment. In our experience too many employers don't even recognize the opportunities that are slipping through their fingers because they are too busy focusing on the tyranny of the schedule and the everyday grind.

There is one additional and inevitable benefit in addition to all those mentioned above: The fact that you take the time to inform the new employee about the company sends an inescapable message to that new employee. "YOU'RE IMPORTANT." This is never a bad message to send to anyone, whether a new or a long-term employee.

Alternatively, management can opt not to take the time to communicate its pride in the company and its accomplishments, it can save the time and let someone else conduct the orientation. And don't fool yourself, new employees **will** receive an orientation, whether you provide one or not. They will and must form impressions about the company. When you abdicate your responsibility for a careful introduction, you just can't be sure what the orientation will be. If you don't provide it, a disgruntled employee who has no use for the company or its objectives or culture may fill in the void. Or if a disgruntled employee doesn't "assist" in the orientation, you may leave the employees on their own to make uninformed guesses about what is important to know about the company.

So you must decide what kind of orientation your new employees will receive.

Some Fundamental Concepts

If you accept our claim that new employee orientation programs are truly important, here are some elements a well-designed program should include.

Initially we think orientation should extend over more than one day. Saying this does not imply that orientation needs to be an interminable slog which must be entirely completed before an employee starts to do any productive work. We do believe that orientation activities should be intermixed with all of the other necessary elements of someone starting at ground zero and progressing to reasonable productivity.

Periodic questionnaires or mini-surveys during the first weeks of the orientation should also be considered to provide feedback about each new employee's view of the effectiveness of the orientation. Responses to these questions will also provide the opportunity to reinforce points which may not have been effectively communicated the first time.

Typically, employers have a secretary, payroll clerk or the junior human resources person sit down with the new employee(s) and get all the necessary paperwork signed which includes W-4s, insurance forms, etc., and put the employee to work. If this is your orientation program, it is neither adequate or effective. While the orientation period should last more than one day, and will necessarily involve the completion of all required paperwork, it needs to include much more

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necessarily involve the completion of all required paperwork, it needs to include much more.

We believe that an effective orientation program should, among other items, include the opportunity for the new employee to be exposed to managers at all levels of the organization, as well as provide an explanation of company expectations, opportunities for advancement, introductions to co-workers and to the operations both in front and behind the employee's work department so the new employee understands how the job interacts with those both up and down stream. A thorough safety briefing is also essential. Obviously it is in the company's interest that all employees work safely and go home at the end of the day in the same condition as they came to work in the morning. Additionally a safety mentality sends the message to the new as well as to old employees that the company really cares about them, which is never a bad impression to leave with an employee.

Some employers with unionized workforces don't bother communicating the company's strengths because all of the employees are covered by a collective bargaining agreement and the employer is obligated to deal with the union. An excellent introduction to the company is useful in *every* case because union-represented workers are not automatons. It is not violation of any labor law if they choose to work productively and use their brains as well as their physical skills to accomplish the company's goals. No provision of the National Labor Relations Act mandates that an employer abdicate its responsibilities to effectively manage, inspire and motivate union-represented employees as well as those who are not represented by a union. There will be no excuse or slack for the employer who does not maximize each and every resource available to her in the new global economy.

We believe so strongly in the importance of an employer's communicating what makes each company unique, that we do not advise limiting employee-orientation efforts only to new employees. Messages about the company's history, why it believes in itself, its culture and value systems should be communicated regularly to employees, even those who are no longer new to the company; and this is particularly so if there has been no prior effective orientation program in effect. So, effective employee orientation need not necessarily be restricted to employees who first walk in the door, although it should always be used for each of them from this point forward.

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