The New Employee Orientation Process

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While there may be many components that enable excellence in an organization, sustained excellence is impossible without a strong process for indoctrinating new employees. If new employees are invited to join the organization for any reason, new employee orientation is critical.

Orientation is the process of familiarizing a new member with the organization, their line of business, their facility, their department or work team, and their job role. Perhaps a better word for the activity is indoctrinate, which, according to the Random House College Dictionary, means “to instruct in a doctrine, principle, or ideology; to teach or inculcate; to imbue with learning.” Perhaps the word assimilate adds perspective as well, meaning “to take in and incorporate as one’s own; to absorb.” From all of these, we can extract the purpose of new employee orientation to be to effectively indoctrinate the new employee into the organization, work team, and job role and to effectively assimilate them into the new organizational culture.

The orientation process has a direct impact on several organizational outcomes. A properly indoctrinated employee is a more committed employee, less likely to become discouraged with their new job and all the frustrations that can accompany a job change. So employee turnover is reduced. A properly oriented employee is able to become productive on the job faster in that the quality of their work reaches acceptable levels more quickly, thus enabling better customer service and satisfaction. Lower turnover, higher quality products and services, and better customer satisfaction lead to repeat business and financial growth. Effective new employee orientation is without doubt a moneymaker to the business with proven positive return on investment.

Critical goals of the orientation process might include:

- Maintain quality measures during employee transitions.
• Achieve 10% or less turnover of new employees in the first year of employment.
• Maintain customer satisfaction measures during employee transitions.
• All new employees will pass a test on organization culture, facility, department, and job role with 95% accuracy within 90 days of employment.

Orientation process design must include all aspects deemed critical to the indoctrination of new employees. Whether intentional or not, orientation begins during the selection process. Prospective new members begin to get a glimpse of the culture, people, and processes as they proceed through the selection process. Interaction with recruitment personnel and other current employees, observation of facility organization and cleanliness, documents, videos, testing, and any other interface with the prospective employee communicates the culture and begins to orient that person to it. We often miss this opportunity to intentionally indoctrinate the employee and leave to chance the impressions they may have about the organization, its people, and the job.

Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, one of the most admired and respected organizations in the world, is perhaps one of the best at orienting prospective employees during the selection process, even to the point of encouraging a prospect to self-select out if they realize it’s a culture they cannot support. Disney goes to great lengths through video, written communication, and the job interview to communicate standards of behavior and appearance with which the prospective employee will be expected to comply should they receive an offer and become a new employee (Walt DisneyWorld, 2005). By the time a person is offered a job with Disney, they’ve already become aware of many critical behavioral and cultural expectations. The orientation process has already begun.

But more formally and perhaps most understood is for the orientation process to begin as soon as the job offer has been accepted. Typically beginning with the new employee’s first day on the job, new employee orientation can last as little as a few hours or as much as a week,
depending upon the organization’s needs and objectives. Disney invests one full day with new employees to indoctrinate them into the culture, key behaviors and key processes that apply to all Disney employees. The employee will then proceed to the property where they will work and receive orientation to the line of business (Magic Kingdom, EPCOT, Disney MGM Studios, or Animal Kingdom), facility, team, and job. The location orientation may last up to several weeks.

Blue Ridge HealthCare (BRHC), a community healthcare organization in western North Carolina, has recently redesigned its orientation process for greater impact. Following a merger with the major competitor three years ago, the organization began a cultural transformation. The new leadership redefined its vision “to become the best community healthcare system in America,” and set high organizational objectives to measure its achievement. Among them were to become a top 100 hospital in America, to make Fortune’s list of the 100 Best Companies to Work for in America, and to achieve 95th percentile patient and employee satisfaction as measured by outside survey firms and benchmarked against the best healthcare organizations nationwide.

After implementing numerous initiatives to reach those goals, the organization has made tremendous progress. But recently, progress has stalled and leadership has realized that new thinking is required to continue to propel the organization forward. One gap identified was that new employees, both staff and leaders, who had joined the organization in the past 2 years, were not able to sustain the same levels of excellence in their areas as were the ones who had been involved with the cultural transformation from the beginning. The orientation process that worked up until now was not sufficient to prepare new employees for the higher level of job performance required to achieve and sustain excellence. A new approach was needed.

By researching other organizations of excellence, BRHC has learned that the orientation process is a varied as are companies themselves and that the right approach must be discerned by
each organization to meet their unique needs. Disney has one day of general orientation for all employees. Southwest Airlines and Ritz Carlton have three. Cox Heath in Ohio has two, and so on. The length of the orientation is not as important as the content and delivery. What is most important is that the experience properly and effectively prepares the new employee for success on the job and assimilates them into the culture, regardless of length.

With that in mind, BRHC has determined that the first week on the job for new employees will be devoted to their orientation. The new employee is introduced to the organization’s mission, vision, values and standards of behavior. Through experiential learning techniques, they learn about the company’s expectations of behavior for all employees.

Providing high quality, safe, accurate, and compassionate care, working together as a team to create a memorable experience for the patient and their family, resilience, innovation, efficiency, responsibility, service, commitment, integrity…are all demonstrated and reinforced at the organizational, facility, departmental, and job role levels to help the individual employee understand and be able to personalize the organization’s mission “to enhance life by excelling in care.” On the next page is a diagram of the orientation process showing entry level at the point of hire all the way to executive level management on the path of learning. Notice how a new orientation occurs at each step along the path as the employee enters a new area of responsibility and accountability.

Once designed and implemented, the orientation process must be managed effectively. Appropriate process sub-goals must be established to ensure the process is meeting overall process goals. Internal and external customer feedback loops must be established to measure process performance. Ample resources must be allocated to meet process goals. And every department and leader in the organization must be connected to the process to ensure follow through at the departmental level.
In my experience, many organizations fail to allocate proper time, energy, resource, and thought to the new employee orientation process. This is a mistake if the organization desires to achieve and maintain operational excellence. It’s like the Fram Oil Filter commercial used to say, “pay me now or pay me later.” Either we invest our energy up front in the selection and orientation process to find the right person for the job and set them up for success, or we invest more time and energy on the back end of the process as we continually manage employee turnover and operational inefficiencies. Up front investment in the new employee’s knowledge and behavior is the short cut to sustained excellence in any organization of any type. Not only that, it’s the right thing to do.
References


