

13 Questions To Optimize Your Onboarding Efforts

by David Lee

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If you're serious about upgrading your new hire orientation program and your onboarding process as a whole, here are 13 questions you need to ask. Ask them of yourself, your HR Department, your management team, your frontline supervisors, and – most importantly -- your new employees.

1. **Do we make our new hires feel welcome?**

– Analyze step by step the first few days on the job that your new employees experience. Do you do things that communicate “We’re glad you’re here” or is it more “Alright get to work, we’ve got things to do here...” Ask new hires who’ve been on the job a month or two how welcome they felt the first day, the first week, the first month.

Ask them what you did that made them feel welcome and what you could do to create a more welcoming experience. In overhauling a call center orientation program, we had all the team leaders sign a welcome poster and put a sign in the lobby welcoming our new crop of call center reps. In our evaluations, new hires reported that they never felt so welcomed in any of their other jobs.

2. **Do we inspire pride?** – The first application of this question requires brutal honesty. Look at how well run both your orientation program and the onboarding process as a whole are. Are they thorough, organized, compelling, state of the art or are they a slipshod, haphazard mess?

Most organizations tolerate a level of professionalism and efficacy in their onboarding process they would never tolerate in their overall operations. The other aspect of inspiring pride relates to the next three questions.

If you want to inspire your new hires -- rather than leave them with buyer's remorse -- make

sure your orientation program let's them know they joined a great company. The next three points explain how.

3. **Do we connect them with the big picture?**

– The more new hires understand the mission, vision, goals, and uniqueness of your organization, the more engaged they will be from the outset. If the centerpiece of your orientation program is rules, regulations, and logistical minutiae, you can guarantee they will have second thoughts about their job choice.

Orientation programs that don't emphasize the big picture rob the organization of perhaps the greatest value new hires bring to their new employer - enthusiasm and the desire to make a difference.

4. **Do we show them how much they matter?**

– Engaging employees from the outset requires more than just communicating “This is what we’re about and why we’re a great company”. It must also include “This is how YOU help make it all happen.” Communicating this is especially important if you want to attract and retain Gen Y employees, who place an extremely high priority on work that matters and being able to make a difference.

At the call center I worked in, the original orientation and training focused on the technical side of the call center reps' jobs for the first couple of weeks. The message? “Your jobs are about processing transactions. In this company, you're a worker bee.” Mindful that what we emphasize communicates a message to employees about what's important, we changed the order of topics. Day one was devoted to how important their jobs were and how, to our customers, THEY were Acme Insurance (obviously not the real name of the company.) Think of orientation programs

you've attended and what a difference it would have made for you if you heard how vital your role was from Day One, rather than enduring hour after hour of transactional and technical information.

5. **Do we collect and share stories?** – Great companies communicate their greatness through great stories. Whether it's Nordstrom's legendary customer service stories (remember the one about the customer returning the tires?) or Southwest Airline's legendary customer service and work environment, greatness is communicated not through Powerpoint lectures, charts and graphs, but through stories that touch the heart and capture the imagination.

One of the best things you can do to upgrade your orientation program is collect stories from your employees about experiences they've had that:

- Embody the unique personality of your company.
- Convey what it's like to work at your company.
- Illustrate the great things your company does.
- Demonstrate how employees make a difference.

Share these with your New Hires. Better still, have the people who told you these stories come in and share them. Doing so accomplishes several useful objectives. First, it creates a more engaging, inspiring orientation programs. Second, it communicates to current employees "You are an important part of helping new hires come onboard". Third, it gives frontline employees the chance to be a star, the chance to be an informal leader.

6. **Do we make our orientation program interesting and interactive?** – Many if not most orientation programs are about as interesting as watching cement solidify. Besides being boring, such programs send a disturbing message to your new employees. Such programs say "You just joined a company that doesn't know how to do things right." Think of boring orientation programs you've attended and what you thought about

your new employer. There's too much information available on how to make learning fun and interactive to excuse old fashioned, boring data dumps.

7. **Do we make our process employee-centric or employer-centric?** – Borrow from the playbook of great customer service companies: design the customer experience from the customer's perspective. In this case, analyze your onboarding process from the New Hire's perspective.

When you've been with the same company for awhile, it's easy to forget what it's like to not know what's going on, who to go to for help, and the desire to not be seen as a high maintenance employee. When people who have forgotten what it's like to be a new hire design the onboarding process, you get a process that's great IF... you've been with the company for a long time and understand the context.

Since New Hires are... well new... it doesn't work real well for them. It's like computer manuals written by technogeeks. They're highly useful if you too are a technogeek who already understands the program. To design your process from the New Hire's perspective, ask them for their perspective. Smart companies, like Northeast Delta Dental, awarded the Fourth Best Small Company to Work For in the US, do this.

They continually ask new employees for feedback on how to make their onboarding process more user-friendly and how to more effectively address the needs of their new employees.

8. **Have we broken our orientation program down into bite-sized, digestible chunks (rather than making New Hires choke on huge hunks)?** – Think of times you've endured orientation programs that were info-dump ultra-marathons. How much did you retain? How impressed were you with your new employer? You knew that was a stupid, ineffective way to impart information. Your New Hires will have the same opinion. As one manager I interviewed wisely noted "With

today's employees, just as you're rating them, they're rating you."

By breaking your orientation program into digestible chunks, you not only communicate "We're a company that does things right", you also communicate "We care about you and respect you enough to spare you a lousy, nonsensical training experience."

9. **Are we offloading as much information as we can onto our intranet (or non-digital equivalent if you don't have an Intranet)?** – Have you ever had someone give you detailed, step-by-step instructions or directions days, weeks, or months before you would actually need them? How helpful was that? How much did you appreciate their wasting your time with something you wouldn't be able to remember when you needed it?

By offloading as much information as you can so it's available in an "as needed" basis, you are being more efficient and effective. You're also once again communicating to New Hires that you know how to do things right.

10. **Do we make it easy for new hires to get the information they need?** – Having a comprehensive, user-friendly knowledgebase on your Intranet gives your New Hires a greater sense of security that they can find the information they need when they need it.

This, combined with a culture that makes it OK to ask for help reduces the anxiety of being in a new environment, not knowing the ropes, but not wanting to be considered a high maintenance employee and a pain in the neck.

Do you have both a comprehensive knowledge base and a friendly, "glad to help you" culture? If you do, your new employees don't waste valuable time and energy fretting about how they are going to find the information they need.

11. **Do we make it easy for new hires to tell us how they're doing... and how we're doing?** – Although some people have no problem letting you know what they think or

feel regardless of the context, when you're trying to make a good impression on your new employer, you're less likely to express distress or let them know they're blowing it. Just as companies known for great customer service make it easy for their customer's to tell them the truth, you need to make it easy for your New Hires to tell you the truth.

In companies that have a "Suck it up" and "Sink or Swim" mentality, New Hires learn quickly that it's best to keep your mouth shut and make the best of it. Their employer never hears about what they do that alienates their New Hires (until the exit interview, and often not even then).

At Designer Blinds, an Omaha-based company, they reduced turnover from 200% to 8% in part, by instituting what they call the "Entrance Interview". After analyzing their turnover statistics, they discovered that most of their new hires were leaving between 90 and 180 days into their employee experience.

So rather than wait to find out why they were leaving in the exit interview, they decided to prevent them from leaving in the first place.

They did this by instituting the Entrance Interview. These are now held prior to the 90 day "witching hour", so they could find out what their New Hire's needed, how they could help them be successful, etc.

At Northeast Delta Dental, at 90 days, New Hires get to have their "20 Questions with Connie" meeting. At this meeting, New Hires sit down with Connie Roy-Czychowski, VP of HR and give her feedback on every aspect of the onboarding process and their work experience.

12. **Do we have a mentoring program... that works?** – Having an effective mentoring program is a win/win/win. Your New Hires win for obvious reasons. Your company wins, because you're able to get them up and running faster and help them feel part of your company more quickly. But also the person doing the mentoring wins.

If you make being a Mentor a symbol of

excellence, if it has cachet, it's a powerful way of recognizing excellence. Since recognition plays such a major role in employee engagement, this is a great tool for keeping current employees happy and engaged.

Mentoring also provides tremendous value to current employees because it gives them a chance to develop coaching, supervisory, and leadership skills. Given that professional development and skill portfolio expansion are especially high priorities for today's workers, a mentoring program also aids your efforts at retaining and engaging your current employees.

13. **Do we help our managers do their part well?** – As Gallup's research has shown, when it comes to employee engagement and performance... it's all about the boss. More than any other factor influencing employee engagement and performance, an employee's supervisor plays THE most important role.

Helping supervisors understand how to create a positive, productive, inspiring work experience is not only the foundation of a high performance workplace, it's a "must" if you want an effective onboarding process.

If HR simply asks supervisors to help their New Hires get started without helping them do it right, they won't. Make sure your supervisors receive training, support, checklists, etc. so they cover all the bases.

Companies like Bensonwood Homes, a NH-based company and Northeast Delta Dental have detailed checklists for supervisors that outline what they should do the first day, first week, etc.

Helping your supervisors do their part also includes training and coaching around the following key moments of truth that will influence their ability to make their New Hire's early days and weeks on the job a positive experience:

- Making it safe for the New Hire to ask questions

- Give constructive feedback so it's actually constructive and not demoralizing
- Making them feel welcome from the outset
- Noticing "Teaching Moments" and thinking like a coach, not simply an impersonal task master.

One Final Point...

Business sage Jim Rohn has a simple saying that conveys much wisdom: "It's not what you know, it's what you DO with what you know that makes a difference in your life."

My hope is that as you read through these questions, you didn't simply ask yourself if you knew these factors were important. They're pretty common sense (yet despite this, rarely done).

My hope is that you will actually ask yourself – and your HR Department, your management team, your frontline supervisors -- and most importantly your New Hires – if you're actually doing these. And then... involve all to make sure you can answer each with a confident "Absolutely".

...And a Question...

If your organization is doing a great job at new hire orientation and/or the onboarding process as a whole, let me know. I'd like to share what other people are doing right:
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About the author: David Lee is the founder and principal of HumanNature@Work. He is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement. Mr. Lee is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, as well as several dozen articles on organizational and individual performance that have been published in trade journals and books in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia.

Comments About David Lee's Programs

"I've now worked with over 150 presenters since you last were a part of MEBSR's Spring Conference, and still you stand out as the best person we've ever had come and present on how we best work with one another, increase productivity and thrive."

Sanna McKim, Executive Director, Maine Businesses for Social Responsibility, ME

"It was a sheer delight to sit back and listen, learn and laugh as David weaved his extensive knowledge of the material with his abundant practical wisdom generously sprinkled with personal reflections, stories and his own wholesome humor. David brings a rare blend of practical knowledge and genuine humanity to his presentations. One cannot help but leave his sessions smarter, and a better human being, as he has a way of touching one's heart as well as one's head."

Bill Gaertner, MD, WI

David, I wanted to thank you for being part our show in Las Vegas. The feedback I have received about your sessions was fantastic!!!!!! Three cheers to you.

Julie McNeney, COO, International Council on Active Aging, Vancouver, BC

"Your presentation on resiliency is extraordinary. I left with a specific action plan for improving the quality of my daily life. Your kindness, your knowledge, and your energy combined for a helpful and inspirational workshop."

Brenda Foster, Director of Communications, Healthwise, ID

"David's unique blend of humor and professionalism provides an engaging forum to absorb the content of his presentation. David does not hesitate to encourage participation and captures the audiences attention consistently throughout the seminar. I left the seminar feeling that this experience was well worth the time and money."

Dennis Hebert, Jr., President, Merrimack Valley Chapter of the NH Credit Union League, NH

"David's presentation style is unparalleled! The substantive and timely content of his subject materials is immediately adaptable to the workplace making his seminars an invaluable aid to an employer seeking to be an "Employer of Choice."

Lynn M. Lombard, VP, MMG Insurance Company, ME

"I can honestly say that your sessions were highlights for me at the conference. Since then I have perused your website and read many of the articles posted on there. Again, thank you and kudos to you for the great presentation!"

Rob Huppée, Amica Mature Lifestyles Inc., Vancouver, British Columbia

"I learned more in this seminar than in four others I took from (a well known national seminar company)."

Jennifer Sgroi, Stonyfield Farm Yogurt, NH

"I want to say a big thank you for the wonderful job you did in your presentations during our Quality Leadership Conference. You are a talented individual; thank you for sharing your gifts with Fairview."

Tom Hanson, Fairview Healthcare System, MN