

Inboarding Sets Employees Up for Success

By Larry Cassidy

If onboarding is such a great business idea – and it is – why should it be reserved for only new employees? Maybe the time has come to give inboarding a try.

Onboarding is more than just a solution for employees with the new job jitters. Getting new employees ready to be productive is one of the toughest jobs managers face. Failure to set new employees up to succeed can lead to a slow ramp up to productivity, unhappy new hires, and, ultimately, failure to meet your critical business goals. Rather than recruiting, hiring and throwing employees in the deep end of the pool (“Sink or swim!”), there are much better onboarding practices to increase the worker’s odds of success.

To many a business school professor, onboarding is known as organizational socialization mechanisms. In layman’s terms, this means the ways new employees acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and corporate culture to become effective team members. Think beyond just a simple new employee orientation. The process might include formal lectures, videos, training booklets, computer-based simulations, and even such basic steps as having someone welcome the newcomer and take them to lunch the first day.

This is a far cry from what we called onboarding when I was a captain in the Marine Corps: boot camp. Obviously stress reduction was not on our priority list. While there are no drill instructors at your company yelling at new recruits to drop and give me twenty (at least I hope not), the purpose is the same. You want to prepare newcomers for success in the organization.

More than 80 percent of organizations reported that they have either formal (i.e., written, documented, standard) or informal onboarding programs and/or practices, according to a study by the Society for Human Resources Managers (SHRM). The vast majority of organizations indicated that providing communication, training and resources is extremely important for the successful adjustment of new hires.

So one in five business leaders are still holdouts, reasoning that traditional human resources orientation sessions are good enough. They fail to see the cost/benefit payoff of investing so much time and energy in the new hires. This is miscalculated reasoning.

Public and private research has proven that onboarding leads to such positives as higher job satisfaction, better job performance, greater commitment to the organization, and stress reduction. Advocates say onboarding does more than shorten the learning curve of new hires. The ultimate payoff is reduced turnover and getting productive workers to increase their tenure at the company.

But Why Just the Newbies?

If you agree with the mounting evidence that onboarding is the way to go, here is an important question: Why wouldn't you do the same to accelerate the progress of the employees you already have? There is no reason to think that it is too late for the rest of the roster who arrived after onboarding began or have already gone through onboarding.

Consider it inboarding, an extension of the idea of onboarding. The purpose of inboarding is to set existing, rather than new, employees up for greater success. You want the same payoffs: higher job satisfaction, better job performance, and greater commitment to the goals of the organization.

Employees are not set-it-and-forget-it machines. The need for input is ongoing. Many inboarding communications tools and channels can be used to continually get the information across. If onboarding is like an inoculation, then inboarding is like booster shots.

When I was president of a 150-person consumer optical company, I discovered there are two groups of employees that are ideal candidates for what I now call inboarding: all employees and specially selected employees.

First, let's consider all employees. That's right, all employees. Do you have employees you don't care if they are successful or not? If yes, I recommend you get rid of the position or get rid of the person in the position (maybe that should be called offboarding, but that is a whole other article). In today's world of lean companies and global competitiveness, every employee counts.

I am a believer that you help employees be more successful at accomplishing corporate goals if they know what's going on, where the company is going, why it is going there, what is expected of them, how they can contribute and what the payoff is for them. A leader wants to know the answers to those questions, and so does the entire team.

Treat your employee base like adults who are as interested in the future and success of the company as you are. Here are the tactics that can make inboarding work. Try town hall meetings, roundtable discussions, and even monthly newsletters (just the facts, not the fluff).

Please understand, I am not talking rah-rah, go-team-go cheerleading sessions. This is honest sharing of information. The important news to always stress is where are we going, why it is important, what the opportunities are, what we need from you the employee, and what is in it for you. Bottom line: We get more business, everyone is more secure.

There is an old adage: "If you don't know where you are going, it doesn't matter what road you take." In my experience coaching more than 300 companies, the information about company success metrics does not easily filter down from the management team and supervisors to the

rank and file. People are often in the dark on how they relate to success. Everyone who goes to work wants to go home feeling they accomplished something and that it was important.

Here is one technique I recommend. Set up idea exchange sessions comprised of representatives from various functional areas of the organization. Have them share why they think another area is important. They might make comments like: "Marketing is important because if we don't have a steady stream of customers we are out of business." "Operations is important because if we don't deliver on time that hurts our cash flow and reputation." "Accounts receivable is important because if they don't do their job we don't get paid by customers." Having that feedback from other people in the organization can really open their eyes to the fact that what they do really matters. They come to work with their heads held a little higher and their focus more intent.

Specially Selected Employees

The other prime candidate for onboarding are specially selected employees who possess high potential for growth. These are the people you know would like to be major players for you as you go down the road. Inboarding can focus on a number of actions to get them ready to become better, rather than pigeonholing them in the job they already have.

Many managers are afraid to groom a high performing employee for promotion, because they hate to lose someone good. Wrong, wrong, wrong. A manager's job is to grow their people and find the right new person to replace them.

With a small to medium company there can be a challenge to find slots to move a high performer up a ladder. Unlike the days when I was an executive at General Mills, in a small organization there are not as many opportunities for promotion for an up-and-comer.

The solution is forget about the vertical ladder and, as proposed by Vistage speaker and consultant AmyK Hutchins, consider a horizontal ladder. This means moving employees laterally into new and different experiences. Moving sideways can keep the employee fresh (not too different from how the military cross trains its personnel).

Project work is another inboarding technique. You might say to one of these special employees, "You have chance to be a manager, but right now we think you are short on finance. So I am going to give you a project that lets get your nose into the numbers."

Maybe the solution is as simple as cross training. The restaurant chain PF Changs took two important actions during the recession. First, they got rid of everything on the expense side that did not enhance the customer's dining experience. Second, they did a great deal of cross training, which allowed them to reduce head count because kitchen staff could fill in for wait staff and vice versa. More important, morale went up because the employees better understood what it took for the entire restaurant to be successful.

Final Thoughts on Inboarding

Inboarding should be done on a regular, continual basis. If you do it episodically, then the employees tend to look at it as something the leaders do when something is wrong or when you get a big order. Communicating on a monthly or quarterly basis is something to strive for, but not less than every six months.

Don't neglect the social side. Functions like the company picnic and the holiday party are important. So is the celebration for the big win. In my experience, companies who celebrate victories do better over time.

Breaking bread is also a proven strategy. Regularly take a cross section of employees out for a lunch discussion. If you show genuine interest in your employees, they will know that you care. Then they are more likely to open up to you on what is really going on. Tagalongs are another strategy. Have a younger employee shadow you for some client meetings, lunches and project work.

Overall, the inboarding payoff can be enormous. Never forget it is the leader's job to create employee alignment with personal goals, management objectives, and company goals. Inboarding will give you better players and deeper bench strength. Technology is great, but technology doesn't give you edge. Business is still about people.