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## Management

### **Beyond Sink-or-Swim Training: Integrating New Staff**

*Ever notice that "deer-caught-in-the-headlights" look on the faces of new people in your office? Sure, they were excellent employees for someone else, but this is their first day at your office. These new staffers are all just promises and potential until you integrate them as productive members of your team.*

*By Gregory P. Hawkins and Claude T. Hawkins*

### **Sink or Swim and Good Luck**

Many associations employ one of two basic methods for training new personnel. The first and most popular is the "sink-or-swim" school of training, which consists of a senior supervisor leading the new employee to a large swimming pool. "We are very impressed with your credentials," the supervisor says. "Ask anyone if you have questions." Then the supervisor pushes the new employee into the deep end of the pool. The new employee – who doesn't want to look foolish – makes a valiant effort to hold his or her frantic splashing to minimum.

This method of training is effective -- eventually. Taking the plunge and making mistakes do teach. Most new people ultimately will learn their jobs and settle into the office rhythm. However, can your office afford an average of three mistakes for every step of the learning process?

Sometimes large, well-funded associations will employ a dedicated training staff, even allocate time for new employees to attend training seminars. New employees can make their three mistakes in a classroom setting.

Chances are good that your office offers some sort of orientation course or at least a handbook of some kind. Still, the day-to-day reality for most associations is lean and mean. The need is now, and resources do not allow time or money for elaborate training programs.

Savvy associations should consider a marriage of the two strategies. Such a merger of training tactics is less likely to soak up limited resources. Also, it provides personal flotation devices when a multitude of new processes and procedures threaten to engulf your new employees.

### **Basic Building Blocks**

Reference material is the foundation of proper training. When your new employee is lost in a sea of new information, and everyone else is too busy to help, reference material can make the difference between success and frustration.

Nothing is more fundamental than names and phone numbers. Obviously, you have names and phone numbers in abundance. Your database is so full of names that they practically ooze from the hard drives of your computers.

While technology has proven a boon to the modern association, humans often need something they can touch, something they can tuck into a convenient drawer or tape to a wall – something on paper. Despite the wealth of information electronically stockpiled on your server, nothing beats a simple printed list.

An experienced employee should compile a list of names, numbers, and, if appropriate, addresses of the people and organizations important to the smooth operation of your office. This should be a short list, no more than two or three printed pages. Just as most people have many acquaintances but a smaller circle of friends, your office may communicate with thousands of people but your people interact with a much smaller group day to day.

This abridged contact list is not a membership list, *per se*. It should include suppliers, the person who fixes the copier, perhaps the "help line" of your overnight shipper, even the numbers of those three places that deliver food when folks are too busy to leave the office. However, the list should exclude office personnel at this point.

Often, especially during the first few weeks, your new employees will discover a need to contact someone and not know who or how. They will waste a few minutes considering the problem, a few more minutes deciding which co-worker to interrupt, a few more minutes to... you see where this is heading. You can short-circuit this entire scenario with a simple list of frequent contacts.

A short paragraph should explain why this person is valuable to your office, which services and/or products this person provides, and what they expect from you. Derogatory comments should not appear. This easy list transforms what began as a phone book into

a superb training tool and resource for your new employee.

### **An Unwelcome Task**

Few employees will thank you for this assignment. Too many important tasks already compete for their attention. For best results, be sure to stress the priority you place on the project and set a deadline for completion.

When completed, give the list to another employee for review. Instruct the second employee to add names and to refine the comments under each name, then return the list to the first employee, who has overall responsibility to format and polish the finished product.

Next, compile a similar but separate list of names and phone numbers of office personnel. Replace the "comments" paragraph with short job descriptions.

You now have two reference tools that will benefit not only new employees, but also your entire staff. Both projects probably require less than two hours total time.

### **Paper Training Your New Employee**

Are there other areas where you can provide written training material for your new hires? Consider training sheets to summarize important procedures and processes.

Most of your office procedures are fairly simple. Still, your new employees must learn dozens of procedures and hundreds of simple steps, which in congregate is intimidating. The things they learn today will begin to crowd what they learned yesterday. A good training sheet allows for efficient instruction and quick review.

Be warned that a hard truth exists about training sheets -- many are poorly constructed, confusing at best, and often nearly worthless. A "good" training sheet must clearly explain a specific process in such a way that your new employee could successfully complete the process in a locked room. Vague or partial explanations and outdated information spawn frustration rather than resolve it.

In addition, a good training sheet must be short and concise -- one page only. Human nature is human nature. An explanation of a basic process that rambles for pages will prove more detrimental than beneficial. Break down complicated processes into components that fit onto a single sheet.

Now for the good news. Most training sheets take less than 15 minutes to prepare, and the format is simple. Describe step one of

the process, then describe step two, then step three and step four. Add a few bulleted explanations under each step, and you are done. Notwithstanding the previous warning about poorly written training sheets, remember that a training sheet is nothing more than a basic outline with brief descriptions, not a master's thesis.

The procedure for developing training sheets follows the pattern you established for the phone lists. One employee writes the sheet; a second employee reviews the sheet.

### **The Human Touch**

Reference material is great, but sometimes the hand of an experienced employee on the shoulder of a new employee makes all the difference. The combination of personal instruction coupled with a training sheet for review is powerful.

Your association likely appoints someone to shepherd a new employee for the first few days and then function as an advisor until the new hire becomes familiar with specific job assignments. This is excellent but creates some challenges for the shepherd. The shepherd must do double duty – training the new person and performing his or her regular job.

You should consider assigning other employees to help with training exercises rather than expecting one person to do the heavy lifting. This allows the shepherd time to fulfill primary responsibilities, and everyone benefits. Team spirit increases because more employees become involved in the training process. The new employee acclimatizes more quickly not only to the job, but also to your office community. If you limit these training sessions to 15 minutes, the time expended by busy veteran employees is minimal. In this way, you secure many benefits of a training staff without the expense.

You cannot afford to ignore the negative consequences of shoot-from-the-hip training. Proper training will help integrate your new employees into your office with efficiency and effectiveness.

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