

Performance management begins with on-boarding - stop lobbing lemons!

 By [Suzanne Patterson](#)

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It is the first day of your new job. You arrive, bright and early, eager to get started and make a good impression. You struggle to get into the premises. The security staff all but strip search you and can't tell you where to park. You park down the street and walk in. When you get to the front desk sweating and crippled from your new shoes, the receptionist does not know who you are and seems annoyed by your questions. Where should I go? Who should I speak to? Can you show me where my desk is? Can I borrow a pen? You certainly don't dare to ask for a cup of coffee. With a harrumphing sigh and after several calls to unanswered extensions, she marches you in herself and abandons you with the first admin person she can find from the department you are meant to be starting in.



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They look equally irritated and leave you standing awkwardly in the passage by the managers office, who "should arrive at any minute", they say. By 9.30am you have played 25 rounds of Angry Birds on your phone and the first impressions of the company where you hope to spend the next five to ten years of your life probably can't be described as positive. It jars more than a little when your manager finally does start the "It is wonderful to work here!" pitch, after having ignored you for fifteen minutes on arrival and only having plastered on that winning smile when handed your file and told (in front of you) that you are Jane Soap starting today in sales...

Feeling sour?

We are told that we should make lemonade out of the lemons life hands us, and the first day of a new job can often feel like a relentless citrus bombardment. As perky and eager as you might be, it is impossible to hit the ground running if you are not supplied with the basic tools and procedures to perform your job and the mandate to do so. Here is the important truth behind that fruit-inspired nugget of wisdom: if life does not also hand you water and sugar, your lemonade is going to suck.

New employees are more likely to become "engaged" (read productive and happy to work for you for a longer stint) if they receive meaningful communication and interaction, if they receive the tools they need to do their jobs, if they have an opportunity to feel challenged, and if they get these things sooner, rather than later ([Gallup Report: State of the global workplace: Employee engagement insights for business leaders worldwide 2013](#)).

So why do we do it? Why do we, as employers, spend a ton of money hiring talent, only to treat these same people like teenage initiates who need to suffer and subjugate themselves before cracking the nod for membership into our secret society?

We think it is an HR problem

The HR department might have been responsible for finding Joe Wonderful and getting him to sign his contract, but once the baby is delivered (and contract signing would be that moment), the ball needs to fall firmly into the court of the direct line manager of the newly minted employee. Think of HR as your adoption agency - as soon as you take ownership of this new person, you need to be the responsible parent and the first nappies need to be changed by you, and done with a smile, if you have any hope at all of bonding with the infant and helping them to develop to their potential.

We are too busy getting stuff done

If we needed an extra pair of hands in the office, it is probably because we are pretty darn busy right now and we don't really have time for baby-sitting, thanks very much. I hear you, but although it might be easier to do something yourself than to train a new person to get the same thing done, it is important to push through basic training as quickly as possible. The sooner you get them on the right track the sooner they will become the asset with capacity which you were looking for in the first place. You also need to realise that being busy looks a lot like indifference and hostility to a new employee, who doesn't want to be a burden for a minute longer than they need to be.

We don't know we are making them miserable

If we have worked for a company for several years, we might have forgotten how awkward the first days on the job can be. We don't remember the discomfort so we might not notice it in others. We might also assume that others are taking care of the niceties so do not know the full extent of the misery and frustration of new staff members. A little empathy goes a long way.

Ask questions. Have you been introduced to the managers? Do you know where to find a cup of tea? Do you understand the expense claims procedure? Has anyone mentioned that we wear funny hats on Fridays? Even if they have already been supplied with the information, they will be grateful for the care and contact. Consider it an investment. The more information you offer up, the less likely you will be to face a situation where the new intake has tried to solve a problem on their own and got it horribly wrong.

We allow disengaged staff to run our inductions

Who should not show the new kids around on their first day of high school? The kids who are in the first day of their second year at high school. Those are the kids who are just a little bit drunk on a tiny bit of authority and who are going to reveal just enough information to ensure that the new kids suffer as much as they did. We might be out of high school, but very compelling social drivers still control our behaviour, particularly when it comes to hierarchy and structure. A disengaged staff member might 'forget' to mention to the new accountant that the finance manager is offended by being called by his first name and prefers Mr Smith. If a disengaged staff member is unhappy in their position they will also pass on negative information to the new on-take, the sorts of things which will make your hair stand on end. Things like who is overpaid, underpaid and getting laid. Disengaged staff are more likely to spread rumours and misinformation to other staff members. Let your happy and satisfied staff lead the on-boarding process, and while you are at it, compare your staff engagement levels to global norms and if you are below the curve, construct a plan to do something about it.

We do not use buddy systems appropriately

So we have in mind a positive staff member who we feel will be best equipped to show our new team member the ropes. Excellent. The next step is to make sure that this mentor is aware of their role, is willing and able to do it, and knows what it entails.

These responsibilities need to be clearly outlined and I would recommend any company have a clear point form strategy outlined for this which would include things like:

- Arrive before the new employee on their first day.
- Have all the information they need, ready for them (printer codes, who to speak to about what, organigrams etc.)

- Facilitate a shadowing process.

The details of your buddy system can be worked out by your HR or training department, however, the buy-in of the buddy is crucial to the success of these sort of programs. Do it right, or do not do it at all. A new employee who has to hunt down a buddy, who is not aware of or antagonistic to the role, erodes all your best intentions.

We do not understand the value proposition of a well-run on-boarding program

I firmly believe that all training programs should be able to prove they have an economic right to exist, because at the end of the day, every minute your new staff member spends watching a video on swans is a minute they are not selling/organising or managing your business. Induction training needs to achieve something and the results it needs to deliver are a measurable increase in your "engaged" employee numbers against the levels of engagement you could expect, should you not run an induction program. This can be done and it can be measured. Do not let any trainer or HR department tell you otherwise.

Wherever possible, a business who employs more than ten people ought to have an official and carefully conceived on-boarding program, which rolls out in the first three days of any new team member joining your business. When you are trying to think about what this should look like, ask yourself how an upmarket hotel would receive an important new guest for the first time.

An important new guest who represented the gateway to a lot of business for the hotel. A guest who would be an investment and so, needed to be handled just right. Are we talking a welcome board in reception, tribal dancers and pink drinks? Absolutely!

... followed by a tour and directions to a room which is ready for them, bed turned down.

If your budget cannot afford the bells and whistles, take care of the details which matter. A new employee should not have to chase down their stapler and punch and beg for an extension cord in their first month of employment. Set it up so that they can spend their time doing more important things. It will be worth it to you, in the long run.

ABOUT SUZANNE PATTERSON

Suzanne Patterson is a staff development professional, accomplished trainer, coach and facilitator. With more than 15 years' experience in helping teams, managers and individuals work toward their potential, Suzanne believes personal development need not come at the expense of bottom-line considerations, or vice versa. Suzanne currently holds the position of group training manager at Smile Communications (Pty) Ltd, which has operations in Tanzania, Uganda and Nigeria. Contact Suzanne by email: suzanne.patterson@smilecoms.com
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