

APPROACHES TO MANAGER ON-BOARDING

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Companies put a lot of effort into hiring managers: preparing job descriptions,

determining advertising, reviewing resumes, interviewing candidates and checking references. For some, the process is over once the new employee is on board, but wise employers know the process has just begun.

Most companies take a thoughtful and thorough approach to hiring, but then take a minimalist approach to on-boarding. An overwhelming orientation and a single meeting with the boss to outline initial expectations are hardly sufficient, and often leave the new manager feeling confused and frustrated.

Consider John, the newly hired vice president of construction at a mid-sized commercial and industrial construction firm. John's primary role was to lead the industrial side of the company, counting for approximately 60 percent of the business.. His new boss, the chief operating officer (COO), briefly reviewed two key industrial projects and instructed John to get them back on track.

The COO told John he could turn to him for assistance, but no corporate introductions and no review of key building processes took place. Trouble quickly ensued on one of the firm's major projects.

The client, not knowing its new corporate contact, continually bypassed John and went to the COO for decisions. When John tried to assert himself, the project manager balked because he, too, went to the COO for decisions and direction. Confusion led to anger regarding who was doing what. John spent a lot of time wondering who was in charge and if he made the right decision to join the company.

What could have prevented these issues from emerging? How could John have contributed to the company more fully and quickly?

It begins with upper-level management, which can help shorten new managers' learning curve on four levels:

- **Culturally:** Describe the unwritten rules and expectations (i.e., how things are actually done).
- **Organizationally:** Walk through key processes and introduce the new manager to key people.
- **Personally:** Help the new manager learn from mistakes and provide on-going feedback.
- **Relationally:** Discuss how decisions are made, information is shared and disagreements are handled. The new manager may address these same preferences as well.

CULTURAL AND ROLE IMMERSION

Decco, a mechanical contracting company in Brookline, N.H., begins its on-boarding process before an offer is even made

“We expect candidates to be technically proficient, so our decisions are largely based on cultural fit,” says Tim Barton, vice president of partner services for Decco. “Our interview questions draw heavily from our four core values: commitment, partnership, excellence and ethics, and we evaluate their responses against them. We ask candidates to describe a failure, and what they learned, and how they handle confrontations.”

Once Decco makes a hiring decision, the on-boarding process really picks up. “We pair each new hire with someone who knows that job—often the new hire’s boss, who is expected to serve in a mentoring role,” Barton says. “For example, a project engineer will work with a project manager, or a project manager may have a senior project manager as a mentor. The mentor and mentee then mutually develop a written contract specifying what the mentee wishes to work on, key areas the mentor considers important and, lastly, how the two will work together.”

While each contract is unique, all mentors use Decco’s project control system as the basis for not only learning project processes, but also for cultural immersion. Mentors ask questions such as, “How did you apply the core values when you made this decision?” Or, “If we go in this direction, will this compromise our long-term relationship?”

Feedback is a key component. The mentor must address the mentee’s job proficiency, as well as his behavior’s consistency with core values, on an ongoing basis.

Teresa Dozier, director of human resources for Ogden, Utah-based R&O Construction Co., also utilizes mentors for manager on-boarding. “We begin with an initial company orientation, followed by assigning a mentor. The new manager’s boss selects the mentor based on technical qualifications, potential relationship fit and availability.”

The mentor’s job is to ensure that the new manager learns the role-specific expectations, such as the R&O buy-out process and associated documentation, as well as all pre-construction components. Based on these expectations, the mentor provides a monthly progress update to the boss and to Dozier. This update allows the boss to give the new manager feedback based on the mentor’s first-hand performance observations.

THE BOSS’ ROLE

While mentoring programs help, first impressions matter most. When the new manager arrives, bosses can send an initial email or post an announcement in the company newsletter. They can introduce the person to his new work group, support staff and professional peers, explaining his credentials and encouraging other employees to share their knowledge, as they also are responsible for educating their new colleague.

New managers need their own discovery process; however, bosses can focus that discovery by making their expectations clear up front. Jerry Schoenholtz, vice president of business development for Tandem Construction in Sarasota, Fla., makes it pretty simple. “When we hire a

new project manager, it is to lead specific projects – those that fit within their existing technical expertise. We are very clear that our one expectation is to bring in each project on time and on budget. They learn our core building process and deeply held company customer service values on their first project with little else to distract them.”

Bosses also can use transition meetings to shorten the learning curve regarding their working relationships with new managers. In this meeting, bosses can explain how they:

- make decisions (whose call it is);
- share information (what, when and in what format);
- conduct meetings (staff meetings versus one-on-one meetings);
- manage disagreements and conflicts (discuss together or work it out alone); and
- respond to problems and issues (bring well-developed solutions, bring options or just bring the problem).

After conducting this meeting, the boss should encourage the new manager to set up a similar meeting with his staff.

By providing the appropriate resources, being intimately connected with the new hire’s progress and minimizing relationship bumps in the road, companies can help new managers contribute to the firm’s success in a short amount of time.