

Helping with onboarding: Supporting a new employee

Have you ever been to a party in a country where you didn't speak the language? Everyone is talking and laughing, sharing stories and inside jokes, and if you just understood what they were saying, you could join in too. Instead you just stand there frozen, trying to blend in with a smile and a nod. This is very much what it can feel like to join a new workplace: frightening and isolating. Because indeed, a workplace is much like a country: with its own customs, cultural cues, and rhythms to get accustomed to. At least with our first day of school as children, there were many others in the same situation. When someone joins a new workplace, they often join it alone, making it that much more overwhelming.

Managers and employees alike have traditionally viewed onboarding – also known as orientation – as a largely administrative process of filling in paperwork, watching policy videos, and flipping through binders while wearing a nametag. Overall, it's a process that's commonly thought of as being tedious but necessary, and often treated as an afterthought. However, just like all first impressions, successful, engaged onboarding can positively impact employee satisfaction, performance, and retention.

The onboarding process is generally divided into two main areas: **professional** and **social**. Of course they overlap, and the places where they feel the most intertwined are usually the most overwhelming, as we may ask ourselves things like "if my new colleague isn't happy with my work, will I also risk losing their friendship?" This presents a great opportunity for strategic integration of these two spheres.

Here are some ways you can support your new hires or new coworkers during this delicate and stressful time, thus helping them feel comfortable and engaged in their new role and workplace.

Start before day one. Arriving for that first day at a new job is daunting, but by getting in touch with your new employee ahead of day one can help. Send the new hire a welcome package with information on their role, as well as a personal note. On the office end, let the new employee's future coworkers know they will be arriving so that they can say hello and make them feel welcome.

Implement a buddy system. Pair a new employee with someone who has been with the company longer. This person can serve as a go-to for questions about the position, the company, and can simply be a familiar face in an unfamiliar crowd.

Personalize it. The best onboarding programs aren't cookie-cutter systems that are implemented identically for all new hires. Each new employee comes with his or her own histories, expectations, and needs, so the way they're integrated into the company should incorporate that.

Make it fun. Bringing new hires into the fold doesn't need to look like dry presentations and longwinded briefs; all the information that's normally presented in these ways can be creatively retooled into energetic games – think game-show formats, charades, and even video games.

Extend it. Successful onboarding doesn't end after week one. Make the process ongoing, with check-ins and activities that decrease in frequency but continue throughout the first year of the employee's tenure.

Make onboarding important – not an afterthought. Thinking of it as a main event is the first step in making it interesting. Onboarding need not be a chore or a hurdle, it can actually be a celebration — add cake and music and applause – after all, new talent means new energy, and that is certainly something to celebrate.

Managing employees during times of stress and grief

Keeping our work lives and personal lives separate yet harmonious is a balancing act at the best of times, but when things at home take an unexpected turn towards hardship it's especially challenging to keep the lines from blurring. Transformative and traumatic life events such as separation and divorce or the death or illness of a parent or loved one are a normal part of the landscape of our adult lives. When they affect our employees and coworkers, it isn't easy to know how to respond. Here are some things managers can keep in mind to support an employee through a time of crisis.

Offer compassion

Sometimes we don't know what to say when someone is grieving, or indeed if we should say anything at all. In these instances, it is always better to explicitly offer condolences, compassion, and support. It is normal to feel awkward saying these things, but your employee or coworker will be grateful that their difficult time is being acknowledged and that you care about their well-being.

Be prepared to discuss their options

Managers are usually the first people employees call when tragedy strikes. Human Resources (HR) and managers should be well informed on the most up-to-date company policies concerning bereavement time off and family medical leave. In cases such as divorce or separation, there may not be official policies in place, but it is important to have parallel options available, as the ending of a relationship can be as traumatic and life shattering as a death.

Listen to what they need

Everyone is different, with different needs, especially during times of grief and change. Ask questions about what your employee needs during this difficult time. Do they want to keep the matter private, or would they prefer their colleagues know what's going on? What method of communication do they want to rely on? Is there a good time to contact them and a time they'd rather not be disturbed? Instead of prescribing what you think may help, listen to what kind of support your employee needs during their difficult time.

Recognize the importance of work

You may think that taking a vacation is the best thing for your employee, but this may have to do more with you and what makes you comfortable than with them and what they really need. Often people prefer to keep working during times of grief and stress, as staying at home can be an isolating and sad place. Work provides stability, normalcy, and a place to direct focus and exert control when everything else feels chaotic.

Recognize the importance of rest

Equally, time off may be exactly what your employee needs. Even if they continue working or return to work early, it might be a time to be flexible with your expectations and lighten their workload. It's likely that the employee's colleagues are eager to know how they can help, and would be happy to pick up a little extra slack during the most difficult period of adjustment.

When an employee faces a challenging or traumatic life event, continue checking in with them about how they are doing and what they need. These guidelines can help you in best helping them. Remember that they are the experts in their own lives – what they might need can change from day to day and week to week, so keep an open dialogue, allow space for their emotions, and be flexible in what you and your organization can offer.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at [1.866.833.7690](tel:18668337690) or visit workhealthlife.com.