

Orientation Renovation



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With the release of our [Staff Screening Notebook](#), and the hiring of three staff members this summer, I've been doing a lot of soul-searching about a perennially risky function: screening. We often assume that screening ends once a new employee is hired, but screening should encompass the full employment life cycle, including orientation, training and performance management. In her list of "Staff Screening Setbacks" featured in the [July 16 RISK eNews](#), Erin Gloeckner warned Risk eNews readers about skimping on orientation. She cautioned that an inadequate onboarding process may make it hard or impossible for a new hire to succeed. Given the cost of replacing staff members who flame out, it's well worth the time to upgrade an ineffective or insufficient orientation process.

Orientation Mess-Ups

The purpose of orientation is to empower your new hires to transition smoothly and excel in their positions. The most common mistakes in new staff orientation include errors of omission and poor planning. Orientation is one of the first experiences a new staff member faces at your organization, so prepare thoroughly and thoughtfully to make a positive, helpful first impression. Consider these common orientation errors when preparing to welcome your next new hire:

- **Shallow Substance:** Focusing solely on "what" the employee will be doing, instead of "how" their role connects to your mission
- **Glossing Over the Good Stuff:** Treating the orientation to the technical aspects of the job as a lightning round on a game show
- **Avoiding Atmosphere:** Omitting discussion of workplace norms and culture
- **Lack of Direction:** Clarifying daily duties without explaining their link to overarching performance goals and team objectives
- **All Work, No Play:** Failing to incorporate social time or opportunities for new staff to interact
- **Unpreparedness:** Inviting a new hire to a slapdash orientation that inspires doubt, rather than commitment
- **Forgotten Follow-Up:** Failing to identify and address gaps in the orientation process

Caring Coaching: Managing Orientation Risk

No employer wants a new hire to fail. Yet we spend too little time coaching our new team members for success. When my daughter was in middle school I was astounded to see the gym teacher actually teach the girls how to play basketball. Each practice consisted of equal measures of praise for their efforts, and corrections when they made errors. My middle school gym classes consisted of endless games of dodge ball, with the stronger, athletic kids spending the entire class period taking shots at the weaker, slower kids.

Here are a few tips to upgrade your orientation and your coaching capacity. Aim to manage the risk that an ineffective orientation will lead a potentially great employee to either resign in frustration, or be the next person you need to terminate.

1. **Slow it Down** — Resist the instinct to cram orientation into the employee's first day, or first half-day. Why the rush? Of course you're eager to have that new hire cranking on important projects, but consider the downsides. An employee who's overwhelmed with new information won't be able to perform to their full potential. Consider making orientation a multi-day activity. A five-day orientation lasting 1.5 hours per day is probably more effective than a mind-numbing first day.
2. **Focus on Culture and Norms**— Make certain you set aside time during an employee's first week to share "how" the organization works, going well-beyond the mechanics of your mission. For example:
 - Do employees meet frequently and without notice, or are staff meetings scheduled with formal invites sent out using Outlook?
 - If the employee has a question about an assignment, who should they speak to and how quickly should they do so? Years ago a former employee told me her preference was to spend a couple of days (!) trying to figure out an assignment rather than ask me for clarification. This approach was interesting, but in direct conflict with our "ask lots of questions!" culture.
 - How flexible and team-oriented is the employee's role? Do your employees assist each other as often and as much as is necessary, or are they dedicated their own specific tasks and only willing to assist others once in a while?
3. **Adopt an All-In Approach** — Although responsibility for orientation often falls on the shoulders and desks of the HR manager, it ought to be a shared responsibility. After all, the contributions of your brand new employee should advance the organization's mission and make it a better organization for everyone involved. Many staff members should be invested in the success of the new hire. Insist that a diverse team contribute to the design and delivery of the orientation, especially those who have gone through orientation before. Consider asking veteran staff members to identify information and training that was omitted from their own orientations.
4. **Engage the New Hire** — Orientation can be a whirlwind experience for a new staff member. New staff are too often expected to sit through hours of mindless lecture with little interaction. After completing orientation, newbies are suddenly thrown into the fire without additional guidance or training. Whatever your orientation process, ensure that you truly engage your new staff members. Invite them to participate in orientation discussion and ask for their feedback about the whole process. A new hire should be the star player at orientation—don't make the mistake of forcing your star to sit on the sideline.

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