

FAST TRACK STARTS FOR NEW HIRES

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Let's face it; most of the managerial talent Building Service Contractors employ are home grown. Often they are operations staff who have previously been loyal site supervisors or even area managers. They already know the company ways and means. They know where to go for answers, and where not to. They know the temperament of most customers, and how to court them. As experienced as they are, the company cannot always rely on its current staff to deliver the performance which future growth demands.

So you make the decision to go outside. It has cost you time and money to search, interview, and hire, and you're already into it a bunch. You can't recoup your initial

investment all at once, nor can you wait six months for them to be up and running.

Just because you've made the effort to just bring them on board, don't expect to just go on to something else. You have plenty still to do.

What do you know about the new hire?

You must have learned something about your new hire during the hiring process from their resume, their interviews, and from former employers. Use that information as a place to start. Do they possess polished interpersonal and speaking skills? Do they have experience in turning around messes? Have they used a streamlined bid process? Do they use a more sophisticated form of team cleaning than you? Are they a whiz at product safety, equipment selection, job routing, or customer satisfaction? If you assume that new people come void of abilities, you'll frustrate them early on by making them go through a "one size fits all" orientation and development process. You already know much more about what they can do for the company than you think, and tailoring quick win projects will be playing right to their strengths.

Given that you know much more about what your new hire brings than when you wrote the original job description, you can more specifically tailor your expectations to them. And there is a significant difference between a job description and performance expectations. Job descriptions are ordinarily a narrative or bullet point listing of major responsibilities. Too often we take that as sufficient for someone to fully know what their role really entails. The new hire may

have a grasp of their overall duties, but within those duties are other aspects, many being more covert than explicitly spelled out. These are performance expectations. Putting yourself in the new hires' place and asking, "what else, in addition to my specific job responsibilities would I want to know early on helps fill in the "covert" section.

What do you know about your company?

A large, Southeastern maintenance company recently hired their first administrative-legal vice president and they included in the job offer the major task expectations for each of the administrative departments, legal work, and "their own projects". When the new hire made the decision to accept the offer, he did so based on a full understanding of the major projects on his plate. In addition, the CEO outlined the more subtle, but potentially derailing expectations of how to treat customers, support staff, peers, suppliers...and how to work with his boss. When the new administrative V.P. walked through the door on day one (and you know the feeling of the first day on a new job) he knew a lot more about the areas he was to manage. He knew the key initiatives he would be leading with an associated timeline for each. He also knew the twenty five year old, privately held company's norms about behavior and performance.

Turnaround situations are different. It is a lot easier to transition into a smooth running machine than to enter with expectations for fixing a broken one. Cleaning up someone else's mess requires some initial study on their own, prior to taking any action. BSC bosses need to offer direction, and a willingness to deal with long term employees (including themselves) who possibly created this mess while also setting realistic timelines for turning the department around.

There's an old managerial adage about what happens early in a working relationship has a tendency to play itself out-over and over. A poorly orchestrated round of new hire introductions could do just that. Often lurking is the internal candidate who harbors

some jealousy about why they weren't offered the job-or even encouraged to apply for it. Don't assume that their silence or willingness to go along is not without hurt, disappointment, or quiet anger. Chances are the new hire is that person's future boss, or at a minimum a key colleague and they may not get full cooperation. To minimize this, ensure that you speak to the internal person who was not offered the job, and explain why they weren't considered and what they would need to improve in order to be viewed for other advancement opportunities-and request their assistance in helping with the transition.

First impressions

When the new person formally arrives send an initial e-mail, or post an announcement in the company newsletter. Introduce the person to their new work group yourself, explaining the person's credentials, and generally what you would like to see take place within their new area. Encourage existing staff to share their knowledge and let them know that they are responsible for educating their new boss as much as you are especially regarding the specifics about how business is done in their areas of responsibility. With professional peers, go through the same round of introductions, as well as with the support staff. At this point they may conduct their own managerial introductions, but not until they formally made the rounds with you.

Other factors warrant attention. If the new hire is brought on to assume a new company position, interesting dynamics may play themselves out. Often a new position absorbs some responsibilities from existing positions, and the person who "lost these responsibilities" could respond with withholding of information, job knowledge, and overt support. It is helpful to meet with the person historically involved in that task and let them know why the tasks were moved, and what assistance you expect them to provide the new person on board. Then meet with both parties and detail an orderly transition of formerly owned responsibilities to the new hire. Don't expect this to go

smoothly without your assistance if the “lost tasks” were someone’s favorites.

This exact situation took place in a rapidly growing janitorial company in the Northeast. The controller, who doubled as office manager and human resource manager, bitterly complained that she had no time to do a satisfactory job in all three areas. After a year of grousing, she succeeded in gaining a new human resource manager position. Shortly after being hired, the human resource manager felt sabotaged by her boss as she refused to allow employee relations issues to go to the new human resource manager. It seems that the controller’s greatest delight was “being in the company know” and helping employees deal with personnel and personal issues. It was the one area from her former human resource role which she couldn’t part with. Her boss, one of the company owners, didn’t plan well for the transition, and the new human resource manager almost resigned.

Orientation needs to have both a formal and informal flavor. Formal components include technical, administrative, and behavioral aspects. Technical orientation should focus on typical products, current equipment, and company cleaning practices amongst others. Administrative aspects include labor tracking, budget preparation, HR policies and procedures, and how the major areas of the business are supposed to run. Behavioral parts entail specific expectations about decisions should be reached, conflicts addressed, problems solved, and others. Their informal orientation should include an open discussion of prevailing company norms, customer and collegial idiosyncrasies, and how things “really get done.” This orientation is the joint responsibility of the boss, key colleagues, and their direct reports. A single person should never be responsible for the entire orientation, although sadly this is typically the case. Clarity on who is doing what aspect of the orientation, both formal and informal needs to be decided before the new hire arrives. Remember, orientation is not a one day or single shot event, but a

consciously determined formal and informal process for at least six months.

Making the grade

Having been through at least the first few days of orientation and OJT, bosses sometimes present themselves with the sink or swim quandary. There’s no silver bullet answer, however full, instantaneous, immersion will almost assuredly create early mistakes, and rework for both the new hire and those who work nearest them. People can learn from their mistakes, but at what point does this learning turn to frustration? A large, multi-service janitorial and security company in the Northeast has discovered a formula for addressing the sink or swim polarity. All of their new hires, both front line employees and managers are paired with a buddy. The front-line buddy’s role is to demonstrate, coach, and provide feedback on repetitive tasks, while the managerial buddy pairs with their counterpart, doing inspections, discussing job routing, and meeting together with customers. In this manner, they neither sink nor swim in the short term, but substantially increase their chances of long term success. And long term success amortizes the cost of bringing in a new person better than anything.

The boss’ attentiveness early in the new hire’s tenure is critical. The boss must assume some responsibility in being the question initiator. Often a new hire, in their zeal to look competent and self-directed (two key criteria why you hired them anyway) will not choose to ask a lot of questions. And, in your early performance read you may wonder why they have so few questions, and yet they may not be getting it right. You’ll need to anticipate this cycle, and teach, coach, train, and solicit their understanding of their tasks, prior to having them run totally on their own.

In addition to the boss intensive coaching and training components, the boss must also deliver frequent, on-going feedback to the new hire about how they are doing. All employees, but especially new hires must be given a steady diet of both specific, positive

feedback and constructive criticism to allow them a sense of how they are doing; to perpetuate their positives, and to change the aspects of their early performance which are unproductive.

Turning them loose

Mentioned earlier was the new hire, upon being introduced to their new colleagues, may wish to conduct their own introductory meeting with their new direct reports. These “transition meetings” are an opportunity for the new hires’ direct reports to “shorten their learning curve” regarding their new boss. You could coach the new hire to prepare statements articulating how they wish to work with their new staff. In a meeting like this, the new hire would explain to their staff how they wished to;

- make decisions (whose call is it)
- share information (on what, when, and in what format)
- conduct meetings (staff meetings, one on one meetings)
- manage conflicts (come directly, work it out themselves)
- respond to employee problems (bring problems with well thought out solutions, or just bring the problem)

Conducting these transition meetings shortens the staff’s learning curve with their new boss, in much the same way that we are shortening the new hire’s learning curve for their own “stuff”.

Being at least modestly successful in the first month certainly is a confidence builder. And with increasing savvy and confidence, the new hire provides the company with an opportunity. While learning the company practices, equipment, and supplies is important, management needs to be mindful that the new hire came with their own experience. There is a fine line between your quashing initiative by responding to suggestions with “this is our way, it has worked fine”, or “we’ve always done it that way”, and encouraging fresh eyes to look at the company from an outside view.

Certainly by the completion of their first quarter’s work, BSC’s should meet regarding

just this point. Ask the new person what the company is doing is successfully, and what could be improved on. Ask them to provide suggestions on where efficiencies could occur, if floor cleaning practices could improve, if another product could beat the one currently being used...This meeting serves two purposes. One outcome is that with fresh eyes, the company could become more productive, save money, or generate new business. The other is that the new hire is no longer the “new kid” on the block, but feels like a valued addition to the new company.

BSC’s can substantially shorten a new hires’ learning curve by using the hiring process as a place to start, setting clear and well informed expectations, introducing them appropriately, having their orientation be a long term, individually specific process, and utilizing them for company renewal. In their first six months new hires can thrive, not merely survive.