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Orienting New Team Members for Long-Term Success

By Charlie Trautmann

"Well begun is half done."

In hiring, this adage offers an important insight: The first day of work is the most teachable moment for someone starting a new job. By taking advantage of this fact, we can launch new team members into more effective, loyal, and productive careers at our science centers. Similarly, the first week provides an extended learning period with potential impact that will rarely, if ever, be repeated. How can science centers use these brief, one-time opportunities to best advantage?

At the Sciencenter—a small center in Ithaca, New York, with 40 employees—our goal in orienting new team members is to create a solid foundation that will help them over time reach their fullest potential, while getting them up the learning curve as far and as quickly as possible. This means steeping them in our mission, culture, strategy, and organizational structure; connecting them to the right people; ensuring they have the right tools and knowledge to be successful; and removing roadblocks to success.

THE ORIENTATION PROGRAM
Our orientation program includes four components (also available at www.museumtools.org).

1. Prearrival: Preparation
During the hiring process, we assign an orientation manager, most often the new team member’s manager. Several weeks before the start date, this person reviews our orientation checklists and assignments with relevant staff. We aim to complete all support tasks, such as setting up a computer, server access, email account, and keys, before the start date. During this preparation, we establish a detailed schedule for the first week.

2. The first day: An energizing, high-level experience
Because first impressions can last a lifetime, we provide a memorable first day. The new team member’s manager welcomes them at the front door, and we have fresh flowers and a hand-written welcome note on their desk. Our goal is to make a strong impression that, whatever their title, they are a valued member of the team.

As executive director, I meet individually with the new team member and their manager for two hours to provide an overview of the organization. We start by discussing our mission, vision, values, and core audience. Drilling down, we then discuss our organizational strategy, culture, decision-making process, organizational chart, and position in our community. We touch on our annual staff review process, discuss the relationship between staff and trustees, describe our quarterly staff climate survey, and distribute our staff handbook and a CD course on interpersonal communications. All materials are organized in a three-ring binder and introduced by a personal welcome letter from me.

A friendly welcome at the front door creates a positive first impression for staff about to start their first day on the job. Photo by Teresa Bell
New hires and their manager go for lunch together on the first day, with no particular agenda other than getting to know each other. Only after lunch do we begin administrative paperwork, assignment of keys, security codes, telephone access, etc. Rarely do we task new staff members with any “real” work for at least two days, which allows them time to absorb the big-picture context that forms the framework for their own individual efforts.

3. The first week: Highly structured orientation and training
Using a detailed schedule managed closely by the hiring manager, new team members meet with many people during the first week to learn all about the museum. Typically, they have 6-8 meetings per day for the first few days. For example, they receive customer service training from our director of guest relations and operations, and they learn about the importance of membership and fundraising from our director of advancement. Also scheduled is time to become familiar with the exhibits in each gallery and how they work. Our view is that, regardless of whether team members are building exhibits, processing memberships, working at the front desk, or writing grant proposals, an intimate knowledge of the museum benefits their enthusiasm, dedication, and productivity.

4. The first three months: Setting goals, mentoring, and evaluating
Managers work with new team members to establish goals for the first three months. At the end of this time, which we call the “provisional employment period,” new team members have a formal performance review using the procedure subsequently used for their annual review. This process begins with a review of the position description, and if the new team member feels it is inaccurate, they are required to mark it up for discussion and possible updating. The next step is a self-assessment of impact—regardless of job title—on the experience
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of our guests. The manager then reviews the three-month goals and accomplishments, in addition to typical dimensions such as job competence, communication, and teamwork.

After one month, I talk each new team member out for lunch to check on their work experience with us. We find that this helps staff know that their work is valued from the top down.

We assign each new team member a mentor—someone at their level or above, but not their manager or even another member of their department. We cover the cost of several lunches during the first six months and encourage new team members to use their mentor to broaden their base of contacts within the museum and get an alternative perspective on any questions or issues they have. Mentors help new team members learn our culture and how we function as an organization, and they provide another point of contact during the often busy workweek. The mentoring relationship is informal, with no reporting or formal goals. Many staff members continue the connection long afterward, and a recent survey showed that some friendships have continued for years.

FEEDBACK

Our orientation program has been a work in progress for nearly two decades, with continual additions, improvements, and updates. In reflecting on the process, team members have offered comments such as:

- "It made me feel part of the team from the start."
- "I had the chance to learn more about how my position would interact with the different departments within the museum."
- "Since I established a working relationship and understanding of each person's work, I know whom to go to when I need information."
- "It communicated the importance of values and substance and a culture of caring and good communication."

While the orientation program is expensive in terms of time, we believe that the long-term benefits outweigh the initial costs. Our team members remain with us for 5.5 years on average, and a significant number go on to leadership positions in other museums.

On the first day of work, flowers and a personal welcome note can set the stage for a culture of friendly collaboration. Photo courtesy the Sciencecenter

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