

Employee Orientation: An Organizational and Experiential Learning Approach

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Abstract: Employee orientation problems for a resort chain were studied and addressed through action research. The implemented solution leveraged experiential learning to foster employee initiative and problem solving to instill a culture of learning, improve customer satisfaction and increase employee retention. Business results were achieved but learner/ management reaction was mixed.

“Most of our service businesses don’t serve very well” (Senge, 1990, p. 332).

The typical multi-location service company of today faces challenges of engendering a culture of service and of continuous learning to meet the needs of an increasingly demanding clientele. Front line employees turn over the fastest and yet are the critical group for delivering on customer expectations. Typically, employees with the least training and shortest tenure in a service enterprise have the most customer contact. As any customer who has suffered at a hotel reception or a fast food counter can attest, the attitude and level of initiative shown by the front line team of that enterprise can make or break one’s experience there.

To meet customer expectations, a modern service enterprise faces the dual challenges of instilling a spirit of initiative and customer orientation in their newest frontline employees *immediately* after hire, and in bonding the employee to the organization so that they remain on the job. This represents an education and training opportunity as well as an organizational learning challenge. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a practical solution to such typical organizational problems through the application of individual and organizational learning theory.

The Problem

In 1999, a major worldwide resort company decided to address ongoing resort employee turnover and low retention in its ten North American locations. This company staffs its resorts with an international population of front line employees, attempting to match the ratio of languages and cultures of the guests. These employees work a six-month contract, fall to spring, or spring to fall, with renewal options. The employees live onsite and range from 20 to 50 years in age.

From 1996-1999, over 40% of their contracted resort employees quit or were dismissed before the end of their semi-annual contracts, equaling an ongoing 81% annual turnover rate. (Club Med Management Services, 2003a). The cost of replacing these employees in mid-contract (hiring cost + transportation cost + training cost) totaled over one million dollars annually. Aside from such documented “hard” costs, this high turnover had an additional significant but unmeasured impact on productivity and guest satisfaction. Measured in mail-in client exit surveys over the same 1996-1999 period, guest ratings of employee service in the 10 resorts averaged at 30% “very good to excellent,” 50% “good to average,” and 20% “fair to poor” (Club Med Management Services, 2003b).

Although expensive employee turnover and unsatisfactory guest satisfaction rates were the principal problems brought to human resources by resort operations, there was also general dissatisfaction expressed by the resort managers themselves concerning the slow pace of

acclimation and general lack of initiative shown on the job by the new employees. The problem, as presented to this author, the director of training and development, was to design a low-cost employee orientation program that encouraged retention, employee initiative to resolve guest issues, and integration into the resort workplace culture.

Employee Integration Training as Practiced by the Organization

As is common throughout the service industry, the existing orientation and integration process in this organization in 1999 was static and passive, using an adult-child educational model. Designated managers, generally from the onsite personnel office, held long briefings for newly arrived employees. These lessons, accompanied by detailed handouts on workplace policies, emphasized the passing of large quantities of verbal information to new employees and along with some intellectual skills, such as concrete and defined concepts (Gagne & Medsker, 1996). No opportunity, beyond question and answer time, was given for the new employees to demonstrate mastery of the concepts or procedures that had been explained to them. Arriving employees who had worked previously for the organization were typically excused from these sessions. After two such "integration classes," employees were then considered "trained" and ready to work.

Pre-Intervention Data Collection

I conducted a 1999 telephone exit interviews of 30 former resort employees with the assistance of a human resource department intern. The intent was to explore what contribution the orientation process had in their resignation. A homogenous sample of participants was selected from eight resorts, the common denominator being that they had all resigned while in their first employment contract. They were asked why they left and what they thought the organization should work on to keep new employees on the job.

After themes in the data were detected, I individually interviewed four resort managers and four resort personnel managers to confirm or disconfirm the validity of exit interview information. Finally, I conducted a group-interview of the same four resort managers, three regional operations managers, and four clients. They were queried on which essential qualities seemed to separate successful frontline service employees from the others.

Pre-Intervention Data

Only 11 of the 30 former employees cited the integration process as a contributing factor to their decisions to resign. Other reasons for leaving included homesickness, workload, conflict with supervisor, disappointment with the resort worker lifestyle, and inadequate information on the job environment or expectations. However, fully 28 of the 30 cited the integration process as something that the organization should address if it was to do a better job of keeping employee on the job. Themes in the recommendations were (a) stretching the integration period to several weeks, (b) introducing new employees to each departmental manager, (c) having a designated mentor for new employees, (d) giving new employees a feedback mechanism to evaluate their welcome period, and (e) focusing on the integration of experienced employees transferring in from other properties. Two former employees reminded me that the workforce is multilingual and that integration should be facilitated in the native language of the learners.

The resort and personnel managers interviewed validated four of the five employee recommendations to reinforce the orientation process, but all eight expressed concern at the feasibility of (a) stretching the integration period to two weeks. The management/client group

identified individual initiative and the ability to solve problems as the top qualities in the best new employees. A manager made the comment that “it is impossible to explain everything to a new employee. There isn’t time for that, and in any case, it is impossible to foresee every situation.” Another manager suggested that there is “too much coddling and handholding of new employees.” A manager lamented that when debriefing a new employee on a service breakdown, the most common remark heard was “nobody ever told me that I needed to or could do that...” A guest elaborated: “I want to encounter employees who see what needs to be done and do it, without seeking permission or waiting for instructions.”

The profile of an effective program began to emerge. To meet the needs of the employees and of the organization, it would have to be flexible to accommodate a busy multi-scheduled workplace, to have a feedback mechanism, to be deliverable in multiple languages, and to be personalized. In terms of outcomes, it was decided to focus on problem solving and initiative, rather than on rules and procedures. Above all, it should be sustainable, week-in and week-out, in each resort, whether there were one or twenty new employee arrivals.

Theoretical Framework for a Solution

In reviewing organizational and experiential learning literature, links between the needs of the clients, the organization and the employees became apparent. What had begun as an employee turnover complaint soon evolved into an opportunity to address the organization’s culture itself at the entry-level, an opportunity to move towards organizational learning. In discussing organizational culture, Schein (1997) stresses the importance of “internal integration” (p. 71) and the connective link between such integration of new members and organizational learning. He stresses that a learning organization must emphasize the need for members to be “proactive problem solvers” (p. 364). Pfeffer (1999) suggests that there is a link between employee retention /motivation and the creation of a workplace culture that empowers employees.

Similarly, the guru of organizational learning, Senge (1990), in his five-discipline model, recommends that an organization begin with emphasis on the first discipline of “personal mastery,” ongoing individual learning. To link individual learning to organizational learning, he proposes second and third disciplines, “mental models” and “shared vision,” through which an organization commits at a cultural level to common values of empowerment and ongoing learning (pp.10-11). As shown above, researchers agree there is link between employee retention, cultural integration, employee initiative to solve problems, and the building of a learning organization.

The question was how to leverage this into an effective employee integration program. Dewey (1929) and Kolb (1984) emphasize that learning is experiential in nature. As humans, we learn through doing. DiBella and Nevis (1998) and Kim (1993) expand on Kolb’s individual experiential learning model to propose that organizations also learn experientially through the collective experiential learning of the members. Bridging the gap between learning and business, Pfeffer (2000) similarly argues that the first step towards organizational learning is to create a culture of action in which individuals are encouraged to move out of passivity into interaction and experimentation.

Our organization’s orientation program, to be effective, would have to be experiential in nature, unlike most hospitality-industry orientation efforts. Sitting employees in the classroom, as was company practice, to explain what was expected of them would not cultivate the intended attitudes and problem solving skills, at an individual or organizational level.

The project was ready to enter the instructional design phase to create an experiential learning program that encouraged two varieties of learned capabilities: *problem solving* and employee initiative (*attitudes*). Per Gagne (1996), the external conditions for learning to solve problems include practice and encouragement. The conditions for attitude learning should include role models and positive reinforcement. Furthermore, for all learned capabilities, there should be a sense of fun and discovery in the learning process.

Intervention Design

I decided to scrap the “passive” adult-child orientation model in favor of an active adult-adult guided-learning experience model. Rather than giving them the information, new employees would be required to move immediately into action to find out what they needed to know. The program had two key elements: A learner workbook and a designated integration mentor to act as role model and to accompany the learner through the initial weeks on the job.

The Integration Workbook

New employees were given workbook-format questions to research in their first days in the workplace. A timetable was agreed upon with the regional management team on by when all integration activities were to be completed. New employees performed a sort of “scavenger hunt” across the resort to find the answers. The workbook questions were divided into sections: in the resort, who’s who, your need, the local culture, your role, the concept, guest expectations, the employee team. The questions were formulated as activities. Examples included locating the public restrooms, getting laundry done, calling home, meeting departmental managers, and interviewing resort guests on customer service preferences.

The integration workbook included a wrap-up and feedback section, in which the employee was asked to rate his/her first week’s experience: the welcome, the trip there, their room, their feelings about the experience, as well the degree of helpfulness of the mentor and their manager. The workbook concluded with an interview protocol section to guide an end of integration debriefing meeting with the employee’s manager and with the resort manager.

The Integration Mentor

At each resort, an integration mentor was selected. The role of the integration mentor was to coach learners and positively reinforce the guided discovery learning process throughout the duration of the employee’s contracted stay, even after the “official” orientation process was over. The resort managers chose by the integration mentors using a company-wide profile, which emphasized communication and project management skills. For the mentors, this was an additional duty beyond their regular resort functions. The mentors were trained on the use of the workbooks, on coaching skills, on typical new-employee challenges, and on project management.

Post-Intervention Results

Business Outcomes

The new program was implemented in the Fall of 1999. The business results have been positive. Seasonal employee turnover fell from 40% in 1999 to 21% in 2000, saving over \$500,000 in annual employee replacement-costs. In 2001, the seasonal turnover rate dropped again from 21% to 15%, which represented an \$800,000 savings over 1999. Employee turnover held steady in 2002 at 14% per season (Club Med Management Services, 2003a).

The consistency of implementation of the new program as well as the level of management support varied greatly from resort to resort, especially in year one. It was interesting to note that

there appears to be a positive relationship between management support for this program and the level of employee turnover at that resort. This has yet to be statistically explored and confirmed.

Guest Satisfaction

Guest ratings of employee service in 2000 across the 10 resorts improved from an average of 30% “very good to excellent,” 50% “good to average,” and 20% “fair to poor,” to 35% “very good to excellent,” 60% “good to average,” and 15% “fair to poor.” In 2001, the results were better again: 43% “very good to excellent,” 47% “good to average,” and 10% “fair to poor.” The 2002 results were almost identical to 2001 (Club Med Management Services, 2003b). No strong relationship can yet be documented per resort between guest satisfaction ratings and the level of management support for the employee integration program.

Learner Feedback

The reactions of employees who have gone through this program are mixed and have not been thoroughly explored. Based on a review of the feedback and manager interview sections of over 200 completed integration workbooks and on solicited feedback from integration mentors, the following themes were observed: Employees appreciate the welcome and the focus on their needs when they arrive. The value of having a designated integration mentor is a common theme. One on one meetings with the departmental and resort manager also seem to be appreciated. On the other hand, not all learners appreciated the experiential methods, especially the year the program was launched. Many learners expressed a preference for the adult-child passive learning model. The level of learner complaints in this regard subsided in the program’s second and third year.

Management Feedback

The resort managers fall into two categories: those that embraced the program and those who found it to be too much work to implement and maintain. The former group found the program to be effective and appreciated that it set the tone for new employees to take initiative for their own learning immediately upon arrival. “I never hear ‘nobody told me anymore’ from my employees,” commented one manager. The non-supportive group was uncomfortable with the program, and conducted it grudgingly at their properties. Typically, at these properties, the workbooks are done as an exercise in compliance two to three weeks after the employee arrives. A typical comment of one of these managers is that completing workbooks is “childish” and a waste of time.

Observations

(a) The program was successful enough that regional management requested the creation in 2001 of a second level workbook for transferring employees to complete. (b) Resorts that had a significant volume of new employees or a large number of local employees needed multiple integration mentors. One mentor seems to be able to effectively assist up to 8 new employees per month. There are now anywhere from one to three mentors at each location. (c) The integration mentor role seems to be very appealing, even though there are no benefits. In 2003, 50% of the integration mentors in the resorts had joined the program as mentors at its inception in 2000. (d) The integration mentor position seems to be a good developing ground for future management. Ten mentors have become departmental managers over the past three years and three others have become resort managers. This may be an early indicator of organizational change towards a learning organization. (e) Careful attention should be paid in training the mentors to respect the experiential instructional strategy. Over-teaching is an easy trap for the well-meaning mentor or manager to fall into, and it robs integration of its experiential value, to the learner and organization.

Conclusions

The program has been sustained for over three years and the organization is happy with the results. The basic model of taking care of employees so that they will take care of the clients seems to play out well here. There has been change resistance at several properties, primarily from old school managers. This appears to be subsiding as the program enters its fourth year and as these managers are slowly replaced.

There is room for further exploration of the relationship between customer satisfaction levels and local management support for employee integration. It will also be interesting to study the effects of this program over the next few years on this organization's culture: can movement towards a learning organization be observed and linked to this program? Finally, it would now be particularly instructive to observe whether this program could get equivalent results in another organization.

Implications for Human Resources and Adult Education

An orientation program such as this is cost-effective, portable, and adaptable to many situations. Abandoning traditional "adult-child" styled orientation programs in favor of problem solving and guided discovery holds potential for any organization that expects high levels of initiative from entry-level employees. For educators, this program demonstrates the under-leveraged power that learning theory holds for providing simple solutions to costly business problems.

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