ORIENTATION METHODS TO GET NEW EMPLOYEES STARTED RIGHT

David R. Bennett, MBA

Orienting employees to their workplaces and their jobs is one of the most neglected functions in many organizations. Introducing new employees to an employee handbook and piles of paperwork is not sufficient anymore when it comes to welcoming a new employee to your organization. The most frequent complaints about new employee orientation are that it is overwhelming, it is boring, or the new employee is left to sink or swim. The result is often a confused new employee who is not productive and is more likely to leave the organization within a year.

It is difficult to find the right employee, therefore developing an effective employee orientation experience is extremely crucial. It is critical that new hire orientation programs be carefully planned to educate the employee in the history, mission, vision, and values of the veterinary practice and who’s who in the organization. A well-thought-out orientation program will help not only in retention of employees, but also in productivity. Organizations that have good orientation programs get their people up to speed faster, and have better alignment between what the employees do and what the organization needs them to do, ultimately leading to lower turnover rates.

Purpose of New Employee Orientation

New employee orientation is the perfect opportunity to describe the priorities of the veterinary practice and to immediately connect each new employee with the values and beliefs of the practice. It is also a time to begin developing rapport and relationships with each new employee before she gets into the grind. New employers should realize quickly that orientation isn’t just a nice gesture put on by the organization, but rather an important element of the recruitment and retention process. Some key purposes are:

- **To Reduce Startup Costs:** Proper orientation can help the employee get “up to speed” much more quickly, thereby reducing the costs associated with learning the job.
- **To Reduce Employee Turnover:** Employee turnover increases as employees feel they are not valued or are put in positions where they can’t possibly do their jobs. Orientation shows that the organization values the employee and helps provide the tools necessary for succeeding in the job.
- **To Reduce Anxiety:** When put into a new, strange situation, new employees will experience anxiety that can impede their ability to learn to do the job. Proper orientation helps to reduce anxiety that results from entering into an unknown situation and helps provide guidelines for values, behavior, and conduct.
- **To Develop Realistic Job Expectations, Positive Attitudes and Job Satisfaction:** Employees must learn as soon as possible what is expected of them and what to expect from others, in addition to learning about the values and attitudes of the organization. While people can learn from experience, they will make many mistakes that are unnecessary and potentially damaging.

Tips for an Effective Orientation

Practice managers need to consider the important information that new employees will need at the start of their employment. Managers also need to consider the critical information about the practice, the culture, expected behaviors, and levels of involvement that must be presented and understood. The planning questions below will assist with the planning and implementation phase. Remember, first impressions are crucial.

- What impression and impact would I want to make on a new employee’s first day?
- What key policies and procedures must employees understand on day one?
- What specific procedures must a new employee understand on day one?
- What positive experience can I provide for new employees that will help them feel valued by the practice?
- How can I, as the practice manager, ensure that I am available to new employees beginning on the first day to provide personal attention and to convey a clear message that they are important additions to the work team?
“Must Do” Activities
• Send an agenda to the new associate with the offer letter so the employee knows what to expect. Stay in touch after he has accepted the position to answer questions or help in other ways. Also, make sure the new person’s work area is ready on the first day of work.
• Make a formal announcement that a new employee is starting on a specific date. Encourage team members to stop into orientation to say hello.
• Ensure that practice owners are a part of orientation to ensure an immediate connection with new employees.
• Assign a mentor or partner to the new person. Assign the mentor well in advance of the start date so the mentor can make preparations.
• Provide orientation packets in advance with an orientation agenda or checklist, employment forms to complete, a policy manual, a protocol manual, the individual’s job description, and the evaluation tool.
• Have some fun. Do not spend time on every aspect of the handbook, only on the very important topics.

Conclusion
Many new employees in veterinary practices report that they have not had an “orientation day.” When asked what their first day consisted of, the answer most often heard was that they were placed right on the job at their new workstation. This scenario represents the largest error that veterinary practice owners and managers can make with new employees. An effective, well-planned orientation day is a critical initial moment for the practice to “set the stage” with new employees. Send an immediate message that practice leadership values them as new employees by spending time with them. Provide them with active proof that their success is a mutual goal and that management time, tools, and support will be given to achieve a high level of success . . . excellence! Invest the time, and so will new employees!

Resource