

Inside Leadership

You get one chance to give new executives a positive first impression



Paul Mooney of Tandem Consulting talks lessons on induction from a secondary school.

I remember when my daughter Nicole started into her 1st year of secondary school. It's a big deal. Think back. Can you remember the trauma?

'Will the other kids like me? Will I make new friends? What will the teachers be like? Will the studying be hard?' Even physically moving between classes generates a tension. 'What happens if I can't find my class? Will I get into trouble?'

Enter the Temple: Mount Temple Secondary on the Malahide Road is famous on the basis that a couple of members of U2 went to school there. Perhaps they have another claim to fame. In managing the transition for 1st years, the school has demonstrated

an understanding of human psychology that is often absent in work organisations.

Basketball Camp: One week in advance of the formal kick-off of the academic year, the school ran a basketball camp for new students. At the camp Nicole got to know her way around the place, made a couple of new buddies and generally felt settled. She is a reasonable basketball player and liked 'showing off' (must be a trait on her mother's side!). Somehow, during that induction week, those initial questions and all that underlying anxiety evaporated.

Real World: So, how do we manage transitions in the sophisticated world

of commercial and not-for-profit organisations? Well firstly, we spend a huge amount of time in selecting the new person for the job. At the top end this can include assessment centres, a battery of psychometrics and myriad format interviews. Finally, we lock onto our man/woman – the 'perfect fit for the job'. So far, so good. What happens next i.e. what do we do about induction? Almost nothing – or nothing that adds any great value.

Induction Programmes: Often delegated to the most junior person in the Human Resources Department, these typically consist of a quick run around the factory or office – the 'Shake Hands Tour' – during which the

new person is traumatised by trying to recall 197 new names and what each person does in the organisation. Then they are given time to digest the policies and procedures manual (or the annual reports for the last 13 years), left sitting alone in a room, flicking the pages as their anxiety level spikes through the roof. Finally, someone is delegated to bring them to lunch; they spend an awkward hour exchanging small talk with a person they may hardly know, feeling that this is somehow part of their probation assessment. I'm exaggerating the scenarios to make the point (am I?). The unspoken view seems to be: 'We hired someone smart. Now let them get on with it'. Yet, sometimes, the result of throwing people in at the deep end is a condition called drowning.

Senior Changes: At senior levels, meetings with the previous CEO are sometimes verboten – as they are seen as the enemy. Where this happens a huge amount of organisation history can be lost. Several 'babies can be thrown out with the bathwater' as the new CEO establishes their own team and declares war on the previous regime – with a 100 day change plan (with the strong implication that lots of changes are needed).

What should happen? While there is no one-best-way to conduct an induction programme, the best-managed organisations usually complete the following steps:

Step 1: Handover Plan: The development of a comprehensive handover plan by the previous incumbent including a full debrief of the former CEO (or the person who did the job before) makes huge sense. So much organisation history can be lost in the changing of the guard. Managed well, this stops egos getting in the way of common sense and provides organisation continuity.

Step 2: Site Visit: A formal induction programme needs to include site visits to physically meet customers, see operations and get to understand the business at first hand. New people should not be expected to instantly perform without understanding the wider context. For CEO's the Chairman or a senior board member should facilitate these visits.

Step 3: Informal Organisation: The senior HR person should brief the new incumbent on the informal organisation along the lines of: 'this is how things actually work around here' or 'these are some of the trip wires that you need to be aware of'. Acting as an informal mentor, until the new person finds their feet, is the perfect HR Directors role – not delegated to a Personnel Officer. You can't send a technician to do an engineers job. Probably the best practitioner of this that I'm aware of is Tony Hession, the Director of Human Resources and Organisation Development at Irish Life and Permanent.

Step 4: Management Assimilation:

There is a need for a formal process to help new players get up to speed with an established management team – particularly where a role is filled by an 'outsider'. Check out the New Manager Assimilation Programme on www.tandemconsulting.ie. Tight budget in HR right now? Then download and use this on a DIY basis.

Step 5: Check-Ups: Check in after 1, 3 and 6 months. 'How is the process going so far? Is it different to what you expected (better or worse?). Are you finding any particular issues difficult? Anything that I can help you with?' The HR Director (or senior line manager) can also use these opportunities to give informal feedback to the new employee – with a particular focus on what's working well (the ratio of positive to negative feedback should be about 3:1 – unless the person is royally screwing up – in which case the conversation is a different one completely).

In the commercial world we feel we're uber sophisticated – the latest evolution – swimming along the top of the food chain. But perhaps we need to go back to school on managing transitions. Take some lessons from Mount Temple Secondary School – who understand that transitions are always difficult – and make a huge effort to make the new members feel welcomed.

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