

Unlocking the Brilliance and Commitment of New Hires the Moment They Arrive

By Dr. Alan Gregerman

Even in today's challenging economic environment, many hotels and other companies are bringing on new staff and hoping that they will be able to make a real difference as quickly as possible. There's plenty of work to be done and, in a time of real budget constraints, there's even more pressure to make the best hires and get the most out of every employee. But all too often we begin these new and very important relationships with a set of old and tired ideas. Ideas that fail to unlock the real brilliance and potential of every new hire and, in the process, fail to build the type of connection that will earn their engagement and loyalty. And it's often because we view them as someone who is merely filling a job and a job description rather than being a critical asset in our quest to be an even more remarkable organization. So let's spend a few minutes to think about how we might change the equation in three simple ways that build a stronger bond with new hires, enhance innovation, and improve our bottom-line performance.

Re-Inventing Orientation

Let's start with the notion of **orientation**. The practice of bringing new employees into the fold and making them fine, upstanding, and highly-productive members of our company, property, or tribe--in as little time as possible. After all, time is money and we would have never tried to fill an open position unless we were desperate to get a pile of work done. And so our ancestors invented "orientation" as the fastest way to get the new folks up to speed on what our organization believes in, what we actually do, and exactly how we do it. Let's show them *our way*--which is obviously far better than the way they did things at their old company or, for that matter, at any time in their life before they

lucked out and got a job here. Otherwise, why in the world would they ever have joined us.

But what if we're not far better? Or, at least, not far better at everything? In fact, what if we are great at some things and downright mediocre at some other things that really matter? Then wouldn't it make more sense to have new hires *orient us*? To have them give us guidance on how to get things done?

It turns out that the right new employees are an amazing gift that we rarely appreciate! After all, they show up filled with enthusiasm, energy, and a burning desire to contribute and add value. To prove that they are willing to do whatever it takes to make us more successful in order to prove that we were wise to hire them. And they also arrive filled with new ideas and fresh perspectives based on a new and different set of life and work experiences. Ideas, perspectives, and experiences that might actually make us way more efficient, effective, innovative, customer focused, and successful if we were willing to listen. But instead of quickly welcoming and tapping their insights, all too often we race to make them just like us. And orientation becomes the first step in sucking the genius right out of them.

Doesn't it make more sense to find out what they know the moment they arrive and how we look through their eyes? If so, it's a relatively easy thing to do. Because after they complete their new employee paperwork, get their ID badge, and sign a pledge of honesty and integrity in all matters—things they could do before they ever arrive, we can send them off to explore our business without any preconceived notions. We can ask them to talk to anyone they'd like to, including the General Manager or CEO. To attend a few meetings of their choosing. To visit departments they will need to collaborate with. To ask a bunch of thoughtful and naïve questions. To wander around in order to see us in action. To hang out at the front desk, or in food and beverage, or with the concierge, or marketing and sales, or housekeeping, or anyplace else of interest. Then come back to share their thoughts on what we seem to know and do very well, and the areas in which we seem to be partially or even totally clueless. Thoughts that we will actually take the time to listen to and digest.

And in the process, we will have begun to demonstrate our genuine interest in their ideas and our commitment to their success. Ideas that might enhance brand standards rather than detract from them. Right from the start.

Creating a Culture of Conversation

Now let's turn to how we engage new employees in the first few weeks and months that they are with us—the same weeks and months that often determine their likelihood to stay and contribute in meaningful ways. Our goal here should be to help them build a set of great working relationships with colleagues in their own department and in all of the other departments they will need to work with if they (and we) are to reach our full potential. To get to know each other as people first rather than as someone holding a particular job title and set of responsibilities. Because you work in hospitality, you are keenly aware of the importance of this idea and the power of connecting with customers and partners as people. This is what builds great long-term business relationships. But we often forget this when thinking about employees—especially new hires--and miss a golden opportunity to build greater camaraderie and success. So employees are quickly pushed to build relationships that are tied to getting work done and addressing the urgent needs of the business before they take the time to build a real foundation for working together. Relationships based on the positions they hold, the departments or silos they operate in, the “requirements” of their specific jobs, the way they look at problems and opportunities, and their entrenched interests. But what if we turned this practice on its head and made time first to uncover what made each other tick—by learning each other's interests, talents, and passions? And, what if we sought to find the common ground that would make it easier to work together when the going got tough?

We can do this by creating a **culture of conversation** in which new hires (and everyone in our organizations) are encouraged to get to know each other before working on any assignment. To take the time initially to talk about anything they care to that has nothing to do with work. Things like their interests, special talents, hobbies, and passions in life. What they spend their free time doing. Or what their proudest accomplishments have been. And then to figure out ten things they have in common as the basis for becoming more capable of wanting to work together effectively. Ten things that enable them to like someone right from the start and to better appreciate where they are coming from and what makes them tick. Doing this simple exercise for the past ten years in different hotels, companies, and cultures around the world, I've been excited by how quickly it changes the equation and helps new hires in particular to feel welcomed people and colleagues rather than simply job descriptions.

And this has other benefits as well. Benefits that allow us to understand each employee's unique gifts so that we can figure out ways jobs to leverage their interests and abilities beyond the basic requirements of their job. Benefits that also allow us to discover new ways to deliver greater value to guests by creating a broader base of local knowledge driven by the real people who work at our property. People whose interest in just about anything—music, art, food, sports, history, clubs, neighborhoods, etc.--can help us to create even more authentic experiences for the travelers we welcome—whether they are traveling for business, as part of a group, or for vacation. And our willingness to tap this insight builds a much broader and powerful connection with employees.

Getting Them Involved More Deeply

The third thing we can do to bring out the brilliance and commitment of new hires is **involve them in important assignments** that stretch their thinking right from the start. Based on knowing more about their interests, skills, and passions we can identify priority initiatives that are either underway or have lacked the human resources to get off the ground and set them and their imagination loose as a team member or even a leader. We can use their new injection of energy and ideas as a catalyst for making things happen. And by demonstrating our belief in their broader abilities at the start of their career with us, we sow the seeds for far greater loyalty and commitment.

Again, this idea runs counter to the way most companies behave where participating in key assignments is often viewed as a right of passage or a privilege of position—rather than a way to create the foundation for a long and involved career filled with growing responsibility and greater success.

Concluding Note

We win in business by combining our best thinking with the genius of new people, ideas, and perspectives. New hires are one of the most powerful ways to keep us fresh, focused, and young in mind and heart—whether they arrive right out of school or with decades of experience. But will we tap their brilliance and energy the moment they arrive? Or will we view them simply as workers doing a clearly defined job and fail to unlock all of the magic they bring? We can change the equation right from the start by rethinking the way we orient them, engage them, and involve them. It requires a bit of new thinking but offers a huge payback.

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This article was originally published in *Hotel Executive* magazine.