

HR NEWS



**Attracting Top Talent and
Keeping Your Best Employees**

Give Your Onboarding Process an Inclusion Makeover

By Deanna Singh



The Great Resignation has caused dramatic disruptions at many organizations, raising the stakes for employee retention. To be successful, organizations should consider directing some of their renewed focus on keeping talent toward redesigning the onboarding process to make it more welcoming and engaging for everyone.

The first 3-12 months in a new job can be the most vital when it comes to engaging employees deeply enough to make them want to stay with your organization for the long term. People from underrepresented groups in particular tend to decide very quickly whether they have hit upon a dream work culture or an unappealing pit stop along their route to a better opportunity. In fact, as a woman of color, I can tell you that it can take as little as a few minutes to make that judgment. As a result, giving the onboarding process a makeover while viewing each component through a diversity, equity and inclusion lens is just one thing your organization can do to tip the balance in its favor.

While many organizations still engage in passive onboarding—reviewing a few legal points and ticking boxes on checklists as paperwork is completed—those that opt for a well-designed onboarding program will find that it pays off in terms of depth of employee engagement. Research by the Corporate Leadership Council showed a successful onboarding experience can, all by itself, improve performance up to 11 percent.

Conducting an onboarding makeover also yields a good opportunity to check whether the DEI practices your organization has instituted in the hiring process continue to be reinforced after the first day of work. In other words, you can assess whether your hiring processes attract applicants from underrepresented groups only to alienate those same individuals within their first few weeks on the job.

Here are just a few tips to get you thinking about how you can transform your onboarding process into something more inclusive and engaging for all.

Think Differently About What Onboarding Is Meant to Accomplish

On an intellectual level, we all hope new employees will help our organizations evolve. However, the part of us that is more comfortable with the status quo tends to think of onboarding as a process that transforms a newbie into “one of us.”

In my experience, the organizations that are the most successful at retaining employees resist the temptation to assimilate people. Organizations that have not subjected their onboarding process to much analysis often send new hires the message that their objective is to learn how to fit into a relatively rigid organizational culture. What you should be aiming for is to show new employees that their unique contributions will allow the organization to grow and that their differences from longer-tenured teammates will be celebrated.

People who are hired for their underrepresented perspectives will instantly gain a sense of whether managers and coworkers are receptive to their views and innovative ideas. Today, with social media sites and platforms like Glassdoor increasing work culture transparency, new hires can quickly expose tokenism and choose somewhere else to work. Organizations that can successfully show from the outset that they are welcoming and allow people to be their authentic selves have a distinct competitive advantage.

Assemble a Diverse Onboarding Team

Onboarding for culture change rather than cultural assimilation takes planning and dedicated effort. Rather than assigning each new hire a single mentor and making it that mentor's job to "show them the ropes" while reading from an employee handbook, create a committee to share the work. Simply adding more people will allow a new team member to build a network instantly and also give them more ways to connect with the culture.

Forming an onboarding committee also makes it easier to achieve DEI goals. If a new hire is someone from an underrepresented group and they see a person with a similar identity on the committee, that will greatly increase the odds of the new hire feeling welcomed and believing they can be successful as a member of the organization. Besides, it just may be the Muslim on the committee who reminds the team not to order six meat lovers pizzas to cater the next meeting. Even better would be sending everyone on the onboarding team through DEI training so they can each learn to avoid such pitfalls.

Consider the Message Your Onboarding Paperwork Is Sending

While making it possible for new hires to zip through your organization's onboarding paperwork might feel like a win for all involved, achieving that speed may come at the expense of missing key opportunities to communicate your organization's values. For example, a job advertisement that trumpeted a dedication to DEI might feel like an empty promise to a new employee who does not see a DEI statement and policy in their handbook, as well as an antidiscrimination statement as part of their terms and conditions of employment. What's more, the onboarding team should be explaining those and other policies to reinforce organizational commitments through human interactions. Especially important will be explaining how to take legal action against discrimination. Taking extra steps to ensure new hires read and understand policies offers an immediate sense of psychological safety, particularly for people from underrepresented groups.

And speaking of psychological safety, filling out traditional employee forms can be difficult for people with different racial or gender identities. Many people have more than one racial identity, so do not give them limited boxes to check. Likewise, consider moving away from dropdown menus for electronic forms that offer only binary male or female options. Instead, use formats that allow people to enter their response in a box.

Ask for Feedback and Use That to Improve Retention

It is critical to members of today's diverse workforce that they feel heard and listened to, so do not pass up simple opportunities to ask

for their perspective on how things are going. Setting up online questionnaires and surveys is extremely easy. Use these tools to increase the likelihood that new employees will want to stay with your organization for a long time to come.

End the orientation by collecting feedback and follow up after the first week, the first month and the first quarter. Pay close attention to what the new employee's answers tell you about how well your DEI strategy is working. I cannot emphasize enough how positive an impact this can have on employee retention rates.

Although it might seem like an upside-down model, use the follow-ups as opportunities to allow new employees to shape the way your organization does things. Traditionally, onboarding has a tone of "This is how we do it." Inclusive leaders of the future know how to resist the lure of sameness and use diverse perspectives to progress to "This is how we could do things."

Now Is the Time to Make Inclusive Onboarding Your Strong Suit

As I work with organizations to deepen their commitment to DEI and strengthen their work cultures, I often find that people's first impressions of their new jobs are either immediately positive or immediately negative. The negative assessments usually arise from a sense that the organization has fallen far short of the mark. What this tells me is that the organization's onboarding process is working best for people whose identity fits into an established norm. Effective DEI leaders can help fix this.

Not all organizations look at their DEI leaders as moneymakers. At this point in time, however, I would argue that they can help stave off financial losses by limiting employee turnover. No organization will regret allowing DEI leaders to take center stage and reinvent the way new employees are introduced to the workplace.

Deanna Singh, the founder and chief change agent of Flying Elephant, is an author, educator, business leader and social justice champion who speaks to more than 50,000 people annually. She wrote the award-winning children's book A Smart Girl's Guide: Race and Inclusion—Standing Up to Racism and Building a Better World, and her next book for adults is Actions Speak Louder: A Step-by-Step Guide to Becoming an Inclusive Workplace (Portfolio, Penguin Random House, 2022). —