

New Employees Can Be a Huge Asset

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Every organization experiences turnover of personnel. Few, however, think of new employees as insightful eyes with brains that can help improve their operations!

New employees innocently ask “Why...?” They do it a lot! They genuinely want to learn what is accepted practice so that they fit in and contribute in the most efficient, beneficial way.

Experienced employees sometimes answer the “Why?” questions with a superficial response. They may be willing to help the new employee learn, but the feeling “Hey, I’ve got work to do!” is real.

How much better, however, when the experienced employee pauses and ponders, “Hey, that’s a good question. Why do we do it that way?”

Thus begins an opportunity for improvement. A collaborative dialogue at this point can easily lead to breakthrough system changes for the organization.

After the new employee has been with the organization for several months, his or her “newness” wears off. The same “Why?” inquiry may cause the experienced employee to doubt the motive. The presumption changes from “this person is unaware” to “for some reason, this person must not like how we do things here.”

Stated another way, new employees are not a challenge to the status quo. However, a person who has been around awhile and raises questions about “how we do things around here” is presumed to be a disruptor. All too often, disruptors are not welcome.

So I always encourage new employees to liberally challenge what they don’t understand and to push beyond the obvious answer that is too quickly offered. Moving the new employee from ignorant to knowledgeable is valuable, of course. But look at the additional benefit if the question results in an improved process!

Leaders tend to consider new employees a necessary evil. You have to hire replacements, since there will always be turnover. However, consider new employees as assets from their first day of work. Encourage them to look around, using their previous experiences and knowledge beneficially to serve the organization immediately.

I was working recently with a company that had just hired an experienced professional. I wanted to write this article, so I asked if she would collaborate with me. Doing so required that she pay special attention over her first few months to how her new colleagues responded to her questions.

She had a couple of years of excellent experience at another highly respected firm, so she could contribute her skills immediately. Most of her new employee “Why?” experiences were productive and encouraging. She brainstormed with her new colleagues and contributed some beneficial changes in operating procedures.

One experience, however, was disappointing. She raised a question about an environmental practice that would have been handled far more effectively at her previous employer. She sought to understand why the procedure was conducted this way and received a trite “because it is.” Gingerly rephrasing the question provided no improvement. Discouraged, she dropped the issue, at least for the moment.

You choose new employees because of their past successes and their potential to contribute. They have chosen to invest their time and creativity with your organization over others they might otherwise have selected. When their creativity and energy are shut down because of a careless comment, you lose commitment that could be built. And new employees wonder if they made the right decision.

Are people the greatest resource in your organization? Then encourage your new employees to vigorously ask “Why?” Invite them to offer their observations and improvement ideas. They can be a huge asset--from their very first day of work!