Ten Classic Onboarding Errors

– Violations of the HRM - Employee Relationship

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Abstract

Although many organizations and Human Resource Professionals overlook the importance of onboarding new employees, this Human Resource Management process is extremely important for transitioning employees and is a moral and ethical duty owed to those employees. This paper identifies ten classic onboarding errors and suggests solutions to those ethical missteps. By correcting these errors, organizations can improve the transition of their new employees, build trust and commitment, reduce employee stress, and increase new employee productivity.

Keywords: HRM ethical duties, Onboarding, New employee orientation, Employee relations, Ethical breach

Objective: The purposes of this paper are to identify the ethically-related duties associated with onboarding new employees, to identify ten classic errors made in that process, and to identify how those issues can be addressed to honor duties owed to new employees.

Methods: The paper incorporates the Human Resource Management literature about onboarding new employees and integrates that literature in identifying the ethical duties owed, errors often made, and solutions.

Results: The paper suggests specific action steps to mitigate errors made in onboarding new employees and explains their ethical significance.

Conclusions: Although many organizations mishandle the onboarding of new employees, the relationship between new employees and their organizations can be enhanced and improved by avoiding the ten classic onboarding errors identified in this paper.

1. Introduction

In his classic work on public personnel administration, O. Glenn Stahl observed six decades ago that at its worst the implementation of personnel systems was often "the conquest of technique over purpose" (Stahl, O. G., 1956). Despite the evolution of the human resource management (HRM) profession over the past sixty years, those who are responsible for administering HRM programs and policies continue to make glaring errors in assimilating and onboarding new employees and mishandle that crucial process – often with devastating negative impacts on the prestige of an organization, the respect of its leaders and human resource professionals (HRPs), and the emotional well-being of transitioning new employees (Lengnick-Hall, M. L., Lengnick-Hall, C. A., Andrade, L. S., & Dale, B., 2009).

The purposes of this paper are to identify ten classic errors common to ineffective new employee onboarding and assimilation and to suggest solutions resolving each of those errors to improve the quality of the public sector new employee orientation process. We begin by briefly reviewing the role of HRM and its important staff functions in the modern organization. After briefly describing how HRM can contribute to the strategic goals of an organization, we identify the purpose of new employee orientation and assimilation and the nature of psychological contracts between HRM and organization employees. We then identify ten errors in the mishandling of new employee orientation and assimilation, together with specific suggestions to eradicate the root cause problems of those errors. We conclude with a brief summary of the contributions of this paper.

2. The HRM Roles

Although the HRM function is potentially a major contributor to the effective utilization of the people who work within organizations, there are many reasons why HRPs fail to perform their important roles in contributing to the successful achievement of an organization's mission, goals, and strategic objectives. Despite its importance in achieving organization priorities, only 27% of those who work in HRM are actually trained in the field and fail to understand the complex purposes and roles of HRM (Cassar, V., Buttgieg, S. C., 2015). In many organizations, the role of HRM is considered to be a financial control function to limit the expenses of HRM as a cost center. Organization members are viewed as "human resources" or "human capital" and are often treated as fungible resources rather than as the source of value creation and the key contributors to achieving desired outcomes (Pfeffer, J., 1998).

More enlightened leaders recognize the importance of understanding the integration of the financial and social objectives of any organization and create aligned HRM programs, policies, and systems that demonstrate their high commitment to employees and the obligations owed to them (Paine, L. S., 2003). HRM is a staff support function that can make a significant strategic contribution to an organization's success – but only if HRPs recognize that their roles are instrumental in supporting the other organizational departments in achieving the strategic goals of an organization (Ricucci, N. 2011). Today's HRPs are expected to be ethical stewards who honor duties to an organization's employees, treat them as valued partners, and align HRM programs with an organization's strategic mission and values (Caldwell, C., *et al.*, 2011).

The three key roles of HRPs are 1) to create an organizational culture that facilitates ongoing learning and continuous improvement, 2) performance of key HRM tasks that demonstrate high competence and alignment with an organization's strategic mission and values, and 3) serving other departments as a strategic business partner in helping each department achieve its objectives efficiently and effectively (Becker, B. E., M. A. Huselid, and D. Ulrich, 2001). The focus of strategic HRM is clearly value-based, principle-centered, mission-oriented, and committed to the best interests of all organizational stakeholders (Caldwell, C., *et al.*, 2011). It is in honoring these three critical roles that HRPs demonstrate their understanding of their proper organizational function and their commitment to creating the high trust, high commitment, and high performance cultures that empower employees as value creating contributors to innovation, creativity, and excellence (Beer, M. 2009).

Organizations that view people as assets to be invested in optimize their strategic success and treat employees with dignity, respect, and a commitment to their success [Mello, J. A., 2010). Wise organizational leaders acknowledge that people are the key to creating organization value in delivering quality services to customers (Forman, D. C., 2015). Honoring duties to employees by treating them as owners and partners in an organization's success rises to the level of a covenantal duty (DePree, M., 2004), and a stewardship obligation with moral and ethical consequences (Block, P, 2013). Strategic HRM acknowledges that old models of personnel administration as "personnel police" are neither effective in achieving organizational results nor responsive to the demands of customers and stakeholders both within the organization and outside of it – just as Stahl (1956) affirmed in 1956.

3. New Employee Orientation and the Psychological Contract

The purpose of new employee orientation is to effectively assimilate and socialize employees into an organization to enable them to feel valued, empowered, and engaged in the productive work for which they have been hired (Saks, A. M., & Gruman, J. A., 2011). Unfortunately, according to the International Public Management Association for Human Resources, new employee orientation is "one of the most neglected functions in many organizations." New employee orientation frequently leaves employees feeling uncertain, disappointed, and confused when it should assist them in being enthused, motivated, and encouraged (Saks, A. M. & Gruman, J. A., 2012).

The relationship between HRM and its employees is implicitly affected by a broad array of ethically-based obligations and commitments (Hosmer, L. T., 1987). Psychological contracts are "beliefs in reciprocal obligations between employees and employers" that include employer and employee obligations that exist between its HRM functions and individual employees as part of the new employee orientation process (Saks, A. M. & Gruman, J. A., 2012). Typically, these psychological contracts include both written and unwritten assumptions and mutual responsibilities(Rousseau, D., 1990) and both parties implicitly understand that they owe each other a complex set of duties that are often viewed on an ethical continuum (Rousseau, D., 1995). This continuum is a four-category moral continuum that ranges from immoral behavior that violates commitments and is one-sided to virtuous behavior that optimizes value creation for people and organizations. Diagram 1 clarifies that moral continuum (Caldwell, C., Hasan, Z., & Smith, S. S., 2015).

Virtuous   Moral   Amoral   Immoral

Seeks to optimize long-term value creation and magnifies duties owed to all stakeholders.

Adds value, keeps commitments to stakeholders and society, and obeys laws.

Avoids breaking the law but may act with self-interest rather than society's.

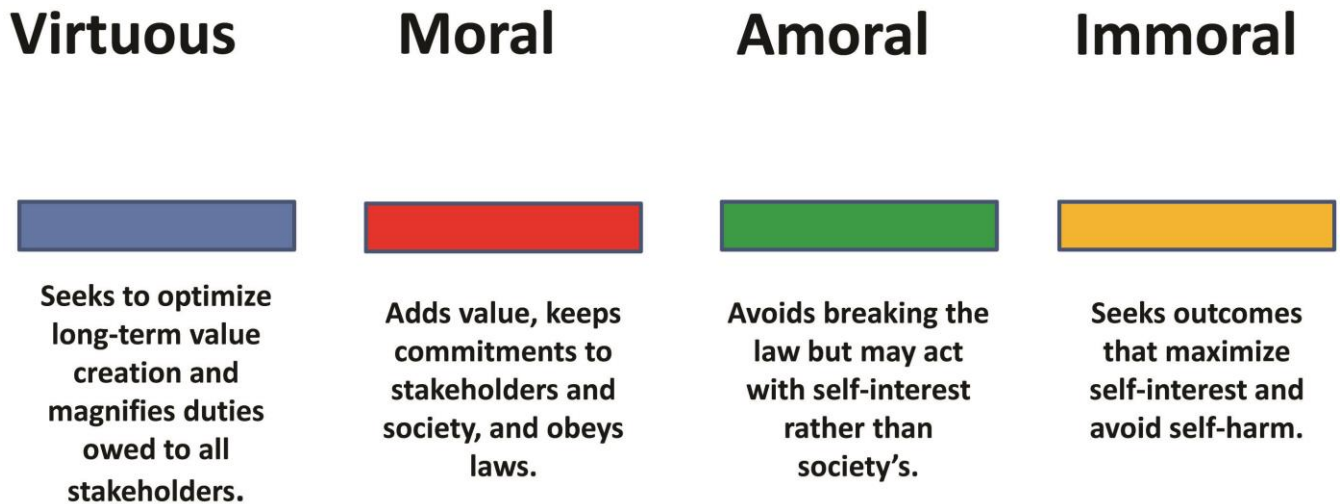Seeks outcomes that maximize self-interest and avoid self-harm.

Diagram 1. The Virtuous Continuum as an Ethical Framework for Leaders and Organizations

Table 1, summarizes the duties of organizations and new employees, incorporating this moral continuum.

Table 1. Twelve Ethical Perspectives and Their Ethical Implications for Onboarding

Ethical Perspective	Basic Summary	Organizational Impacts	Employee Perceptions and Ethical Implications for Onboarding
Self-Interest (Protagoras)	Society benefits when we pursue self-interest without encroaching on others' rights.	Seeks to optimize long-term wealth creation.	Excellent onboarding and quality training would enable new employees to quickly become contributors in creating organizational wealth (cf. Caldwell & Hansen, 2010)
Utilitarian Benefit (Bentham & Mills)	A law or act is "right" if it leads to more net social benefits than harms.	Recognizes the need to identify costs, benefits, and impacts of choices.	The Return on Investment of onboarding actually saves an organization money in the long-run and increases commitment identified as a key to competitive advantage (Pfeffer, 1998)
Personal Virtues (Plato & Aristotle)	Standards must be adopted to govern relationships and articulate virtuous behaviors.	Organizations must govern according to correct principles and virtues.	Creating an excellent onboarding process is congruent with the virtuous obligations that leaders owe to others in organizations (DePree, 2004)
Religious Injunction (St. Augustine)	Compassion and kindness must accompany honesty, truthfulness, and temperance.	Honoring relationships equates with interpersonal respect and kindness.	Treating employees as valued "Yous" rather than as "Its" honors the obligations of Religious Injunction and builds trust (Buber, 1996).
Government Requirements (Hobbes & Locke)	Established rules should be honored and complied with in dealings with stakeholders.	The law sets forth obligations that protect individual rights.	Although there are no government requirements that address onboarding as a legal concept, the spirit of the law requires that onboarding achieve the intent of facilitating the new employee transition as an ethical duty (cf. Caldwell, C. & Clapham, S., 2003).

Universal Rules (Kant)	Inspired rules govern action, resulting in the greater good for society.	Universal rules and values impact organizations and leaders.	Kantian rules mandate that individuals are treated as valued ends with dignity and respect, rather than as means to ends (Kant & Wood, 2001).
Individual Rights (Rousseau and Jefferson)	An articulated list of protected rights ensures individual freedom and protects individuals.	Organizations are obligated to honor duties owed to individual members.	Employees are likely to view organizations as owing them a complex series of "covenantal" duties and rights that enable them to create a win-win relationship (Covey, 1992).
Economic Efficiency (Adam Smith)	Seek the maximum output of needed goods and the maximization of profits.	Acknowledges the importance of wealth creation and value.	Onboarding is perceived by employees as in their interest and the organizations as a win-win benefit that maximizes value creation (cf. Bauer, 2010).
Distributive Justice (Rawls)	Avoid taking any actions that harms the least of us in any way.	Organizations owe individuals fair treatment at all times.	Ineffective onboarding , while the norm, actually harms employees who are under great stress and impedes their ability to succeed (Acevedo & Yancey, 2010).
Contributing Liberty (Nozich)	Avoid actions that interfere with others' self-fulfillment and development.	Acknowledges the obligation to assist employees to become excellent.	Poor onboarding clearly conflicts with the Ethic of Contributing Liberty because it undermines the effectiveness of new employees (Bauer, 2010).
Ethic of Self-Actualization (Maslow)	Seek to fulfill one's highest potential and to maximize one's ability to contribute to creating a better world.	Recognizes that fulfilling one's potential serves all stakeholders.	The Ethic of Self-Actualization is best served by empowering new employees, helping them to transition quickly, and providing them with the resources required to best serve others as well. (Smart, 2012).
Ethic of Care (Gilligan)	Emphasizes the importance of creating caring relationships and honoring responsibilities to those with whom relationships exist.	Focuses on the importance of each person and helping them to honor their responsibilities.	The Ethic of Care enables new employees to serve better if the onboarding process is well managed and empowers them to honor their responsibilities to others. It is also a duty owed to them which demonstrates that the organization cares about their own welfare (cf. Cameron, 2011).

From a relational perspective it is in both an organization and a new employee's best interests when both parties expect that the other party will work for their mutual best interests. Employees perceive that an organization is not to be trusted if their employer fails to honor commitments and breaches the psychological contract that the employee perceives is owed (Caldwell, C., Hasan, Z., & Smith, S. S., 2015). Unfortunately, because organizations may fail to provide expected standards of excellence in the onboarding process the perceived breach of HRM and the organization's obligations to employees in that process is often the norm rather than the exception (Robinson, S. L., 1996).

Because creating an organization of high trust and commitment is recognized as a vital antecedent to improving organizational quality, performance, and productivity (Pfeffer, 1998), the importance of improving the new employee orientation process and creating a culture of empowerment and engagement is of tremendous importance to the modern organization (Sims, D., 2011). The following section will identify ten common errors made in that new employee orientation process and also identify key action steps that will eliminate the likelihood that those errors will be made – thereby minimizing employee perceptions of a trust-destroying breach of the psychological contract.

4. Ten Classic Errors in New Employee Orientation

Understanding the nature of errors made in new employee orientation can provide a valuable self-assessment tool as HRPs assess their onboarding process and as organization leaders oversee the HRM functions and the values that they communicate. For each of the ten errors identified, the action steps suggested can enable HRPs to honor their obligations in the perceived psychological contracts assumed by new employees.

1)   *Insensitivity in Understanding Transitional Stress* – Although it is widely acknowledged that new employees are under a significant amount of life stress, HRPs frequently overlook the importance of understanding and assisting employees in mitigating that stress (Wanous, J. P., & Reichers, A. E., 2000) . New employee orientation programs frequently give little or no attention to the need to help those employees in the managing of personal, family, and job stress (Acevedo, J. M., & Yancey, G. B., 2011). The failure of organization to comprehend the stress under which new employees must transition into their new positions can measurably contribute to the low productivity of these new employees (Arachchige, B. J. H., 2014). . Relocating to a new area, acquiring new living arrangements, dealing with family transitioning, and managing the social and financial costs of a job change are all factors which add to the stress of coming into an organization as a new employee (Ellis, A. M., *et al*., 2015). **Incorporating training in stress management into the onboarding process, providing information resources about the new community, acknowledging the importance of stress management issues by e-mail prior to the actual transition, and providing Employee Assistance Program resources for the overstressed new employee are all possible ways of assisting new employees who face the frustrations and stress of a job transition** (Arthur, A. R., 2000).

2)   *Miscommunicating key Information.* Although it would seem logical that HRPs would appreciate and acknowledge the importance of properly communicating key information to new employees and job candidates, accurate communication is nonetheless often a casualty in the onboarding process and in human relations generally (Guffey, M. E. and Lowey, D. L., 2014).. A major problem with this communication is simply the overreliance on e-mail communications which are often incorrect, poorly written, or simply unclear (Roman, K., & Raphaelson, J., 2000). Communications in organizations and in human interchange are often problematical (Mortensen, C. D., 1997), but when they occur in the onboarding process they can result in a major breakdown in trust and employee morale (Bauer, T. N., Erdogan, B., & Simon, L. 2014). **Communicating clearly in HRM begins with paying attention to key details, acknowledging the importance of the message and its implications, and a genuine commitment to achieving the best interests of those involved** (Henderson, S., 2014)**.**

3)   *Failure in honoring commitments*. The integrity of an organization, its HRPs, its HRM system, and its Top Management Team are at risk if an HRP fails to honor a commitment that it makes to a new employee (Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. 2011). **If and when a miscommunication occurs, HRM has a moral obligation to honor any commitments made, recognizing that its responsibilities constitute not only the commitment made to an individual employee but its reputation for trustworthiness and integrity organization-wide** (Bauer, T. N., Erdogan, B., & Simon, L., 2014) **.**

4)   *Overloading employees with key information*. In the onboarding process, a common error made by many organizations is the overloading of employees with an excess of critical information that they cannot reasonably assimilate in a short period of time. The impact of that overload is an exacerbation of unrealistic job stress and heightened frustration on the part of the employees being given their orientation (Fan, J. & Wanous, J. P., 2008). **This problem can be largely addressed by providing employees with key information prior to their arrival onboard, assisting them in utilizing software and providing online access on a timely basis, and planning the orientation process more carefully so that a reasonable amount of information can be shared with employees so that it can be properly assimilated** (Fan, J. & Wanous, J. P., 2008).

5)   *Providing disorganized transitional information*. Because many organizations fail to give proper attention to the onboarding process to begin with (Brown, J., 2007), the new employee orientation process is often fragmented, poorly organized, and consisting of a multiple set of sometimes overlapping and even contradictory information – as well as gaps in information which employees inevitably need (Sims, R. R., 2006). **Strategically assessing the new employee onboarding process, carefully identifying the key information needed, and compiling that information in a well-prepared and complete New Employee Orientation Handbook with all the necessary information well organized, indexed and labeled, incorporating appropriate dates and checklists, and updated to reflect current changes in personnel or policy** (Sims, D., 2011)**.**

6)   *Mishandling scheduling basic needs*. Despite the fact that the hiring of new employees must typically be budgeted for, scheduled, and approved by both HRPs and Top Management, organizations sometimes fail to

schedule basic needs for incoming new employees. Offices are not cleaned and painted; computers, desks, and chairs are not ordered and set up in advance; and key support personnel are not hired and trained. **Gantt Chart planning, using a simple systems approach to operations planning and recognizing the necessary elements for successful onboarding, can greatly reduce the time spent for a new employee to transition into her/his job – while also communicating to the employee that (s)he has been planned for in advance (**Rummler, G. A., & Brache, A. P., (2012).

7) *Delaying providing important information.* Inexplicably, some organizations fail to provide important information – even including routine but vital information about employee benefits and important time deadlines – during the onboarding process. Asking an employee to defer choosing which of several health benefits or other family benefit programs (s)he prefers until after his/her first few weeks on the job sends the message that the HRM function is either inconsiderate of employee needs or lacking in basic competences in recognizing the timing of such important priorities. **As indicated with scheduling, simple systems oriented planning and check lists will enable an organization to communicate to new employees that they are a priority rather than an afterthought** Rummler, G. A., & Brache, A. P., (2012).

8) *Failing to conduct a timely realistic job preview*. Failing to carefully explain realistic job preview expectations is a common occurrence that is omitted in many organizations. Realistic job previews identify the positive and negative aspects of a job and explain to employees what is expected by the organization. In addition to clarifying the expectations of the organization and articulating its responsibilities in clarifying the psychological contract between the organization and the incoming employee (Morrison, E. W. & Robinson, S. L., 1997), realistic job previews lead to higher performance, lower attrition and turnover, and greater employee satisfaction (Phillips, J. M., 1998). **Providing a timely and clear realistic job preview is not only in an organization's self-interest but is a clearly established ethical imperative due to employees** (Buckley, M. R., *et al*., 1997). **.**

9) *Ignoring relationship building with key employees and networks*. Rather than laying the foundation for key organization members to contact new employees to create strong transitional networks and to build supporting relationships, many HRPs overlook their role in facilitating this important part of the onboarding process. **HRM systems that are optimally effective assist departments in training mentors to assist employees in their transition into the organization** (Sims, R. R., 2006)**. Effective new employee mentoring assists not only in socializing the employee about the organization's culture and values but increases employee perceptions about the organization's commitment to his/her best interests** (Payne, S. C., & Huffman, A. H. (2005).

10) *Mistiming the conveying of key information.* Once an employee is on board, the providing of important and accurate information associated with the orientation process is often far too late and extremely frustrating for the incoming employee. The moral duty of HRPs is to provide clear, correct, and timely information to incoming employees to assist those employees to make a smooth transition. Failing to anticipate employee informational needs or providing that information on a delayed basis violates the implicit psychological contract between the employer and the new employee (Rousseau, 1990). **Thoughtfully anticipating employee informational needs, ensuring that information is correct, and providing that information on a timely basis conveys to new employees that the organization is competent and caring and is a moral duty of HRPs (cf. Hosmer, 1987).**

Increasingly, organizations that recognize the importance of establishing organizational cultures that align HRM policies to communicate their commitment to employees' welfare, growth, and wholeness see employees reciprocate with increased commitment, extra-mile effort, greater creativity, and loyalty (Beer, M., 2009). New employee onboarding programs that demonstrate that commitment to helping employees succeed bear those same fruits and reduce the time for employees to become productive contributors to the value creating objectives of an organization (Bauer, T. N., Erdogan, B., & Simon, L. 2014).

5. Contributions for Practitioners

Addressing the needs of new employees as they transition into an organization is a moral obligation, a professional obligation of the HRM function, and a value-producing opportunity for organizations to facilitate their own best interests. Our paper makes four important contributions for practitioners.

1) **It identifies why the onboarding process is an important task that is consistent with the HRP's organizational role.** Although the onboarding of new employees is often done poorly, the effective assimilation of new employees into an organization honors the psychological contract and reasonable expectations of incoming employees and assists an organization to achieve its strategic purpose.

2)   **It enumerates ten common errors in the onboarding process that inhibit the assimilation of new employees.** Calling out those errors and describing them as part of the psychological contract owed to new employees provides HRPs with a useful and practical checklist for assessing their current onboarding process.

3)   **It identifies action steps to eliminate the ten common errors.** Those ten action steps are a useful guide for improving new employee onboarding and enhance an organization's ability to transition new employees while building credibility and employee trust.

4)   **It provides key information for those who oversee the HRM function.** Top Management Team members are often quite busy and may not have professional training in HRM. This paper provides managers and executives with criteria for assessing the quality of their organizations' onboarding systems and overseeing the HRPs who work in their organization.

As HRPs honor their strategic roles and assist their organizations to bring on board new employees, they send a powerful message to these new organization members. This message communicates that the organization understands the important contributions of employees and that it seeks to treat those employees as valued partners. Building such a relationship with transitioning new employees benefits all parties and fully achieves the purpose of effective HRM (Sims, D., 2011). As the HRM role evolves and HRPs honor their strategic obligations to their organizations, they demonstrate whether they understand the important purposes of HRM and its potential contribution as a vital staff function.

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