To fit in or to stand out? How managers can help new hires succeed

A tailored approach will get the best out of new employees, taking their own skills and personalities into account.



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A new hire entering a team is always a delicate moment. The manager and other team members assess performance and personality, while the newcomer comes to grips with how

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they may, or may not, fit in.

It's in everyone's interest for the new hire to find their feet, and direct supervisors hold a lot of influence here. How can they best ensure a smooth transition? Is there a standard, or standardizable, process? Or do different techniques best serve different outcomes?

IESE's Massimo Maoret, in research with Lucas Dufour and Francesco Montani, looked at 171 newcomer-supervisor relationships to see what works.

For new hires, is assimilation the goal?

One prevailing idea is that newcomers to a company should integrate quickly. This allows them to limit the uncertainty of the entry period, be accepted by other team members and settle into corporate routines. It also boosts task performance.

The best way for the manager or company to make this happen is to bolster "cognitive trust." When the employee can see that their supervisor is competent and dependable, they are likely to align not only with that person but with other coworkers. A reliable supervisor who inspires trust will make them embrace the routines and norms that perhaps don't come easily, and will facilitate relationships with other key members of the team. Trust was also a major theme at IESE's Dignity at Work conference, identified as a must-have for building teams, getting the best out of people and navigating difficult moments.

But assimilation doesn't work for everyone, and some companies might, in fact, want to delay the day when a new hire becomes like any longtime employee. After all, there is value to be found in new perspectives.

When fostering new-hire creativity is the goal, managers should be emotionally supportive

Sometimes companies bring in new staff precisely because they need new voices, willing to float new ideas or express opinions that can improve the unit or the company and challenge the status quo. A fresh vision is arguably one of the biggest assets a new employee can bring, but many don't want to express their views because it is riskier than conforming.

For those wanting that breath of fresh air in the organization, a great way to encourage it is to have supervisors build an affectionate bond with new hires. When employees feel a sense

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of care, goodwill and consideration from managers — known as “affective trust” — they feel a sense of mutual obligation, and are motivated to go beyond their formal role. And when they feel trusted and reassured, they are more likely to raise their voice to suggest amendments and improvements, or simply point out what isn’t working.

When people feel safe, they are more willing to speak up. That, in turn, is key to creative expression. So, making newcomers feel safe enough to express their views can boost interaction and creativity throughout the team.

Do you lead rule-followers or trailblazers?

One element strengthened or weakened the effects described above, and created situations where both assimilation and speaking up could occur: each new hire’s reaction to rules.

In every company, there are people who follow the rules and may even crave rules to give them a framework. When these people also encountered cognitive trust in their supervisor, they were even more likely to assimilate, and they got a boost in task performance.

The opposite was also true: People who were low rule-followers benefited from emotional bonds and affective trust with supervisors, which provided them with the safety they needed to take risks and use their voice. These people were much more likely to speak up and confidently express different views.

So, what should managers do when onboarding new hires?

They should know that frequent, respectful and transparent communication will have real effects on how the new person feels, but also on what they can bring to the company.

Managers should also keep in mind that this isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution. If your newcomer is a bit of a rebel, gaining their trust and affection can channel that attitude in the right direction. If the firm needs people who will quickly excel in assigned tasks, demonstrating competence may be the best way to go.

All relationships are unique. Done well, the supervisor/new hire bond can result in secure, capable and proactively outspoken teams.

About the research

The study surveyed 538 newcomers participating in an apprenticeship at a large French

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business school, along with their supervisors. Newcomers worked in 245 different firms across various sectors. Each newcomer had a dedicated supervisor at the firm who oversaw their socialization. Data for newcomers was analyzed in two and three waves for supervisors and newcomers, respectively.

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Massimo Maoret

Professor in the Strategic Management Department at IESE, specializing in organizational change, leading the energy transition, and strategy and geopolitics.

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