

Orientation Sets the Stage for Success

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It's been said that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. That's certainly true of our visitors. We know that long-lasting impressions are made within the first few seconds after they enter our facility. Because of this, we focus time, energy, and resources to



ensure that those first impressions are positive, meaningful, and memorable. But visitors aren't the only ones who are influenced by first impressions. Your employees are, too, and that starts with your employee orientation program.

While most organizations spend a lot of time and money on the recruiting and hiring process, they often neglect orientation. Yet when thoughtfully designed and facilitated, an orientation program provides far more than an introduction to your facility; it demonstrates a commitment to your employees' success. It generates enthusiasm for your organization and its purpose. It establishes standards and communicates your organization's values, mission, and culture. These guiding principles will impact your employees (and in turn your organization, visitors, and resource) throughout their employment. Research has shown

that effective orientation programs are better for your organization's bottom line too, resulting in reduced start-up costs, reduced turnover (some studies show that organizations with a comprehensive orientation can expect to reduce their turnover rate by 50 percent within two years), and increased productivity and staff morale.

Unfortunately, in spite of their many benefits, orientation programs often end up leaving new staff feeling confused, frustrated, overwhelmed, and questioning their decision to join the organization in the first place. Some of the most frequently cited offenses:

- Bombarding participants with facts, figures, names, and faces.
- Hours spent sitting through boring orientation videos and bad lectures, or reading through tedious training manuals and confusing forms.
- Organizations that are unprepared or unwelcoming, leaving participants waiting in the lobby while staff figure out what to do, failing to provide new staff with a phone, e-mail, computer, and meaningful work, or failing to introduce them to coworkers.
- Orientation programs that emphasize "rules, regulations, and things that will get you fired" but fail to inspire or ensure that new employees clearly understand their jobs.
- Trainers who are negative and

uninspired and who criticize the organization, visitors, or other staff members.

It doesn't have to be that way. As a former employee (or cast member) for the Walt Disney World Company, I was fortunate to participate in its internationally known "Traditions" orientation program and experienced just how powerful orientation can be. Using techniques including storytelling, multimedia, group exercises, discussion, and field experiences, this multi-day program introduces employees from custodial to administrative to the company's culture, heritage, traditions, values, service standards, and behaviors while inspiring excitement and enthusiasm for the company's mission and guests. Studied and replicated around the world, Traditions includes strategies that can lead to exceptional employees and can be applied to any orientation program.

- **Start with great trainers:** Each year, Disney cast members audition for the coveted position of Traditions assistant. Selected for their facilitation skills, work record, enthusiasm, and ability to communicate and model Disney values, culture, and guest service standards, these veteran cast members leave their daily jobs at regular intervals to teach Traditions for one year. The honor of being selected and opportunities to learn new skills and work with

new audiences are benefits to those selected. Participants benefit from spending time with veteran cast members who are passionate about the company and guests and are excited to share their experiences and expertise.

- **Make a memorable first impression:** The company knows that, like Disney guests, new cast members arrive with exceptionally high expectations. Therefore, the company works hard to ensure that everything from the pre-training information packet to facilities, training materials, multimedia presentations, activities, and staff exceed their expectations, ensure they feel welcome, and maintain the Disney “magic.” By showing it cares for its cast, the company models and inspires cast to care for their guests.
- **Introduce them to the company heritage and culture:** Like great interpretation, great training connects

with both the heart and mind. Generating excitement for the company’s heritage, values, vision, culture, and standards through compelling stories, engaging activities, firsthand encounters with cast and guests, and inspiring media presentations has far more impact than forms and training manuals. While policy and procedures are important, they don’t dominate the day.

- **Teach the principles of great guest service:** No matter what kind of organization or facility you are involved with, great guest service is critical to your success. During Traditions, all cast members are introduced to the *Seven Guest Service Guidelines*, which clearly describe standards of friendly, courteous treatment for all guests, fellow cast members, and external business partners. Like the company’s mission and purpose, these service guidelines direct how business is to be done every day.

- **Give people a purpose not just a job:** During the Traditions program, new cast members come to understand that regardless of job title, they all share a common purpose—to make a positive difference for guests through fun, memorable experiences. This sense of purpose, the awareness that every job impacts the guest, and that every action is a reflection on the entire organization directs every decision, behavior, and guest interaction, no matter what the cast member’s role may be.

Never underestimate the power of a great orientation program. While it takes energy, time, and commitment, when carefully designed and facilitated it creates inspired, effective employees, which leads to success for the organization, the visitor, and the resource.

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