

Good Buddy or Bad Buddy? Devil's in the Details

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By Lin Gensing-Pophal

Michelle Winkley is director of HR at Spot Runner, an Internet-based ad agency in Los Angeles that has expanded rapidly. So Winkley said she's using "buddies" to expedite the process of bringing new hires on board.

"Sometimes new employees need a peer to help them feel comfortable," she said. "You're probably not going to feel comfortable asking your boss where the bathroom is."

It's that peer-to-peer relationship that distinguishes buddy programs from mentoring programs, says Winkley and others.

At Wilkin & Guttenplan PC, a certified public accounting consulting firm in East Brunswick, N.J., entry-level staff also are assigned a buddy they meet with throughout their first year, according to firm administrator Janine Zirrieth. "It's deliberately less structured so that the relationship can develop naturally over time," she said.

The word "buddy" is a good term to indicate the difference between these programs and the formal mentoring programs with which they may often be confused, said Rick Maurer, a nationally cited expert in change management and organizational health.

"Every organization has unwritten taboos," Maurer explained. Buddies can be helpful in guiding new employees through the land mines to avoid missteps and potential embarrassment, he said.

Selecting Buddies

"Buddy selection should be taken just as seriously as the hiring decision itself," said Maurer. "A buddy becomes the face of the organization, and through his or her actions says, 'This is how we do it here.'"

At Wilkin & Guttenplan, interns and entry-level staff are assigned to younger staff members, Zirrieth said. "Since [they] are closer in age to our younger staff, we feel they'll relate more easily to them than to a partner or senior manager. We look at our younger staff and approach those individuals we feel have the time and personality suited to the program."

Beth Carvin, president and CEO of Nobscot Corp., a Kailua, Hawaii-based recruitment management company, agrees. She recommends a simple, three-step approach: Ask for volunteers, encourage them, and reward them for their efforts.

Rewards don't have to be significant, and they don't have to be monetary, said Carvin. At National Interstate Insurance Company in Richfield, Ohio, for example, human resource associate Liz Rogers said, "We will hold an appreciation event at the end of the year for our buddies to attend."

There are two key criteria that buddies should have, said Steve Trautman, a Seattle-based consultant and the creator of the Peer Mentoring Workshop. Buddies, says Trautman, must be willing to help. But more important, "They should be the kind of employee the organization wants to replicate."

Keeping It Simple

While a certain amount of information and orientation is necessary, Carvin cautions against doing too much training for buddies. "You want to keep it light or you're not going to be having too many people wanting to be buddies," she said.

Winkley's program includes a toolkit and a loosely defined process to help buddies perform their assigned roles. "We want the buddy to be armed and ready with information when they need it," she said.

A buddy checklist provides a guide for what to do when the new hire comes on board. "We suggest that buddies e-mail the new employees before they start, and we provide a sample draft that they can use if they wish," said Winkley.

The checklist also includes recommendations for introducing the new hire to the department, arranging lunches, establishing follow-up contact and more. Buddies are expected to check in with new hires at least twice a week.

Evaluation of the program is also important and, again, can be informal. National Interstate's Rogers said new employees and buddies complete a survey at the end of the program; managers' feedback is sought as well.

Winkley has used an online survey to gather feedback after the first week and an in-person meeting after the fourth week.

Taking these steps to ensure consistency in the process and to manage the experience for both the buddy and the new hire can help improve the program's effectiveness.

A key objective should be to minimize any sense of "buyer's remorse" on the part of the new hire, said Carvin. Failure to properly acclimate new hires to the organization and make them feel comfortable and productive can result in turnover—an expense that few companies wish to bear.

A buddy system might seem like a lot of work initially, Zirrih admitted. But, she said, "The short-term benefit for a company is a workforce that's happy and productive. In the long term, this translates to lower turnover and less need for recruitment. It's a win-win for the employer and employee."

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