WHITE PAPER

STRONG START TO JOB SUCCESS

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WHAT LEADERS CAN DO TO SHORTEN TIME TO PROFICIENCY, INCREASE JOB ENGAGEMENT, AND REDUCE EARLY TURNOVER

After a lengthy search for the right person to fill a key position in a fast-paced, global organization, a candidate with good skills and potential has been identified and hired for the job. The new team member, Lisa, reports for work on her first day, both excited and anxious to embark on this new chapter in her work life. She's ready to get started, but at the same time she's also quite nervous about the transition into a new role amid the unfamiliar surroundings of a new organization. She's eager to make a good first impression and wants to begin contributing in a meaningful way, right away.

Lisa's leader, Dan, who has for months had to juggle his team's assignments to cover for the vacant position, is especially excited to have Lisa on board. He's also every bit as anxious as Lisa is for her to start contributing right out of the gate.

But does Dan appreciate what it will take for Lisa to get up to speed quickly, to get her fully engaged in her work, and to successfully get her through the first two years on the job, when most turnover occurs?

Many leaders mistakenly assume that, just because they've hired a great person, that person should be able to quickly figure out everything he or she needs to know to be successful. Or, they may falsely believe that the organization's orientation program will provide all of the information, insights, and motivation the new team member needs, and that the leader's role is largely to show the new hire the ropes and provide "post-mortem" coaching when the individual inevitably makes beginner's mistakes.

This is not the case, however. Leaders need to take an active role in assuring that new team members—be they from outside the organization or promoted or transferred from within—get off to a strong start. Their early efforts, or lack thereof, go a long way toward determining whether the new team member becomes fully proficient quickly or becomes a turnover statistic.

This paper will examine the negative consequences of employees getting off to a weak start when placed in a new job and identify what leaders can do to help their new team members get off to a strong start—so they can quickly get up to speed and become engaged employees who stay for the long term.

WHAT NEW TEAM MEMBERS WANT

When individuals, at any organizational level, start a new job, in addition to bringing to the job their own particular skill sets, knowledgebases, personality traits, and experiences, they will bring a common set of needs and preferences. Among the things that new team members want when they take a new job:

- ***They want to know what, exactly, the job is and what their boss expects of them.*** Having gone through the selection process, the individual should have had a realistic job preview that provided a sense for what the job is really like. But no job preview will answer all of the questions a new team member will have when reporting to work, especially the unknowns around the boss' expectations and preferences.
- ***They want to be successful.*** Regardless of how confident an individual appeared during the job interview, he will inevitably have self-doubts about his ability to perform effectively in the new job; he may feel he has oversold himself. New team members need encouragement and reassurance, and they need to believe that others feel they have what it takes to succeed.
- ***They want to make a meaningful contribution as fast as they can.*** They want to have early successes and make a good impression on their boss and on their peers.
- ***They want to avoid making mistakes early on in their jobs that potentially could haunt them for years.*** They want to skip, as much as possible, having to learn from mistakes. Instead, they would rather learn from their successes—a less-painful and more efficient way to develop.
- ***They want to get started on developing new skills and knowledge.*** Research has repeatedly confirmed that employees, whether new or experienced, want opportunities to grow and develop. Beyond building their résumés, employees want opportunities in their jobs to be challenged, to acquire new knowledge and skills, and to become more valuable to their employers over time. This desire for growth figures prominently in the degree to which employees feel fulfilled in their jobs. The lack of growth opportunities also is one of the main reasons people seek out new jobs.

Not meeting the needs of people starting new jobs results in major costs for organizations.

THREE WAYS A WEAK START COSTS AN ORGANIZATION

Getting off to a weak start in a new job costs organizations in three ways:

1. It takes too long for the new hires to reach full job proficiency.
2. Job engagement decreases as individuals experience early failure or misunderstandings.
3. Individuals start to consider moving to a new job.

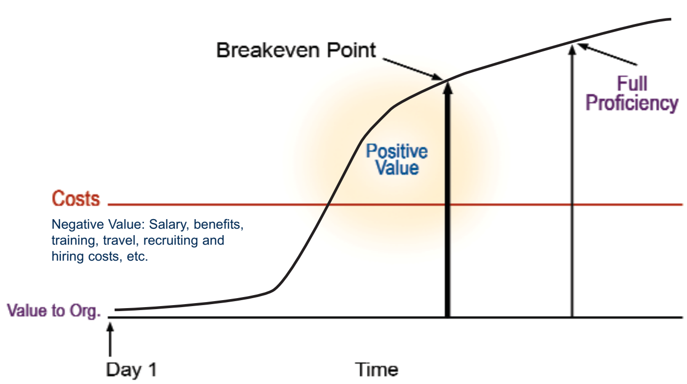
Below, we examine each of these costs and propose three actions leaders can take to dramatically reduce them.

1. The Cost of Not Rapidly Reaching Full Proficiency. Figure 1 ("What Is Time to Proficiency?") illustrates the length of the start-up process through which a new hire reaches full job proficiency. From the organization's perspective, the day a new team member begins work, he is capable of contributing only a limited, sub-optimal level of value because the new team member lacks knowledge and information about the organization's business, its products, its processes, its structure, its culture, etc.

The new team member also may lack job- or role-specific skills that are yet to be developed and applied. Due to these deficiencies, a new team member is not yet able to contribute at a level commensurate with the organization's investment in him or her—the value the new team member "consumes" plus the recruitment and hiring costs.

Over time, the employee becomes more knowledgeable about the organization, more skilled in his job, more comfortable, and more confident in the job or role, and begins adding more value. In most jobs, this value level begins tracking upward almost immediately, if only slightly, as the individual settles in and starts becoming proficient.

What is Time to Proficiency?



– Figure 1 –

At some point, depending upon the job and its associated learning and experience curve, and the speed with which the new employee grows into the job or role, he reaches a breakeven point. On Figure 1 above, the breakeven point is the point at which the Value to the Organization line has exceeded the Cost line to the degree that the organization's start-up investment in the individual and the recruitment and hiring costs are recouped. (See the sidebar on page 4, "The Total Cost of a New Hire," for a listing of the costs associated with filling an open position—costs that are *in addition* to salary, benefits, and training.). But, of course, organizations don't hire people in hopes of breaking even on their investments in them (although many organizations find themselves in this situation). They expect an ROI, and that usually requires new team members to become fully proficient and to perform in the job at this high level for an extended period. Thus, the longer the total time required for the new team member to reach full proficiency, the greater the cost to the organization. Minimizing time to proficiency is important at all organizational levels, whether the new hire comes from outside the organization or is promoted from within.

How long does this process take? A study by one large financial services firm determined that the time for new hires to overcome the learning curve and achieve full proficiency ranged from eight weeks for clerical jobs to 20 weeks for professionals to more than 26 weeks for executives (Figure 2, below)[1].

Time to Proficiency at a Major Financial Services Organization

– Figure 2 –
Source: Rollag, Parise, & Cross, MIT Sloan Management Review, Winter 2005

THE TOTAL COST OF NEW HIRE

It takes time for a new hire to cover start-up costs, such as training, salary, benefits, etc., but these costs do not include all the costs that the organization incurs when it goes through the process of filling an open position. A full accounting of these costs must also include:

- Lost-opportunity costs when the position is open.
- Recruiting costs (advertising, posting the open position on job boards, etc.)
- Fees paid to recruiting firms.
- Selection process costs (sourcing and screening candidates).
- Time leaders spend conducting interviews, evaluating candidates, and performing additional selection tasks.
- Travel and relocation costs.

When all costs are included, depending upon the position, the total can be thousands of dollars—hundreds of thousands of dollars for senior executives.

Speed to Proficiency is a Competitive Advantage

Organizations today are increasingly concerned with shortening time to proficiency for those they hire. They have to be. Driven by the relentless demands of the global economy, they are moving at a breakneck pace, leaving little time for new hires to deliberately ease into their jobs. What's more, as the war for talent has become a global phenomenon, organizations are finding it harder than ever to hire good people, further ratcheting up the pressure for new team members, when they are finally found, to successfully perform. Organizations need the people they hire to be able to step into their new roles, and step up to the plate as soon as possible and start making meaningful contributions.

Every leader knows that there are large individual differences in time to proficiency (also called time to productivity). Some people seem to quickly catch on to jobs with few missteps along the way. Others take much longer and their path is marked by many often-costly mistakes. Smart organizations have attacked time to proficiency with a vengeance through improved HR department-sponsored orientation and training programs, in many cases with considerable success. These programs and processes are often lumped under the title "on-boarding," and if done well can result in highly significant improvements in time to proficiency —50 percent or more in some cases.

But there is still a lot of room for improvement in how people are treated in their early months on the job and there remain big differences among people in time to proficiency. According to a study by the Corporate Executive Board's Recruiting Roundtable, 89 percent of new hires lack the institutional knowledge required to get up to speed quickly and become effective on the job within their first 90 days[2]. Even in successful organizations famous for their on-boarding programs there are still many costly early failures. We believe this is because the immediate leaders of new hires have not been fully involved in getting their people off to a strong start.

The Difference Between a Strong Start and On-boarding

Getting a new hire off to a strong start is not the same as on-boarding. On-boarding is an event. Making a strong start happen is a process that lasts up to six months.

The Impact of Delayed Time to Proficiency

New employees don't like having to go through a lengthy process in order to reach their full proficiency, and they also don't like to think of themselves as a "cost." They may not consciously think in terms of what their early job performance is costing the organization, but they will usually be cognizant of the fact that they are contributing less, producing less, adding less value, and maybe making more mistakes than their more experienced colleagues. This can lead to feelings of inferiority and frustration on the part of new team members—feelings that can manifest themselves in terms of decreased engagement and early turnover.

Consider the example of Rajesh, an individual contributor who started a job working in a high-performing department in which all of his co-workers had been in their jobs for at least three years. He wanted to jump in and start working on projects right away, but he soon learned that he lacked the fully developed skills, job-specific knowledge, and experience that the other members of his team possessed. It was bad enough that he was fully aware of the gap between his performance level and that of others' but he also found himself repeatedly making mistakes that resulted in more work for everyone else, not less. While every day he grew more competent, knowledgeable, and experienced, Rajesh also grew more frustrated by his slow progress and his lack of contribution to the team. He started to dread coming to work, felt less engaged in his job, and, after only a few months, had circulated his résumé in hopes of landing a job elsewhere.

Delays in Reaching Job Proficiency Are Often Tied to the Degree of Change Facing an Individual

If a person moves into a job that is quite similar to his present job, just with more responsibility or with a larger number of direct reports, time to proficiency tends to be very short and, thus, there is little opportunity for improvement. On the other end of the spectrum, when an individual moves into a job that is radically different from what he has been used to in terms of organizational level (e.g., going from an individual contributor role to a leader role, or from an operational leader role to a strategic leader role), or moving to a new department or a new country, there are many new challenges in store for the individual and average time to proficiency can be quite long—as much as a year. (When an individual transitions to a new job in a new organization these challenges can be even greater, as the individual has to learn things like new technology, customers, and the culture of the organization.) These are the "sweet spots" in any attempts to cut time to proficiency.

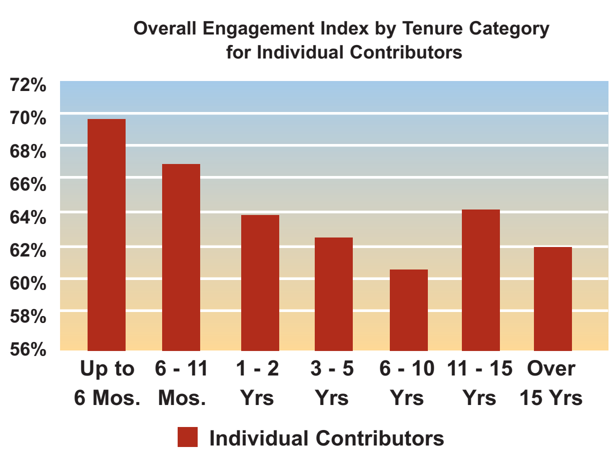
2. The Cost of New Team Members Becoming Less Engaged in Their Jobs.

DDI defines employee engagement as the extent to which people value, enjoy, and believe in what they do. Engaged employees are committed to the bottom line, have tremendous pride and job ownership, put forth more discretionary effort in terms of time and energy, and, on average, demonstrate significantly higher levels of performance and productivity than those who are not engaged.[3]

The level of engagement of new team members tends to peak within their first year of employment and decreases afterward, never again to reach as high a level. Figure 3 (below) shows the average percentage of people who report moderate or high engagement on a standardized 17-question engagement survey, reflecting data collected from thousands of team members and individual contributors. Note that these are median engagement figures, which indicates that while many employees do become significantly less engaged, many others do not—a fact that indicates an opportunity for improvement.

Why does engagement go down? Of course, there are many reasons, but we believe the difference between the people whose level of engagement decreases the most and those whose engagement level either stays the same or increases significantly is related to what happens during the first few months on the job. Those employees who don't get off to a strong start and don't experience early success begin to dislike their jobs and start psychologically pulling back from their job and organizational commitment. In some cases they decide to leave, while others begin to dwell on the negatives of their job, lowering their own and others' morale.

Engagement Goes Down in Early Years



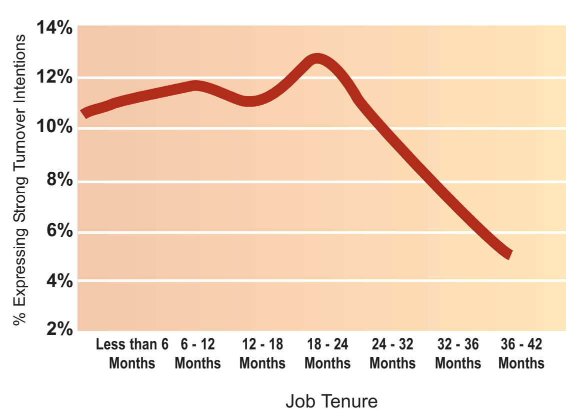
– Figure 3 –

The costs associated with low employee engagement are staggering. Data we at DDI have gathered indicate that those companies or business units with highly engaged employees experience a significant decrease in the number of quality complaints, have lower turnover, and are 52 percent more likely to grow their top line. In addition, a study by Towers Perrin-ISR that covered a three-year period showed a significant increase in operating margin for high-engagement companies and a decrease for lower-engagement organizations.[4]

3. The Cost of Early Employee Turnover.

Beyond the challenges associated with the time required for new team members to reach full proficiency, and with transforming them into engaged employees, organizations also grapple with the challenge of keeping their new team members on board long term. Younger employees represent the greatest risk for voluntary turnover. While the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has estimated the median tenure for all U.S. workers at 4.0 years, for workers ages 25 to 34 the median tenure drops to just 2.9 years.[5]

Turnover Intentions by Job Tenure

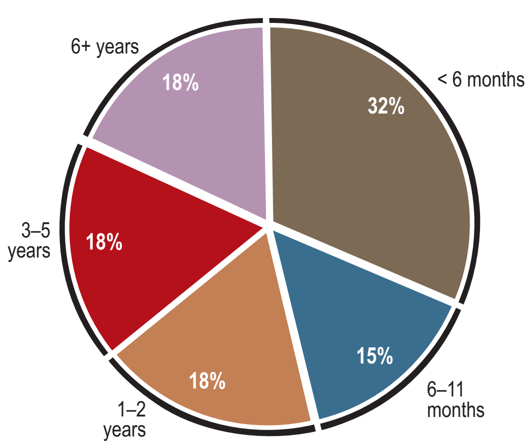


– Figure 4 –

As shown in Figure 4, more than 10 percent of employees start to think about leaving their jobs very soon after being hired. Employees who can be retained for two years have a much lower interest in leaving; many don't leave. According to research by DDI and Monster.com (Figure 5), nearly one-third of employees start to look for new jobs within their first six months on the job, and that figure reaches nearly 50 percent within a year.[6] A Midwestern U.S. financial services organization calculated that it was experiencing a turnover rate of 31 percent within 90 days of hire.[7] If the time to proficiency was as high as 20 weeks, as was the case with those professionals hired by the financial services organization highlighted in Figure 2 on page 3, this organization was clearly losing money on one-third of their new hires. Similarly, before enacting initiatives to improve its employee retention, Wal-Mart determined that about two-thirds of employees who left the company within their first year of employment did so within the first 90 days—when they had produced very little, if any, return on Wal-Mart's investment in them. One study, by Reed Consulting, estimated that up to four percent of all employees quit after their *first day.*

Job Seekers' Tenure in Their Current Job

(N = 3,725)



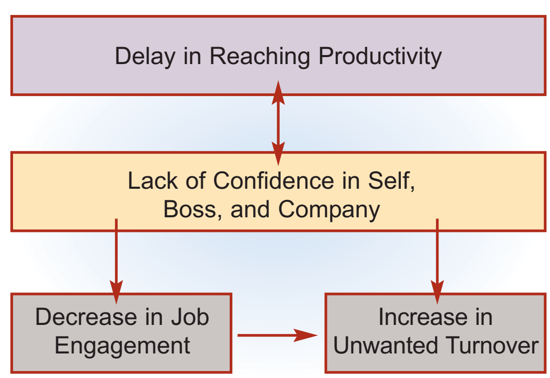
– Figure 5 –

The Impact of Turnover at a Large Health Care Organization

- 40 percent of new hires resign within six months.
- 79 percent leave before completing three years on the job.
- Cost to replace an employee: 100 percent of the employee's salary and benefits.
- Annual turnover cost for nurses: $832 million.

Predictably, the bottom-line impact of this turnover is significant. In call center and high tech sectors, turnover costs represent more than 40 percent of industry earnings. In specialty retail, this figure is 50 percent.[10] Organizations in these industries routinely calculate their turnover costs in the millions of dollars.

Three Negative Outcomes Are Interrelated



– Figure 6 –

THE THREE COSTS OF A WEAK START IN A NEW JOB ARE INTERRELATED

There is little question that time to proficiency and employee engagement and retention are closely intertwined issues. In the first few weeks or months, if a new team member (whether hired from the outside or promoted from within the organization) fails to meet his self-imposed proficiency goals, he often will become less engaged. This, in turn, contributes to his making a determination about whether or not the job is meeting his expectations and whether or not he wants to continue in the job for the foreseeable future. (Figure 6 shows the relationship between the costs of a weak start.)

Beyond assuring that their new people take full advantage of the orientation and training offered by the organization, what can leaders do to ensure that their new team members get off to a strong start, that they become and remain engaged, and that they don't leave the organization prematurely?

Three Actions Leaders Can Take to Get New Team Members Off to a Strong Start

Leaders play the single most important role in helping new team members have a strong start. Here are three things leaders can do.

1. Help new team members understand all expectations—both job performance expectations and personal expectations. Building on what was shared in the organization's orientation program, a leader needs to share specific information about job responsibilities, why those responsibilities are important to the organization, and how they relate to the organization's key business drivers. Further, the leader needs to share how job success will be defined and measured, and how the new team member can evaluate, on an ongoing basis, his job success. New hires need to understand how the leader interprets and prioritizes the various responsibilities listed on the job description ("Here's how I interpret 'timely response to all customer requests' . . .").

An especially important part of clarifying and promoting the new team member's understanding of expectations is working with him to begin scoping out and setting performance goals. While it might be weeks or even months before the new team member will be expected to set performance appraisal goals, the leader will want to get the new team member thinking about the goals that will be part of his performance plan. By reinforcing the importance of observable and measurable performance goals, the leader helps to make the job expectations "real" for the new team member, in terms of what he needs to focus on in the job and how success will be defined and evaluated. Emphasis needs to be on the support the new team member will receive, from the leader, peers, and others in the organization, in meeting goals.

In communicating expectations, the individual also should be alerted to pitfalls and mistakes that typically befall new team members—in hopes that the individual can successfully avoid them.

Additionally, a new team member needs to really understand what's important to the leader, both in the short and long term. For instance, the leader might need the new team member to place a higher priority on tasks related to a short-term initiative the leader is charged with executing, such as the rollout of a new product. These tasks may differ from the tasks that will define job success long term—and from the tasks spelled out on the job description.

The new team member also needs to know the expected timeframe for reaching full proficiency. Sharing this timeframe is important so that the new team member is not too hard on himself (new hires often expect to be fully proficient on Day 1) and also so that he sees he will have to move fast to meet the organization's expectations.

Especially, though, a new team member needs to know about the leader's personal expectations, leadership style, and particular likes and dislikes (e.g., communicating face-to-face as opposed to using e-mail)—those "off the book" expectations that will not be covered in a job description or in an orientation program.

Types of Expectations Leaders Should Share with New Team Members

> ***Job Responsibilities and Expectations***—Review the job responsibilities and expectations as outlined in the job description: "Your job will be to post all of the receivables that come in each day." "An important part of your role in dealing with customers is to make the whole team look good."

> ***Day-to-Day Operations***—Unwritten personal (not company) regulations: "Because customers routinely visit the office, your work area needs to be kept neat." Typical interactions among team members and leaders: "I have an open door policy. That said, if my office door is closed, please do not disturb me." Frequency and method of communication: "I'll expect an e-mail from you every Friday spelling out your sales results, your top 10 prospects, and your plans for the following week."

> ***Work Flow***—Typical time frames and deadlines for work completion: "Whenever possible, you need to respond to all customer inquiries within 24 hours."

> ***Values***—"Integrity is my number one issue. I can't operate if I can't totally trust people." "Don't gossip about what we discuss." "I expect 100 percent on ethical and legal decisions."

> ***Interpersonal Relationships***—"We are very informal here. No one uses their academic titles." "We often pass around drafts of papers or speeches for comment. You are expected to offer your true feelings—even to higher management."

> ***Teamwork and Cooperation***—Consideration of team consequences in making decisions: "Cooperating with and supporting other teams is a must in all decisions."

> ***Autonomy/Empowerment***—What leaders make decisions about versus the scope of team members' decisions: "I'll determine who will work on which projects, but then it's up to the team to figure out how to get the work done."

> ***Likes and Dislikes***—The leader's general preferences: "I get in the office early and I expect other people to get in at least on time." "I give a lot of decision-making opportunities to people—I expect accuracy." "Long coffee breaks annoy me, particularly when I don't know what's happening."

> ***Additional Expectations***—"As a leader, the most important thing for my team members to understand about me is . . ."

> ***Information About the Performance Management System***—What the new hire will need to know and do toward putting together a performance plan: "We'll work together to set measurable performance goals for you." "You'll need to have your performance goals set by this specific date."

REASONS LEADERS DON'T SHARE JOB EXPECTATIONS MORE OPENLY AND FULLY

- Belief that good people can find out information on their own—particularly professionals or experienced leaders.
- Belief that values, culture, and politics are the same as in the individual's previous organization.
- Over-reliance on orientation programs or manuals (which often are outdated) to orient new individuals to the organization and its values.
- False belief that it will demand too much time. In truth, correcting mistakes takes much longer.

WHEN LEADERS OPENLY SHARE JOB EXPECTATIONS:

New team members feel:

- Appreciative.
- Less anxious about the possibility of making mistakes.
- More "clued in" and comfortable with the work environment.
- That their new boss really cares about their success.

Leaders feel:

- Like they are "on the same page" with the new hires.
- That there should be less ambiguity in what the new hires need to do.
- More aware of the idiosyncrasies of their own leadership styles.

In sharing personal expectations with the new team member, it is often tempting for the leader to overemphasize those expectations or behaviors that contributed to the failure of others who have recently been in the position. For instance, if the person who previously held the job had problems with punctuality (and may have been let go, in part, for this reason), the leader might be quick to emphasize the need to get to work on time, when, if she really stops to think about it, one of her team's strongest performers also habitually runs a little late. In truth, what she's more concerned with are deadlines being met and the work getting done. People being late, is really more of an annoyance to the leader than a major problem in and of itself. For this reason, it's important for the leader to take a more philosophical, big picture view, and to really zero in on and share with the new team member those expectations that she believes are really important to success on the job.

Should a leader ask the new hire to reciprocate and share his personal expectations? Certainly, the door is halfway opened by the leader sharing her expectations. This mutual sharing is a good idea because it enables both sides to avoid needless problems that can arise when positive or negative desires are not communicated. But, many leaders and team members are uncomfortable with so much sharing. A common approach is for the leader to share her expectations. Then, depending upon how the conversation is

COURAGEOUS NETWORKING DEFINED

Courageous Networking is the proactive relationship-building and information-seeking behavior that new hires engage in to help them become quickly proficient in the job. The name "courageous" networking is used because the behavior does not come easily to many individuals. While it may be second nature to individuals who are outgoing and gregarious, those less given to seeking help or interacting freely with others, may require support or encouragement.

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going, ask the new team member to share his personal expectations. Such a request doesn't put people on the spot. If the new hire doesn't want to disclose his true preferences or expectations, he likely will at least offer a fairly generic preference, such as the preference for open communication with the leader.

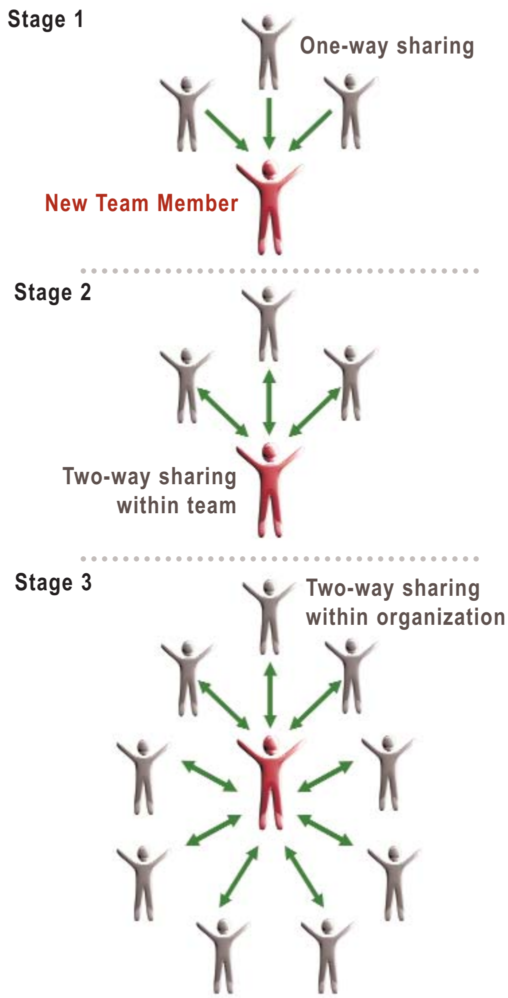
2. Help new team members become Courageous Networkers. No activity a new team member can engage in will accelerate his speed to proficiency more than seeking the help of peers and others in the organization with assignments and projects. We refer to this behavior as Courageous Networking (see definition in the sidebar, "Courageous Networking Defined" on page 10).

Courageous Networking encompasses a set of behaviors that can include, but are not limited to:

- Seeking input or advice from others before performing an unfamiliar job duty.
- Asking for an explanation when a work procedure or task is unfamiliar.
- Building relationships with influential people in the workplace who may, at some future time, be a source of information, skills, etc.
- Taking action on feedback from colleagues or leaders.
- Seeking information about the internal politics of the team, department, or company.
- Seeking out a mentor at work.

Seeking help to attain information, build skills, or enhance knowledge is only half of networking. The other half is opening a mutual channel of sharing. Networks won't last unless networking is a two-way street. The illustration below (Figure 7) shows how an individual can be encouraged to grow his or her networking skills in stages and, thus, develop "advanced" Courageous Networking skills.

The Stages of Courageous Networking



– Figure 7 –

After a person is settled in his job, networking with people outside of the immediate work group becomes more important. Often, people within a work group or team have much the same information, so there isn't a lot to share. The big payoff comes from people beyond day-to-day contacts, people who can provide a greater organizational perspective or people from different technical specialties. The skills required for this level of networking are trainable.

Michael, a leader in a large organization, hired two new team members, Colleen and Luis. Both were highly educated and technically competent. Within Colleen and Luis' first weeks on the job, Michael gave each of them an assignment—a report that needed to be researched and written. Colleen, a naturally gregarious person, immediately reached out to her new peers for help. She found out how similar assignments were usually handled, and determined Michael's expectations for the report's length and format. Within a couple of weeks, Colleen completed the assignment. But, more important, she had begun to build her network of internal contacts—people she would be able to reach out to for future projects. Colleen was a Courageous Networker.

Luis, meanwhile, tried to complete the project on his own, without seeking out others. He made two wrong assumptions at the outset, which led to Michael rejecting his report. In fact, Michael wound up taking the project off of Luis' plate and giving it to Colleen who, by drawing on and further expanding her network, was able to complete it quickly. Luis was not a Courageous Networker.

Courageous Networking does not come naturally to all people. For many, this is just not how they operate. In fact, often Courageous Networking is thought to be gender-related—women are better at it—similar to their greater willingness to ask for directions. (A July 2007 *New York Times* article drawing on anecdotal evidence supports this observation.[11]) Yet it's a behavior that is related to job success and should be encouraged, whether or not the individual is a natural networker.

One reason for its effectiveness is that Courageous Networking helps people to learn from their successes as opposed to their mistakes. If Luis had begun his project by asking questions of others instead of trying to do things all on his own (and doing them wrong), he probably would have been able to successfully complete his project. The success would have reinforced his decision to join the organization and work with the people in it. Instead, in the wake of his initial, humiliating misstep, Luis started to rethink his decision to leave his old job. There he knew how things worked, what was going on, and who did what—insights he had attained through trial-and-error over several years. To hedge against the possibility that he would make more mistakes, Luis put his résumé back on a couple of major Internet job boards, "just to see what comes up."

Research has proved that Courageous Networking is effective. In a 2007 article published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, the authors presented the results of their meta-analysis of 70 different studies of the successes of new hires. Among their findings was that information-seeking—the core behavior or Courageous Networking—"was significantly related to role clarity, self-efficacy (self-confidence), and social acceptance"—outcomes that, in turn, positively impacted job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intention to remain with the organization.[12]

The challenge for leaders is to encourage a strong start toward Courageous Networking. Yet, many don't, even though it clearly accelerates time to proficiency. (The outcome for Luis in the example above might have been different if Michael had realized that Luis wasn't a Courageous Networker and had given him specific directions to check with others, while also encouraging and supporting him in his networking efforts). Leaders often do not promote Courageous Networking because they believe that they have given the new hire all the needed information and if more is needed, the individual will get it on his own and doesn't need to be encouraged to ask questions of others.

Courageous Networking is a Third Millennium Skill

Given today's fast-paced, interconnected, increasingly virtual organizations, an individual team member's actions and decisions can positively or negatively impact others on the team—sometimes even the organization as a whole. In this environment, Courageous Networking is not just a skill that builds confidence through early success and accelerates time to proficiency, it's also a survival skill for employees. With greater frequency, organizations find that Courageous Networkers are most likely to be successful. These individuals prove to be team players, work collaboratively, pitch in when others have a problem, seek insight for themselves, and provide aid to others.

What's more, some leaders view Courageous Networking as a time-consuming, as opposed to a time-saving, activity.

There are at least five ways leaders can encourage a strong start toward Courageous Networking. They include:

1. ***Probing for competencies associated with Courageous Networking (e.g., Collaboration) during the selection process.*** Questions included in a *Targeted Selection*® interview can elicit data about an individual's past Courageous Networking behaviors. Armed with this information, a leader can either determine that the lack of Courageous Networking is an important piece of information that needs to be seriously considered when making a hiring decision about the individual, or else note the area as a development opportunity once the individual is hired.

2. ***Courageous Networking can be covered by the leader in the orientation discussion with the individual.*** Alongside the description of the job provided to new team members, underscoring the need to get to know people and what they do, and to seek the help of others can help focus the individuals' efforts.

3. ***Assign a coach or buddy.*** Peer coaches or assigned "buddies" can be invaluable in helping a new team member navigate the uncharted territory that is his new organization. A peer buddy, who sits nearby and is readily available, can often prove especially helpful as the new employee seeks answers to the most basic questions, such as "Where is the kitchen located?" and "How does the copier work?" as well as more meaningful information about customers or projects. Working with an assigned buddy orients an individual to the value of Courageous Networking and encourages him to develop other "buddies" on his own.

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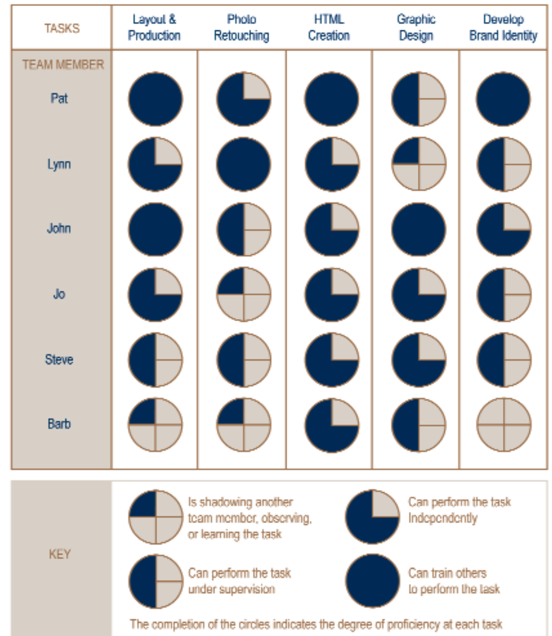
However, assigning a new hire a buddy doesn't necessarily mean that the two will prove to be "buddies." How much time will the assigned buddy be willing to devote to the assignment—especially if the new team member doesn't seem very interested? The leader needs to play a monitoring role to ensure that these relationships prove valuable.

4. ***Promote interactions between the new team member and his new coworkers.*** Some ideas: organize a lunch where the new team member can meet coworkers in an informal setting; give the new team member early assignments that require assistance from others and coach the individual through the information-seeking process; have "welcome" balloons at the new employee's desk on the first day as a visible reminder to others to stop in and say hello and introduce themselves.

5. ***Help identify networking targets.*** A challenge for many new hires is knowing with whom to network when faced with a particular problem or task. Some organizations post a chart similar to the one depicted in Figure 8 to serve as a reference. This chart, which shows the degree of knowledge or proficiency of each team member in critical areas, also acts as a powerful motivator for those listed to increase their skills or knowledge.

Team Member Knowledge or Proficiency



– Figure 8 –

6. ***Identify those who need encouragement and provide them with special coaching.*** Leaders who must manage several new team members at a given time may find it challenging, if not overwhelming, to give all of them the coaching and encouragement needed to transform them into Courageous Networkers. An alternative is to identify those team members in most need of this encouragement and focus efforts on them.

WHEN LEADERS ENCOURAGE COURAGEOUS NETWORKING:

NEW TEAM MEMBERS FEEL:

:: More comfortable because they know where to turn for help.

:: That they have a better understanding of how the organization works.

:: More like accepted members of the team.

LEADERS FEEL:

:: That they have helped to open the line of communications for the new hire, which will in turn help lead to job success.

:: That the whole team is involved in helping get the new hires off to a strong start.

COURAGEOUS NETWORKING BY JOB LEVEL

Courageous Networking provides benefits regardless of the job role or level. Here's what Courageous Networking might look like at three different job levels:

FRONTLINE TEAM MEMBER:

:: Seeks help from other team member on how to use the department's time tracking system.

:: Asks coworkers for assistance in completing a large, deadline-driven project.

:: Shares with others tips learned in past jobs for quickly completing common job-related tasks.

LEADER:

:: Consults with peers for ideas on best way to communicate a major change that impacts the leader's team members.

:: Asks leaders from accounting and IT to help devise a process to streamline employee expense reporting.

:: Asks a respected senior leader to serve as an informal mentor.

SENIOR MANAGEMENT:

:: Initiates quarterly meetings with employees at different levels to get their take on the business and the organization's culture.

:: Seeks input and "historical perspective" from senior leaders who have long tenures with the organization.

:: Consults with leaders from outside of the organization or industry to find out how they approach challenges similar to those facing the company.

To help identify those who might need extra support, DDI offers the *Strong Start*℠ Survey that contains personality and biographical items that indicate the extent to which a person will independently seek help and coaching from peers and the leader during the first six months on the job. (The *Strong Start*℠ Survey is administered after the individual has accepted the job.)

It's worth pointing out that while some individuals will readily engage in Courageous Networking, those who won't often need to build this skill in stages (see Figure 7 on page 11.)

It's also worth emphasizing that Courageous Networking is not just an activity that benefits new team members. Those new to leadership and management roles need to be Courageous Networkers, too, if they are to quickly reach full job proficiency and to remain effective over time. Yet, leaders at all levels often fail to network as much as they should for a variety of reasons, including the perceived time commitment, geographic distance from colleagues, and negative past experiences in their relationships with others.[13] Another reason leaders may not network is that they may become isolated in their own organizational silos and be hesitant to invest the time and effort in an activity that does not appear to directly support the attainment of their team's goals. Managers of leaders are wise to be attuned to the degree to which their subordinate leaders are networking (or not networking) and encourage ongoing Courageous Networking.

3. Start development from Day One.

When she interviewed for her job as a marketing specialist, Hanna felt that her skills and experiences were generally a good fit with the job description. When hired for the position, however, she became apprehensive about those job duties related to media relations and market research—two areas in which she had no professional experience.

Likewise, Peter had worked for 15 years in industrial sales. In his new job, selling professional services, he must be highly consultative as opposed to being more of an order-taker, as he had been in his past jobs. Peter is nervous about effectively making the switch to the new industry and the new sales approach.

Hanna and Peter are like most new hires in that their transition into their jobs entails some self-doubt and at least a modest level of fear. Did they overstate their abilities during the hiring process? Will their weaknesses be found out? Can they really do the job?

Also, they have another common desire—to keep learning and growing their skills and knowledge. The lack of such opportunities could have been the reason for them leaving their previous jobs and the anticipation of better opportunities was what attracted them to their current positions.

SUCCESS PROFILES℠: A MORE HOLISTIC PICTURE OF WHAT'S REQUIRED FOR A JOB

A growing number of organizations are using Success Profiles to define what it takes to be successful in a job or role. Pioneered by DDI, Success Profiles identify the specific competencies required, but they also spell out the knowledge, experiences, and personal attributes (motivations and personality factors) that are needed, as well. When a Success Profile is used as the basis for a hiring decision, the data gathered on the individual will be more holistic—and, therefore, there is a richer pool of data for the leader to draw on to help the new hire confidently and quickly get off to a strong start.

Hanna and Peter want to quickly learn what they need to do to hone their skills and become proficient in their jobs, and they want to quickly start developing skills that will move them upward in the organization.

An important part of the leader's role in getting new team members off to a strong start is helping them develop confidence. Some new team members will need this psychological boost more than others, of course, but all will need the reassurance that they are, indeed, the right person for the job.

An excellent way of building confidence is to, on Day One if possible, share information from the hiring process. During the hiring process a great deal of candidate data is gathered, including competency and motivational data, knowledge data, and information about the candidate's past experiences. There is no reason a leader can't repurpose and apply this information to help new team members see that they are qualified for the job and to help them start planning their development.

We advocate that on the new hire's first day on the job, or soon after the start date, the leader should meet with the new team member to hold a selection results review and development planning discussion (Figure 9). The tone of this meeting should be extremely upbeat, with the leader emphasizing the individual's various strength areas and reinforcing why those involved in the hiring decision felt positively about offering the job to the individual ("We could tell that you have what it takes because of your accomplishments at. . .").

Also, in this discussion the leader should emphasize the contribution the new hire is expected to make ("We really need your analytical skills to help us make better decisions.").

This information from the selection decision can then be leveraged to create a short-term development plan (we feel that six weeks is the proper timeframe for most new team members). This plan should focus on leveraging the new team member's strengths in the various areas of the Success Profile℠ (see definition on page 16). The plan also should cover those areas that need to be addressed in order for the new hire to become fully proficient in the job. For instance, a short-term development plan might specify further strengthening the individual's already-strong technical skills, developing knowledge of the company's products, assigning him to a project that will start building his base of experience in

Building a Short-term Development Plan

– Figure 9 –

interacting directly with clients, and receiving coaching around a potentially negative personal attribute, such as a tendency to take action before consulting with other team members.

The process of developing a short-term development plan sends three important messages to the new hire:

- We know you have what it takes to succeed—and we're counting on you.
- We know you have some skills or knowledge gaps and we are going to assign you a "buddy" to help you to fill in the gaps.
- We know you have a competency gap and we're going to develop you in that area. We won't put you into challenging job situations requiring that competency until you have the skills to handle it.

These messages amount to tremendous piece of mind for new employees, such as Hanna and Peter, and it vividly shows them their leader cares and is not "just blowing smoke" relative to her commitment to employee development ("Boy, I've only been here one day and I am already getting a development plan!").

WHEN A LEADER SHARES THE RESULTS OF THE SELECTION PROCESS AND STARTS NEW HIRES ON THEIR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT:

NEW TEAM MEMBERS FEEL:

:: Confident that they can do the job.

:: Appreciative that the organization is committed to their success.

:: Motivated to develop and grow.

LEADERS FEEL:

:: Pleased that they can support the new hires' development and career growth.

:: That they have put the new hires on the path to greater job proficiency.

:: That they have made good hires.

GOOD BUSINESS

Given the growing costs of slow time to proficiency, decreasing employee engagement, and unwanted turnover in a tight labor market, organizations need to take action. While lengthy time to proficiency, low engagement, and turnover are costly, complex problems, they are fixable.

Figure 10 (on page 19) illustrates how the three leader strong start actions recommended in this paper target the problems of slow time to proficiency, decreased engagement, and early turnover. You will note that we have introduced an intermediary factor, "Confidence in Self, Boss, and Company," as the relationships between the fixes and costs are not always direct relationships. For example, a new hire's attitude toward his leader is positively affected by the leader clarifying job responsibilities and spelling out personal "hot buttons," the leader's efforts to help him make connections with other people who will help get him off to a strong start, and the leader's help in the creation of a development plan.

These efforts contribute to maintaining or enhancing the new hire's level of engagement, and help prevent him from leaving the organization.

The person's self-confidence, meanwhile, is enhanced through both Courageous Networking and the meeting with his leader about the selection process results—especially when the leader discusses the positive reasons why he was selected and how he is well-positioned for job success.

Leaders, of course, don't have the power to address all of the factors that can erode employee engagement and contribute to turnover. Some factors, such as a highly competitive job market, can siphon away valued employees regardless of what leaders do to accelerate time to proficiency. But when leaders don't take action to enact the fixes that minimize the costs of a slow start, they raise the likelihood that individuals will depart when they otherwise might have stayed—if they had gotten off to a strong start, become engaged in their jobs, and been satisfied with the job, their relationship with their leader, and the organization.

This being the case, the more proactive organizations and their leaders are in adopting the fixes described in this paper, the better. The stakes have never been higher for organizations to hire great people. If they want to keep those people and reap the rewards of the talent, knowledge, skills, and experience they bring to their new jobs, hiring them should be viewed only as a first step. Without support, especially from their leaders, even the best and brightest can stumble instead of getting off to the strong start that both they—and their organizations—need.

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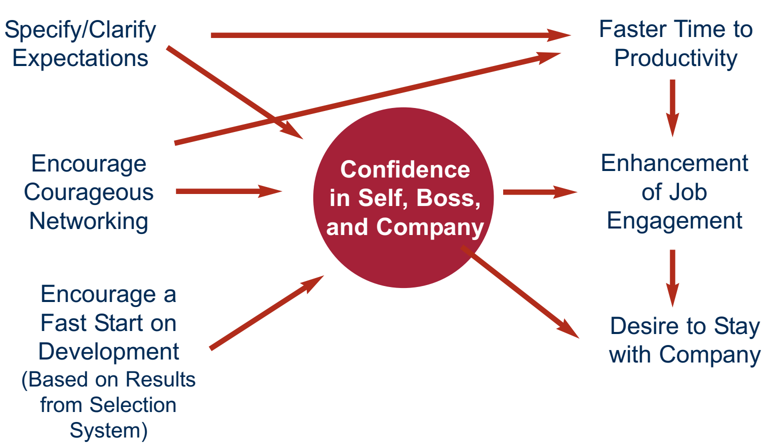
Note that what we've described in this paper has been primarily concerned with getting professionals and individual contributors off to a strong start. The same strong start actions are applicable to higher levels, as well, though some may be more appropriately taken by an executive coach, instead of a higher-level manager. In some cases, the leader's manager and an executive coach may both play roles in accelerating the leaders' time to proficiency.

Relationship Between the Three Things Leaders Can Do and Problem Areas



– Figure 10 –

OTHER THINGS THAT NEED TO BE IN PLACE FOR A STRONG START

Getting new team members off to a strong start and speeding their time to proficiency (and, by extension, improving employee engagement and retention) needs to begin with the basics—having an effective selection system that accurately identifies the best candidates, providing candidates with a realistic job preview so they'll know what to expect once they are in the job, offering competitive pay and benefits, giving leaders the skills they need to build trusting relationships with their people and maintain an engaging work environment, and having an orientation system that gives new team members the information they need to know about the job and the organization.

Most important of these are the selection system (hiring people who are a good fit with the organization, the job itself, and the job location) and the orientation process that provides the new team members with accurate information about the job and about the organization as a whole.

THE SPECIAL CHALLENGES OF GETTING NEW LEADERS AND EXECUTIVES OFF TO A STRONG START

In a survey by Korn/Ferry International, more than half of executives indicated that it took them three to five years to reach "maximum productivity" in their jobs. A large consumer goods company, meanwhile, found that more than half of its new frontline managers underperformed during their first year on the job. Why so long? Clearly one reason is that executives are not getting the support they need to start strong. In the same Korn/Ferry survey, just 30 percent of executives rated their organizations' on-boarding and assimilation process positively[14]. As these findings illustrate, there is much room for improvement in time to proficiency for newly appointed leaders—especially executives.

In the case of frontline leaders, many of these individuals may have been with the organization for an extended period of time, but are first-time leaders. As such, they may lack critical leadership skills and may also need to be oriented to their new organizational responsibilities more so than to the organization itself. DDI data on the job engagement of frontline leaders shows a 17-percent drop by end of their second year on the job.

Sally has been a star team member for five years. When her boss departs the organization, she seems to be the logical choice to step into the team leader role. But Sally has no experience as a leader and, what's more, she's now in the position of having to supervise her former peers, some of whom are close friends. With five years experience, Sally knows the organization. What she doesn't know, however, is how to be an effective leader. She needs to understand how her new role differs from her previous job and she needs to learn the specifics of the leadership role. To get her footing and become successful, Sally will need coaching from her boss and training to develop the necessary leadership skills.

For newly promoted executives, skills typically aren't the main consideration. Instead, the primary issue is described more in terms of "executive integration" or "executive assimilation," understanding the very different responsibilities that executives must shoulder (DDI has an experiential learning program, the Strategic Leadership Experience®, that raises awareness of the various roles—Strategist, Entrepreneur, Talent Advocate, etc.—that define a senior leadership position).

Newly appointed executives start their jobs at very high levels of engagement (Why wouldn't they?), but their engagement levels steadily fall off as they get into their jobs, often because of their frustrations in implementing their strategy. By the end of Year Two, their engagement has dropped 18 percent. For those who survive the first two years, their engagement level quickly goes back up to the level it was when they started.

New leaders and executives from the outside tend to have a more difficult time getting off to a strong start than those hired from within the organization. They must learn about how the new organization operates and adapt their leadership styles to drive results in the organization's culture.

THE SPECIAL CHALLENGES OF GETTING NEW LEADERS AND EXECUTIVES OFF TO A STRONG START (CONT'D)

Gene was a highly effective vice president when he was recruited to become the chief operating officer of a company in a different industry in which he had no experience. At his previous organization, his hard-charging style produced exceptional financial results and exemplary customer service. How will his style mesh with the culture of the new organization, which values employee quality of life as highly as it does "hitting the numbers?"

C-level turnover is a common phenomenon. It has been estimated that between 30 percent and 50 percent of newly hired executives will fail and depart within their first 18 months on the job at a fully loaded cost of up to 10 times their salary.[16] Another study set the executive failure rate at 64 percent for new executives hired from outside of their organizations.[17] One global company, Bristol-Myers Squibb, has estimated that the loss of one executive can result in a direct cost of $500,000.[18]

What do newly hired executives, such as Gene, need in order to quickly become fully proficient in their roles? They need the same three areas of support described in this paper—but focusing on different things—and often provided by an executive coach:

1. **Courageous Networking.** Just as with lower-level employees who need to be encouraged to be Courageous Networkers, new executives need specific information about their role and about the organization. They need to ask lots of questions of lots of people. (See sidebar, "Courageous Networking by Job Level," on page 15.)
2. **Understanding Expectations.** New executives must meet the needs of many constituencies that have very different ideas of what is important. One approach is to engage an executive coach who can interview board members, peers, subordinates, customers, and other important stakeholders, and build a clear picture of what is expected of the new executive. This coach also can help the executive plan how to close the gap between these expectations and the executive's perceptions and leadership style.
3. **Developing Weak Areas.** Even though they typically are paid a great deal of money and have years of experience, a new executive will not be perfect. The selection process a newly hired executive will have gone through will have surfaced areas for growth or change—often personality areas. An executive coach with access to selection data, particularly if the individual went through an assessment center, can use the insights to plan coaching discussions leading to behavior change.

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WITH A STRONG START, EVERYONE WINS

When an individual starts a new job, whether the job is a lower-level individual contributor position or a leadership role, he is typically enthusiastic about the opportunity. Getting a new hire off to a strong start is basically about preserving and leveraging that enthusiasm, and guiding the individual to early job success, so that he reaches job proficiency sooner, remains engaged in the job, and stays with the organization for the long term.

The expensive alternative? Disengaged employees, early turnover, and the need to start a costly hiring process all over again.

In other words, when a new hire starts strong, everyone wins—the individual and the organization.

FOOTNOTES

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