Fraternal Onboarding:
Developing Comprehensive Staff and Volunteer Training Programs
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Nearly all inter/national fraternal organizations employ professional staff and trained volunteers whose work includes supporting and advancing the efforts of local chapters. Additionally, host campuses employ full and part-time staff as well as graduate and undergraduate student workers who carry out the important responsibility of mentoring and advising fraternity men and sorority women on a daily basis. The importance of these front-line volunteers and staff cannot be overemphasized. While each comes to the job with their own experience, which for the majority includes collegiate fraternal affiliation and participation, it is not enough to assume their previous training has effectively prepared them for their new responsibilities.

Each fraternal organization and fraternity/sorority office has their own onboarding process, a program to bring new employees or volunteers into the organizational fold. Unfortunately, some do not have structures in place to do so effectively. Budget and philosophy restrictions aside, this is largely a result of a lack of knowledge and experience in what works, best practices, and applying the appropriate theories to orientation and training program design. Competent and comprehensively trained staff and volunteers can make the difference in propelling a chapter forward or leading its men or women in the wrong direction because of a lack of knowledge, skill, and ability on behalf of the support team.

Onboarding is “the process of helping new hires adjust to social and performance aspects of their new jobs quickly and smoothly” (Bauer, 2010). Onboarding is much larger than orientation and training, though. In fact, this ongoing process begins pre-hire—or selection in the case of volunteers—to 12 months or later post entry. A research-based model of onboarding (figure 1) shows the various elements of successful onboarding with new employees or volunteers going through each function of the equation and the organizational elements (e.g. training, support, recruitment, orientation) impacting success at each level.

Figure 1, Research-Based Onboarding Model (Bauer, 2010)
Effective onboarding transforms organizational outsiders into functioning organizational insiders (Bauer, 2006). This “organizational socialization” creates confidence, limited role ambiguity, feelings of acceptance by coworkers, and leads to enhanced job satisfaction, performance, organizational fit, and lower turnover (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Organizational socialization is the intersection of newcomer actions and the attempts of the organizational insiders to socialize the new employee. Bauer (2006) identifies three important factors in socializing employees, each easily encapsulated by a key question.

1. Task information: “How do I do this job well?”
2. Social information: “Do I fit in with my coworkers and feel accepted?”
3. Cultural information: “Do I understand the norms and expectations of this organization?”

Managers and new employee/volunteer trainers would do well to focus on these three areas when designing, carrying out, and evaluating their onboarding efforts.

Organizations typically use either an institutionalized or an individualized approach to socialization. The former includes step-by-step programs that isolate new employees from existing ones while teaching them their roles, norms of the organization, and how they are to behave. This model is prevalent in large companies and military operations. Individualized socialization uses more of a “sink or swim” approach of starting employees immediately in their new position and allowing them to figure out organizational values, norms, and expectations along the way (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).

Bauer and Erdogan (2011) argue for the inclusion of four key socialization tactics in onboarding—recruitment, realistic job previews, orientation programs, and organizational insiders—regardless of whether the organization utilizes the institutional, individual, or a hybrid-approach to socialization. Recruitment, finding the right employee-organization fit, should focus on forming realistic expectations and helping potential employees understand what the organization is really like. For fraternal organizations this might include targeted sessions at conclaves or regional events, interactions with existing staff and volunteers, and through internships and lower-level volunteer assignments. Realistic job previews provide as much accurate information as possible before work starts. This includes more than a listing of qualifications, responsibilities, and competencies; they could include detailed “day/semester/year in the life” expositions, ride-along assignments, and implementing the basics with newcomers prior to their first day on the job. Orientation programs, which may last from a few hours to several months, teach employees about the goals and history of the organization and communicates its power structure. Organizational insiders can be utilized as formal mentors and provide valuable social interactions between newcomers and veterans. Staff retreats, formal outings, living arrangements (e.g. pairing new and veteran consultants), and the adoption of core covenants (see Riley, 1993 or Smith, 2013 presentation materials) are additional examples of utilizing organizational insiders. Effectively employing these tactics positively impacts newcomer adjustment and results in role clarity, self-efficacy of new employees, acceptance by organizational insiders, and all important knowledge of organizational culture (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).

The onboarding and organizational socialization literature provides numerous resources for assessing your own organization’s efforts and applying best practices (Bauer, 2010; see also Smith, 2013 presentation materials). As the staff member primarily responsible for the onboarding process of entry level employees of my own organization, I would also provide the following lessons learned.
1. New employee fit should be considered above all else. Differentiate between inherent characteristics and learned behaviors and skills. This could be done through developing/implementing a competency framework, normalizing questions and ratings for interviews, and identifying desirable characteristics. Beyond eligibility criteria, clearly describe what your team is looking for and will respond to is key in selecting new team members. Also, look to the future, are you hiring people that only fit your immediate opening or are you keeping an eye on potential for advancement?

2. When it comes to orientation and training, repetition of key information is welcomed and effective. Intentionally integrate learning theories in your training program, like the tell-show-do-apply model. The overall new employee training schedule uses this approach, both in the placement of topics on the training calendar, and in how information is presented and used prior-to, during, and following each topic’s training session. Key information and concepts are presented early in the training, linked to the consultant’s specialty area and responsibilities in the middle, and tested through simulations and scenarios closer to the end. If possible, provide a ride-along experience (e.g. student meeting, consultation, presentation) where new employees gain the experience of doing the job, with the security of having an experienced team member or supervisor there to assist and provide valuable feedback and coaching on both process and end result.

3. Consider the return on investment related to the length of your training program, what is included, and the role of the employee. How better prepared may your new team members be if you were to add two more weeks of training or include attendance in another professional development opportunity? A longer training program means more time and costs on the front end but may also equate to saved time and dollars in management and corrected mistakes later on.

4. Provide new employees with opportunities to immediately contribute to the team and the work of the organization. This might include projects and focus groups that maximize their connection with the current undergraduate experience. At Sigma Nu, we involve new consultants in the review and creation of new resources for students and chapters, tap into their close connections with their own chapters to pilot ideas, and solicit their immediate feedback on existing and new initiatives. Creating a balance between “trust the process” and immediate opportunities to provide feedback and inspire change is a powerful tool for creating buy-in and connection to the work.

5. Develop, discuss, and regularly revisit your team’s philosophy. Engaging new employees pre-hire, during orientation, and throughout their time on staff in an ongoing conversation about the mutual expectations of team members and breaking superficial walls created by tenure and position empower even the newest team member to bring forward new ideas, enforce accountability, and take ownership in results (see Core Covenant in Smith, 2013 presentation materials). Sigma Nu’s team spends time at regular intervals each year recommitting to a workplace and customer service philosophy. This Core Covenant includes both shared values and exposition on how those values are carried out in our daily work. Understanding, agreement, and buy-in by every team member means that everyone can speak to the philosophy and point to examples of it in action in their daily life. Present the philosophy—both in writing and by way of explanation—to candidates during the interview process. Providing real-life examples, allow them to ask questions, and ask for their initial reactions and buy-in. Talk about your philosophy early on in the training, give each employee a copy, prominently display copies in the workplace, and allow new employees to dissect and understand the philosophy with the assistance of veteran team members.
Effective onboarding is all the more important in an industry such as ours where high turnover is the norm and where the actions of front-line employees and volunteers may arguably have more day-to-day and long-term impact than the deans, executives, and board members they represent. Those responsible for the hiring, training, and supervision of new employees and volunteers would benefit from a review of the onboarding literature and regular audits of their own programs and tactics.

References


Suggested Reading


