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Viewpoint

Onboarding is a change

Applying change management model ADKAR to onboarding

Mohan Karambelkar and Shubhasheesh Bhattacharya

O nboarding is a crucial step for an employee, as well as an employer, but it is often neglected by both. In some organizations, onboarding is viewed as the training of a newcomer or induction or a checklist to tick for the completion of joining formalities or onboarding may go overboard with information overload. These approaches will not be helpful either to a new employee or to an organization. It can impact the bottom-line of the organization by causing a delay in making a new employee productive and by creating a low level of engagement and retention. The better approach can be treating onboarding as a change and applying the change management process. There is a big change for the new employee when he or she joins any organization. For the organization or department or team, it is an adopting of a new person. An onboarding process smooths the experience for both.

Onboarding

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, "Onboarding is the process by which new hires get acclimatized to all aspects of their jobs rapidly and easily, and learn the knowledge, skills, abilities (KSA) and behaviors required to function effectively within an organization".

Onboarding connects several Human Resource (HR) processes. It starts with inputs from recruitment and selection process, then uses training, coaching, and mentoring to build required KSA. For tracking the progress and achievement, performance management process, and reward and recognition process are used. The feedback mechanism of performance management processes is utilized to assess the competence and readiness to become a full-fledged employee. Process areas like communication and collaboration impact onboarding. New staff gets a glimpse of the strategic direction of the organization during onboarding. HR professionals and line managers should recognize onboarding as key to a successful talent management strategy.

Awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement – change management model

The change management model ADKAR (awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement) developed by PROSCI is a popular model. For organization level change, there is a need for project or program management to address technical and logistic requirements and change management to address human aspects. ADKAR gels well with project management. The model can be applicable to make a successful change for one person or 20 people or 1,000 people or for the whole organization. This can be used for onboarding of one person or several new employees.

This model has five phases awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement. This is mapped against the project phases – requirement, design, implementation, and

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post-implementation. The phases of change management and project management and their mapping are shown in Table I.

Change management aspects

Awareness

The first phase is to make new staff aware of how the organization is great to work with and how the role of new staff is important. Awareness is to be generated about the organization's vision, mission, values, and culture. This phase can include a brief history of the organization and the present organizational structure. The person presenting the information should have credibility. It is good to arrange an event so that it is a memorable day for the new staff. Sponsorship may be needed for the event.

The line manager should be aware of the new staff joining him or her in terms of skills as well as background. This can help to analyze onboarding requirements. The onboarding plan should ensure timely provision of key information without overloading. Communication and access to information are key for the awareness phase.

Desire

At the time of joining the organization, new staff will have high motivation owing to successful selection and may have a fear of the unknown because of being in a new workplace. To improve or sustain motivation and reduce anxiety, the manager should set the context right and explain the role clearly to set expectations. During the desire phase, the manager should highlight opportunities and support:

- means to gain knowledge and experience and have career growth;
- assistance for education, certifications, and professional growth;
- social events and socialization opportunities;
- access to information and resources; and
- availability of coach and mentor.

This brings clarity on "What Is It For Me?" (WIIFM).

Knowledge

This is a confidence building phase. New employee picks-up knowledge about processes and products. This can be a mix of online courses, mentoring, formal classroom training, and coaching. This is planned based on knowledge gap. Sufficient resources, adequate time, and timely feedback are provided. Processes and standards are implemented as a system using tools. Training covers use of system and tools. Understanding on compliance required to organization's process and standards is developed.

Besides operational aspects, the organization also trains employees on code of conduct, legal requirements, policies, ethics, and values. The emphasis is to have a good understanding of compliance to policies, rules, law and regulations, and desired behavior.

Table I	Phases of change management and project management and activities linked to change			
ADKAR phases	*Change management*	*Project phases*	*Project management*	*Key activities related to change*
1	Awareness	1	Requirements	Communication, Sponsorship
2	Desire	2	Design	Coaching, Resistance/Stress Management
3	Knowledge	3	Implementation	Coaching, Mentoring, and Training
4	Ability			
5	Reinforcement	4	Post-implementation	Coaching, Sponsorship

Ability

This is a capacity building phase. New employee needs to apply knowledge and demonstrate capability to take up the role and responsibilities of the job. Like the knowledge phase, needed resources, time, and feedback are provided. The physical, psychological, and intellectual abilities are matched to the demand of the job. Coaching and mentoring can be helpful to build abilities. The new employee establishes connections with the team and colleagues and gets accustomed to the culture.

Reinforcement

This is a sustainability building phase. The new employee realizes his or her accountability toward the job. Performance management system and rewards and recognition program help the reinforcement. Celebration for successful completion of the probationary period will make new employees maintain motivation to perform well in the job.

Project management aspects

Good project management focuses on different dimensions – planning, scheduling and monitoring, managing budget, scope and risks, and considering stakeholders involvement. Formal and proactive onboarding needs project management.

Requirements

Information gathered about new staff during recruitment and selection process will give inputs to the onboarding requirements especially the knowledge and ability gaps. A checklist will be useful to define requirements. However, the requirement should not be restricted to a checklist. The resources and timeline are worked out. The resources include physical resources like a place to sit, computer, stationery, and also human resources people need to meet or stakeholders involved. A list of activities is prepared as per timeline on day 1, within first week, within 1 month, and within 3 months. The initial interaction with new staff will confirm the onboarding requirements in terms of training, coaching, and mentoring.

Design

Every person is unique. Onboarding should be customized to a person's needs. New staff will be delighted when a printed unique onboarding program is given. Milestones and review or feedback points are decided. Some organizations use 30-60-90-day checklists. However, flexibility is important for designing the onboarding program.

Implementation

This is the execution of the plan and design. If values of an organization are taught during awareness, then new staff needs to experience the manifestation of those values. Timely provision of help, information, and resources will give good experience.

Post-implementation

What went well and what went wrong will provide learning. Reinforcement happens at this phase. It is good to repeat good experiences.

Caution from the ADKAR model

■ *Follow the phases*: For a successful onboarding, the program should follow the phases. If the manager says "My new staff needs just on-the-job training" (direct ability phase), new staff may have a very stressful period and will not be productive. The progressive nature of the model makes it holistic and stress-free.

■ *Flexibility*: Not everyone learns and adopts at the same pace. Hence, it is necessary to have flexibility and customization to suit the requirements of new staff.

Conclusion

Irrespective of size, any organization will have new recruits and onboarding is a necessity. Besides new recruits, the foreign posting of staff or acquisition of an organization will require onboarding. A carefully custom designed onboarding process can make a new employee engaged and committed, resulting in higher productivity. Higher retention brings lower turnover cost. Thus, onboarding has strategic importance. A change model ADKAR can bring in change management and project management aspects to make systematic and proactive onboarding.

Reference

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