

Cooperative Grocer

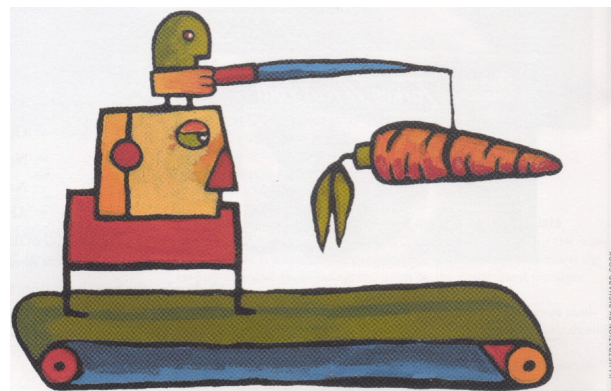
FOR RETAILERS AND COOPERATORS

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Seize The Moment: A narrative for successfully orienting new staff

BY ALLEN SEIDNER

"I'm very impressed with your experience and your attitude, Yung Wannabee, and I think you'll find yourself an easy fit as a member of our prepared foods team. I'm happy to extend you an offer at the training wage we discussed and, if you can stick around a bit longer, I'd like to tell you what I know about building a successful career here."



The hiring of each new staff member is a precious opportunity to add a fresh dose of the right spirit, energy and work ethic to your department. As prepared foods leader and human resources director at an independent natural foods store near Chicago, I realized there was an invaluable window of opportunity to successfully orient new hires, for which I developed a "stump conversation."

I knew that moment in which I was offering someone a job was the moment in which I had that person's best attention. Once they began their training, there would be no further opportunity for this 45-minute one-on-one conversation about my vision for the department, our standards of excellence, my role as a leader and not a babysitter, and how to keep from violating my key peeves.

New staff started life in our department with a very clear sense of the bigger picture, their starting role in it, and the potential for career advancement. Much of the conversation was on two key points: our requirement that a trainee demonstrate significant competence within 30 days, and an explanation of our department's merit pay system. By the time they clocked in for their first shift they knew their role – and the only way to increase their wage – was to learn their new job, become a teacher to other staff, and to keep learning.

If you're interested in helping each of your valuable new hires get off on the right foot and see more of them excel long after their initial training is complete, you might find helpful this abridged and one-sided version of my new hire narrative.

Introductory period scrutiny

"Great! As soon as your two weeks are up at the Yuppie Grill, we'll put you on the schedule to train. I want to tell you, Yung, we look carefully to find great candidates for positions in our department. I review a dozen applications and interview only three or four of them to find a quality new hire. I think you're going to love being surrounded by smart, fun, hard-working people in this high-energy environment.

"This team can't wait to have another capable, fully trained partner. We're all on your side, but there is one thing I need to be clear about. And this is something I say to everyone who

begins work here, so it's not personal: We use our 30-day intro period to be certain we've made a good hiring decision and to weed out mediocre performers. For every four people who start work in this department, one person does not complete the 30-day intro period. I don't expect this will come up for you, but I owe you clarity on how seriously I take my responsibility to hire only the best staff members.

"During this first month, we're checking each other out and we're each free to walk away with no hard feelings. If you wake up one morning and decide that working here is not what you thought it would be, you're free to resign with no hard feelings. We only want you to be here if you really want to be here. While you're in the trial period, you'll get lots of feedback and counsel on all aspects of your work. If we're having minor problems with your performance or attitude, we'll bring them to your attention. We don't expect perfection, or that you'll learn the entirety of your new job during your intro period. We're all still learning, and our expectation is that you'll never be done learning here either. These first 30 days are for both of us to make sure that your joining this team is a really good fit. And all we need to decide that is to gain a clear sense that have the brains, attitude, commitment and passion to do consistently good work.

"If, during your intro period, we should come to believe that your ability to excel here is unlikely, I will offer you as gracious an exit as possible. Most of the time, this doesn't come up, but sometimes things just don't work out. I'm not trying to put any added pressure on you, but I need you to know that this new position isn't yours until your 30-day intro period is completed.

"At the end of your trial period, we'll sit down for a formal evaluation, and you'll get your only automatic raise. From then on, you're a regular member of the team and our commitment to one another is higher. If we have any problems with your work, we'll talk with you about it. We'll talk a second time and document conversations on paper, if we need to. So long as you consistently bring a good attitude and participate in this team's growth we will never terminate your employment without first bringing problems to your attention and giving you the fullest possible chance to fix or overcome them. (Of course, this wouldn't include one of the major violations listed in your handbook, such as stealing, fighting or being under the influence at work.) Once you're a member of our team, one of our primary goals will be to help you increase your value by continually giving you new opportunities and new responsibilities. It's what keeps people happy in their work – and in our department, it's how you grow your wage.

"And once your intro period is over, Yung, we similarly expect a higher commitment from you. If you're having a problem here at work, we expect that you'll bring it directly to one of us on the deli leadership team. We expect that you will be a solution-oriented participating member of our team, using productive avenues for fixing and improving things – and not gossiping or complaining about things privately. None of us, especially myself, is ever done learning how to do our jobs better. And we all need to hear and make use of constructive criticism.

"Finally, just as I'm waiting for you to finish out your two weeks notice at the Yuppie Grill, we expect you'll give our team the same respect if you should someday decide to leave us. You will soon become a highly trained and valued member of our team, and we really need two weeks' notice to adjust to anyone's departure.

It's your job to learn your job

"Of course, it's totally in my interest that you succeed. And I have every confidence that you will be successful and happy working here. I'm going to give you the best training I can, but it will never be as good as I'd like. I'm hooking you up to train with my most patient and articulate staff members, and we have training documents to help organize the information you need to learn. But, I need to remind you that it's your job to learn your new job. Be a good listener and observer. Ask questions, so that you know not only what and how we do something, but why we do it. Stick to your trainer like glue. When your trainer takes her dinner break, you'll take your dinner break. (We'll be buying all your meals while you're training, by the way. It's to welcome you, to help you get by on our training wage, and to encourage you to become familiar with our deli foods!)

"New staff members bring fresh eyes, and suggestions are the lifeblood of our department's continuous improvement. But while you're in training, we'll ask that you just focus on learning your new job. Try and learn it as it's being taught. A couple weeks from now, once you've learned your job, we'll invite you to sit down and improve our training materials. You'll also find that our daily department pow-wows are an excellent forum for bringing an idea or problem to

the team's attention. I'll check in regularly with you, your trainers and co-workers during your training. If you ever feel like you're not getting the quality or amount of training you need, come and talk to me right away. It's your job to learn your new job -- and it's my job to make sure you're getting training that works for you.

Pay for performance

"At the end of your introductory period, we'll meet to evaluate your performance, and we'll bump your wage up from the training wage. After that we'll sit down for an evaluation every six months. So that you have clarity on how your work will be evaluated, copies of our performance evaluation form and pay scales for each of our positions are in your folder.

"The other thing you need to know is that our department's ability to give raises is entirely dependent on our department's growth and profitability. We value seniority, but we don't give raises just for seniority. When we have a wage review, I'll be looking for us to identify new contributions you've made to the department over the previous six months. If you and I can't point to any important new skills or contributions on your part, if you've been doing the same good job you were six months before, you get to keep your job. But you don't get a raise.

Once you've learned the job you're being hired for, there are limitless ways to keep learning and growing here. You can learn additional positions, how to place orders, revise menus, cost out recipes, work on the computer, become a trainer, etc. We cannot grow this department and everyone's wages without everyone in the department participating in its growth. I can't do it alone and I don't want to. I don't want you to compete with anyone except yourself. It's not hard to get a raise every six months here. You just have to remember that none of us is ever done growing and training, and that we are each a student and a teacher every day.

Avoid under-performers

"As I said earlier, Yung, we're a bit tougher on our newest staff members. Once you've shown excellent capabilities and have completed your intro period, we try to work with the future challenges that sometimes come up for people. I'm not pretending you will see exceptional work from every single person all the time. That's the goal, the expectation, and you will see it from most people most of the time. But there may be a weekend evening shift when you observe someone being less productive than they obviously could be, or abusing our break policy, or otherwise behaving in a way that doesn't serve the department. You'll want to steer clear of those behaviors and those individuals. We're working to grow those few people through their challenges, but we do not invest the same kind of energy in trainees.

"Training is a large enough investment all by itself, and we simply can't afford to risk it on anyone who demonstrates problems right off the bat. So, you'll want to associate with the wonderful people I'm scheduling you to train with, and all the other allies who are a force for fun and success in this deli. After all, this needs to be a work place where people happen to have fun, not a fun place where people happen to work.

We're all doing it

"It sounds to me, Yung, like you have a good sense about how and why our standards are high, and I'm psyched that you look forward to being a part of it! Having high standards isn't nearly as hard as it can sound because, well, we're all doing it. You'll be surrounded by excellence in food, service, merchandising, communications, financial success...and it's very motivating -- even to me. Unless you have any more questions, I'm ready to get you in here. Come, I'll introduce you to some of your new co-workers on your way out!"