

Beyond Orientation: Designing Onboarding that Connects, Inspires, and Builds Culture

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Making Connections

A. Reflection

Reflect on your first 90 days in your current role. Remember key moments that shaped how you felt about your organization:

1. What moment made you feel most connected?
2. What moment made you feel least connected?
3. How can you *intentionally* create those positive moments for others?

B. Examples of connection-building

1. Pre-Start Warm Welcome

New hires receive a welcome package a week before their start date. It includes:

- A handwritten card from their team
- A branded water bottle and journal
- A short video message from the Agency Director
- A “First Week Map” outlining what to expect

2. Connection with People

- “Coffee Chats Passport” – Give new hires a “passport” with names of 5–8 colleagues across departments. Each check-in (15–20 min casual chat) earns a stamp. Goal: complete within the first 60 days.
- Buddy System – Pair each new hire with a peer (not their supervisor) who can answer informal questions, offer support, and share organizational culture tips.
- Speed Networking – Host a structured 30–45 minute session where new hires rotate every 5 minutes to meet staff from different teams.

3. Connection with Mission & Values

- Story Circles – Invite seasoned staff to share short stories about when they felt most proud to work there. Then, ask new hires to share what drew them to join.
- Mission-in-Action Tour – Instead of a building tour, frame it around the mission: show how each department contributes to impact.

- Values Bingo – Create a bingo card with values-related prompts (“Find someone who solved a problem creatively this month”). New hires fill it in by talking with colleagues.

4. Connection with Team Culture

- Team Origin Map – On a big map (physical or digital), have everyone mark where they’re from and share one personal tidbit. Builds a quick sense of shared humanity.
- Two Truths and a Myth (about the job/department) – Lighthearted way for the team to share experiences and quirks of their work.
- Lunch & Learn Rotation – Schedule informal lunchtime sessions where different departments share what they do and how they connect to the whole.

5. Connection through Shared Experience

- Collaborative Challenge – A fun, low-stakes group activity (like solving a riddle, trivia about the organization, or a short problem-solving task) that includes both new and veteran staff.
- Photo Wall / Slack Intro Thread – Invite new hires to post a short bio and fun photo; encourage colleagues to comment with a “welcome” or something they have in common.
- First-Week Snapshot – Have the new hire and their team create a short, lighthearted group photo or video intro to share internally.

6. Connection to Well-being and Support

- Personal Resource Map – A facilitated activity where new hires map who they can go to for specific support (tech help, HR, supervisor, peer buddy, wellness resources).
- “Ask Me Anything” Panel – A no-judgment session with a panel of staff at different levels who answer candid questions about how things really work.

C. Your small group ideas for connection-building:

Breaking Down Silos

- **Communicate the unified vision:** From day one, onboarding should clearly and consistently communicate the company's mission, values, and strategy.
 - This helps new hires see how their work supports shared goals, preventing them from becoming insular.
- **Foster cross-functional awareness:** A structured onboarding process can introduce new hires to representatives and leaders from different departments. This helps them learn about other functions and builds their network beyond their immediate team.
 - *Cross-Functional Story Panels*
During onboarding, invite a small panel of staff from different departments to share short “day-in-the-life” stories, including how their work connects to others. Emphasize real examples where collaboration made a difference.
 - *“Passport to the Organization” Challenge*
Give each new hire a “passport” booklet. They collect stamps/stickers by visiting or virtually connecting with different departments during their first month. To “earn” a stamp, they ask about that team’s biggest win or challenge. This creates organic cross-team conversations.
 - *Team Scavenger Hunt*
Create a list of clues that can only be solved by reaching out to different departments. Example: “Find someone who works with data every day” or “Which department has the office mascot?”
 - *Mix & Match Bingo*
Create a bingo card with boxes like “Knows how to use Salesforce,” “Has worked with clients,” or “Has been on a cross-departmental project.” New hires mingle with staff to find matches across teams

- **Assign cross-departmental buddies or mentors:**
 - Pairing new hires with a mentor from another department helps them navigate the organization's dynamics and forge valuable cross-functional relationships.
 - *This is especially helpful for remote and hybrid teams.*
- **Promote collaboration tools:**
 - Use onboarding to train new employees on a centralized suite of communication and project management tools.
 - This establishes a single source of truth for information and processes, breaking down technical barriers.
- **Involve new hires in cross-functional projects:**
 - Assigning new employees to a group that includes members from different departments creates a shared purpose from the beginning, building bridges and facilitating the exchange of diverse perspectives.
 - Give new hires a mini-project to work on in small groups, each person paired with a mentor from a different department. The project doesn't have to be big — e.g., "Redesign the break room bulletin board," or "Suggest a new way to celebrate staff wins." It fosters collaboration and fun.

Building Culture from Day One

Why Focus on Culture?

- **First impressions last.** New employees quickly decide if the organization's values align with their own.
- **Culture is learned through experience.** Mission statements and policies are important, but what people see, hear, and feel *daily* matters more.
- **A strong cultural introduction builds connection, retention, and engagement.**

Actionable Ideas for Leaders

1. Show, Don't Just Tell

- **Stories of Impact:** Share real stories about clients, staff, or community partnerships that show your values in action.
- **Cultural Symbols:** Explain meaningful traditions, rituals, or language used in the organization.

2. Create Intentional First Connections

- **Culture Ambassadors:** Pair new hires with staff who embody the organization's values.
- **Welcome Rounds:** Have leaders personally greet new hires and share one way they live the mission in their role.

3. Make Values Visible

- **Values in Action:** Tie daily decisions and practices back to organizational values in staff meetings.
- **Artifacts:** Display photos, quotes, or project highlights that reflect the mission.

4. Invite Participation Early

- **Shadowing & Observation:** Let new hires sit in on client meetings, community events, or board discussions.
- **Micro-Projects:** Give them small, mission-driven tasks where they can contribute quickly.

5. Encourage Questions

- **Culture Q&A:** Dedicate time in onboarding for “What does this mean here?” questions.
- **No Wrong Question Rule:** Normalize curiosity about norms and expectations.

6. Share the “Unwritten Rules”

- Every organization has informal practices (meeting etiquette, how decisions are really made, how staff celebrate successes).
- Make the implicit explicit—help new hires avoid unnecessary missteps.

7. Build Belonging

- **Social Welcome:** Schedule informal coffee chats, lunches, or team gatherings.
- **Highlight Diversity & Inclusion:** Show how different voices and perspectives are valued.

8. Keep Culture Conversations Going

- **Check-ins:** Ask in 30-60-90 day reviews what they are learning about the culture.
- **Feedback Loop:** Encourage new hires to share fresh observations about what they notice in practice vs. what’s written.

Quick Checklist for Leaders

- Did I personally welcome the new hire?
- Have I shared a story that illustrates our values?
- Did I connect them with a culture ambassador?
- Have I made space for them to ask about norms and expectations?
- Did I help them see how their role connects to the mission?

Remember:

Culture isn’t taught in a handbook—it’s lived, observed, and reinforced through everyday actions. Leaders set the tone.

The 5 Questions Every Onboarding Program Must Answer

1. What do you believe in around here?

- **Meaning:** This question focuses on the company's values and culture.
 - **Onboarding Goal:** New hires need to understand the company's mission, vision, and core principles to feel integrated and aligned with the organization's ethos.
 - This is the beginning of orienting new hires into the culture of the organization. As early as possible a new employee wants to know:
 - who OR WHAT gets rewarded
 - how decisions get made
 - how problems get resolved
- When employees strongly agree that they have a good understanding of "how we do things at this organization," they are 4.7 times more likely to strongly agree their onboarding process was exceptional.

2. What is my role?

- **Meaning:** This addresses the new hire's responsibilities and expectations in their specific position.
- **Onboarding Goal:** Providing clarity on job duties ensures that employees understand what they are supposed to do and how to do it, preventing confusion and setting clear performance standards.
- When employees strongly agree they are confident in their ability to excel in their role, they are 1.8 times more likely to strongly agree their onboarding process was exceptional.

3. Who are my partners?

- **Meaning:** This concerns the relationships the new hire will have with their team members, colleagues, and other stakeholders.
- **Onboarding Goal:** Fostering connections and a sense of belonging helps new employees integrate into the team and build the relationships necessary for collaboration.
- People perform at their best when they respect the people they are working with and trust that they also are going to perform at their best.
- Building trust takes time, but there's much that managers and organizations can do to develop trust and collaboration between new employees and their teams.

- When employees strongly agree they have partners they can always rely on at work, they are 1.9 times more likely to strongly agree their onboarding process was exceptional.

4. What are my strengths?

- **Meaning:** This question relates to the unique talents and contributions the new hire brings to the table.
- **Onboarding Goal:** Recognizing and leveraging an employee's strengths builds their confidence and helps them see how their individual skills add value to the organization.
- Employees who strongly agree they can apply their strengths every day at work are 3.5 times more likely to strongly agree their onboarding process was exceptional.

5. What does my future here look like?

- **Meaning:** This focuses on the new hire's long-term career path, growth opportunities, and development within the company.
- **Onboarding Goal:** Highlighting future potential and providing a sense of direction gives new hires a reason to commit to the organization and encourages long-term retention.
- New employees arrive at the office filled with high expectations. But those positive feelings evaporate if they gradually realize they aren't going anywhere.
- For this reason, a path for future growth must be front and center throughout their onboarding journey.
- Employees who strongly agree they have a clear plan for their professional development are 3.5 times more likely to strongly agree that their onboarding process was exceptional.

One Next Step

Identify **one concrete action** you will take **in the next 30 days** to improve your onboarding process.

My one next step is:

Why this matters:

Accountability partner (optional):
