After Courting your Exceptional Talent and They Say "I-do" Plan and Execute That Awesome Honeymoon Let's Talk Onboarding.

By Tim Kahms, The Manufacturing Leadership Recruiter

"Hi there and welcome. If you're reading this then you've been hired at Percolate. Congratulations and great work, you must be awesome. Prepare to be challenged, inspired, rewarded and transformed."

Wow…this is the first thing that new employees see their first day of work at Percolate, a company with a best-in-class, comprehensive on-boarding program.

How was your first day at your company? …how were you feeling? …were you nervous? Excited? Both? Who greeted you? Who helped set you up? How did it make you feel about your new family?

How did you feel after your first day? Excited, floored by the reception you'd received and vision for your new work home? How they engaged in a meaningful way on day one? If you answered these questions in the affirmative, good for you. If your experience was anything like what most new employees go through in their first days, probably not. You were likely ushered into a conference room and told to complete a mountain of paperwork focused on remaining compliant with various employment laws and regulations.

Don't treat your newly hired, excited, future star like most organizations treat their new-hires, by either squelching their excitement with a mountain of boring orientation paperwork or throwing them into the deep-end with no preparation. Both approaches are a recipe for rapid turnover.

You've put in considerable effort, time and expense to land this "top-performer", don't blow it now.

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~ Day One @ Percolate

Courtship vs. Marriage

Isn't it obvious to say that the key to a successful marriage is to put as much, if not more, effort into the marriage as you would the courtship and engagement? We would all agree that it's important to "keep the romance alive" in the relationship, yet I see far too many leaders (and recruiters for that matter) forget this simple advice when it comes their newly hired employees.

As I mentioned previously, if you truly want to build a team of top-performers, then you must face the hard truth that you must not only recruit top-performers who are already in committed long-term relationships with their employers, but to identify their career wounds, illuminate their opportunity gaps, and present your Employer Value Proposition (EVP) as a 'no- brainer' opportunity for them to self-actualize.

...and even if you successfully do all of these things, you still have to contend with their soon-to-be 'former lover' making last-minute, desperate entreaties to "Please stay...I'll do whatever it takes. I'll change I swear!"

...and don't forget about the other potential suiters who come out of the woodwork when they realize your exceptional performer is thinking about making a change. The day your recruiter makes that fateful call to your him/her and intrigues them just enough to lean-in and consider leaving their situation, a subtle mental shift happens, and they are now 'in-play.' The clock starts ticking, and just because you were the one to set things in motion, doesn't mean you will be the winner of this very serious game.

So why, oh why do the hiring managers who have done everything right during the courtship phase, let things fall apart the minute their superstar says, "I do?"

LET'S TALK ON-BOARDING
The Honeymoon

On-boarding, and it's first cousin retention, are often-times forgotten about in the excitement of the hunt and hire. Too many times I've seen hiring managers who, once they've gotten their hires butt to hit the seat their first day, move on to the next thing or next fire to put out. That's the summary of the 'hunt-kill' and move-on mentality that creates career wounds from the very first day. As any good marriage counselor will tell you, the work starts when the ring goes on the finger, but the real work starts on the first day of the honeymoon.

To drive my point home ever further, consider these facts from an Aberdeen Group study:
- Companies that excel at on-boarding and employee retention are 2.5 times the revenue growth and 1.9 times the profit margin of companies who struggle with these two critical skills.
- Companies with strong on-boarding programs have 62% of their new- hires meet their first performance milestone on time, and 91% of those employees were still a part of the company after their first year.
- In contrast, the companies with poor or no on-boarding programs only have 17% of their new-hires meet their first milestone on time, and only 30% of them remained at the end of the first year.
- Also, according to the Aberdeen Group (I realize I'm quoting them a lot), you can expect to lose 1 in 6 new-hires within their first four months, and according to The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), nearly 90% of new-hires decide whether to stay or go with their new employers within the first six months. The cost of mis-hires is exorbitant…and unfortunately an all-to-common yet preventable condition of the current hiring environment (see You Can't Afford a Mis-Hire)

What happens when that Exceptional-Superstar of yours realizes that the song and dance you did during the interview process was just that, a song and dance?

As a seasoned headhunter who has been through the wars, I know from years of personal experience that companies are at their most vulnerable to losing key personnel within their first few months of starting employment. I'll even fill you in on what happens to be one of my secret weapons. I have search agents on LinkedIn that tell me when an manufacturing leadership professional starts a new job, and I make sure that myself or someone from my team reaches out to them within their first few months.

Do they feel disappointed? Are they let down after being promised the moon? Are they coming to realize buyer's remorse?

Why? Often-times my clients, who have a more contemporary view on recruitment, will take advantage of their competitor's mis-steps and opportunistically scoop up elite talent.

All's fair in love and war, right?

During an Elite Leadership pro's crucial first few months of employment, you're still selling. Your new-hire doesn't have much invested yet, and they're watching to see how committed you are to their long-term success. Remember and reinforce your Employer Value Proposition and remember that your primary role as leader is to enable your team-members to self-actualize. Be sure to create an environment that will enable them to achieve their personal and career goals within your four walls, and you will be the beneficiary of their rise to stardom.

Don't lose your best VP, Director, or Plant manager when I come calling with a more enticing opportunity. Incorporate these best practices into your company's on-boarding process, and you can increase your chances by 58% that your best employees will still be with your company after the three-year mark (The Wynhurst Group).

Besides...

You've already cut your back up candidate loose, and do you really want to start that tough search and arduous interview process over again? Besides, given that I provide my clients up to a full 1-year guarantee, you can see why I'm such an advocate for a strong on-boarding process? I've got skin in the game! ...I don't like having to do the same work twice.

To ensure that you have a rock solid on-boarding process, you must first realize that for up to a full-year after a new-hire starts, they go through a process called Organizational Socialization, which is just a fancy name for the process by which one passes from being an Outsider to an Insider.

In 2007, Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker published *Newcomer Adjustment During Organizational Socialization: A Meta-Analytic Review of Antecedents, Outcomes, and Methods* in which they pulled together and analyzed all existing peer-reviewed research on on-boarding. They integrated the findings of the best 70 scientific studies conducted with over 12,000 people and built a model to explain what helps people adjust to a new job. They found that proper on-boarding should aim to provide three things:

- Clarity
- Confidence
- Connectedness

All on-boarding should be viewed through these 3C's, and if an on-boarding task doesn't add to at least one of these three pillars, you should consider tossing it out.

Early On-Boarding - If you've implemented our best practices during the offer stage, you should have maintained open lines of communication from the moment your Superstar accepts your offer to the moment their butt hits the seat on day one. Send them a welcome pack, including information on your company's history, values and what to expect on the first day, first week and first month of work. Provide access to your employee portal, where they can fill out paperwork, sign up for keycard access, and any other logistical details that get in the way of hitting the ground running their first day. **Reduce first day bureaucratic stress as much as possible.**

On-Boarding Template - On-boarding should be clean and consistent, and a template or a checklist helps you do just that. Create a Trello board template to outline the all the steps involved in your on-boarding process and create a copy for your new-hires so they can get a feel for the upcoming weeks. In this example [CLICK HERE], you will see several lists; on the "To Do" list, it will be the new-hire's responsibility to go through each card, completing the required paperwork or enrolling in the appropriate program, and then mark off check-listed cards to "Done." The "Before First Day" list isn't for the new hire at all, as it lists the setup work done by the you and the on-boarding team, but it gives your new-hire insight into everything that's been prepared for their arrival. The other lists are self-explanatory.

Be Crystal-Clear About the Role - Make sure that, all the way from the interview process through the first day, your superstar is crystal-clear on the role they've accepted. On their first day, invest the time to ensure they are brought up to speed on exactly what is expected of them. what their priorities should be, as well as any constraints on them that they need to be aware of (budget, approvals, other stakeholders). Make sure they understand your culture, and that you will protect that culture at all costs. They need to know what's expected in terms of values and DNA. What behavior is not tolerated? What does good behavior look like? How do your values manifest in the workplace? Do they understand that the embodiment of those values is a non-negotiable?

The Lay of the Land - Make sure your new-hire has a full understanding of the lay of the land:

Competition - Who is your competition? How many others are there? What's the market share? On what basis do they compete? Who tries to be the low-cost provider? Who the premier high-service provider? How do you differentiate yourselves? Sales and Marketing - What are your key messages? Who are your target customers? How do you acquire leads and convert those leads into customers? Advertising? Email? Referrals? How do you keep customers? What are your customers' concerns, objections, and fears? No-matter how technical the role, and no- matter how far removed from the end-customer one is, everyone in the company is a salesperson, and they can't sell if they don't understand the key messages. The Product - Teach your new-hire about the products or services you sell. Pricing, features, benefits, functionality, everything. They need to know exactly what you offer to the world, and they need to believe in it, heart and soul.

Jump into the Deep-End - Earlier, I mentioned a study by the Aberdeen Group that found that best-in- class companies had 62% of their new-hires meet their first performance milestone on time, and 91% of those employees were still part of the company after their first year. Facebook has employees launch into their first projects within 45 minutes of starting with the company, because they believe that the sooner, they feel like they are really contributing, the more confident they are that they made the right career choice. Make sure your new-hire feels like that they are pulling their own weight as soon as possible.

Cadence - Although you will be helping them hit the ground running ASAP, make sure you are very clear that you don't expect them to blast out of the gate their first day either. Be open with your new-hire as to what your expectations of them are their first few months. Let them know that you expect a learning curve but give them a target ramp-up schedule. Allow them to crawl before they walk and walk before they run. The first month they are starting to put the pieces together, by the end of the first 90 days they should be contributing at 80%, and after that, they should be at full capacity. You'll be surprised how fast superstars can get up and running, but you still need to give them a runway to take off from.

Open and Frequent Communication - Weekly 1-on-1 check-ins are vitally important, even for top-performers. As they ramp up, be open and honest about where they're at compared to your expectations of their ramp- up, and make sure you're constantly asking them:

- How are you feeling in your new role?
- Do you feel you're on track?
- How confident are you right now?
- What are you enjoying the most?
- Is there anything coming up that's a concern?
- Any surprises?
- What's are you most excited about?
- Nervous about anything?
- "Do you have everything you need?
- Is there anything you need from me to help you be more successful?"
- Is this what you expected? A no here is a red-flag for an early departure. Dig further to see if there is something that needs to be fixed on your end, or if you need to realign both your and their expectations.

Immediate Engagement - Engage your superstar right from the jump, by pairing them with a someone from the team who will be their "on-boarding buddy." This will be someone they can go to for questions and problems, and to help them engage with the company when you aren't around. Give them a tour, introduce them to other team members, and plan a lunch to welcome your new-hire. Don't forget to organize informal meetings with key stakeholders, with colleagues from other departments, or with important clients with whom the they will need to collaborate.

Studies show that when new-hires feel socially accepted in their new company, they are more likely to experience success in their new roles. The building of social connections at work has a strong impact on engagement, so organize introductory sessions and time spent with members of different teams and departments. Make new-hire announcements within the company so that all employees are aware of the superstar, making it easier to reach out and welcome them.

Who Does What? - Think back to your first day. You were likely nervous about what to expect and hoping you would remember everyone's name. Eliminate that stress by being clear on who does what, what their key functions are, who the leaders of those functions are. Design an organizational directory Trello board (as you can see, I'm a fan of Trello) with a picture of everyone in your organization. Include the obvious things: name, picture, contact info, team, and role. Also include more human details like personal bios (history, hobbies, quirks, etc.) and links to personal social media profiles.

To make this a living, breathing document, set up a Typeform to collect information from your employees, and create a Zap to link up to a Trello board. As new employees get started, keep adding to the directory, and your new superstars will never have to worry about putting a name to a face ever again. Teams can be represented by lists, with the team leader's card on top, and as people move to different teams, simply drag the card to the appropriate team. Lastly, on each card, indicate their individual goals, priorities, and metrics (of in the case of the team leader, their team's goals, priorities, and metrics). [Click Here for a Real-Life Example]

One thing to note about the 3C's. Not only should you focus on Clarity, Confidence and Connectedness as the pillars of a rock-solid on-boarding program, but you should also assess these three elements at an individual level as well. You can evaluate whether a new potential superstar is adjusting well to their new position through the lens of the 3C's. Measure at 30 days, 90 days, 6 months, and 1 year, the clarity they have in their role, their confidence in their ability to make an impact, and their effectiveness in making valuable connections within the team and the organization as a while. Falling short in any one of these key areas is a red flag that you may be losing your superstar soon.

In addition to making sure your new superstar's transition is going smoothly, keep a close eye on their performance,

particularly in the first 30-90 days. I've found that by about day 30, you will start getting a good feel for whether a candidate has the required competencies and DNA has you thought they had in the interview process. By day 90, you will be sure of it (and often-times much earlier than that). Why? Because they are putting their best foot forward their first few months on the job, and if even their best isn't good enough, their performance will continue to drop as they get start to get comfortable in their role.

The clients who have followed my advice to land exceptional talent, their odds of successfully hiring a real live superstar, let alone just avoiding a mis-hire, have increased exponentially. With that said however, mistakes do happen and sometimes superstar wannabes slip through the cracks. Hiring is never a 100% endeavor, and the best any great leader can ever achieve is 90%.

Even "The Great One" Jack Welch has made hiring mistakes.

Don't make the mistake many leaders make and keep an under-performer for too long, thinking they can turn them around and develop them. In my experience, you can train up an under-performer into a serviceable employee, but you'll never train up an under-performer into exceptional top-level performer. You are either a superstar or you are not. ...and if your goal is to build your team with the very best talent in your industry, you cannot afford to have just 'serviceable' employees on your team.

President Truman famously had a sign on his desk that said, "The buck stops here." Derived from the slang expression "pass the buck" which means passing the responsibility on to someone else, every great leader knows that the buck stops with them.

If hiring mistake has been made, own it. It's not the candidate's fault. It's not your teams' fault. It's not HR's fault. It's yours. Remember, even Jack Welsh, the king of spotting talent, made his fair share of hiring blunders. But the difference between Jack and everyone else, is that he wasted no time in exiting his hiring mistakes. It's your responsibility to exit the under-performing employee as soon as possible. The hassle of re-initiating a completed search is nothing compared to the damage an under-performer will have on your company, your team, and your career. Besides, you're not doing the employee any favors keeping them in a role they are not a fit for.

Your leadership team is the point of the spear, and everything else flows from them. Set them up for success by on-boarding them the right way and watch the positive ripple effects it will have on your organization.