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Leadership And Managing People

It’s Time to Re-Onboard Everyone

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Summary. High turnover, the shift to hybrid work, and continued uncertainty about the future mean that your entire workforce may be feeling unmoored. These upheavals mean that even long-time employees — who have spent years building their reputations within an... **more**

“I’m the most tenured person on my team,” my friend Joyce, a senior marketing manager, told me. “But I feel like a new hire.”

Despite having worked at her company for four years, a slew of recent changes had left Joyce feeling unmoored. After her manager quit in June, Joyce worked in a state of limbo for a month until she got a new boss. She started going back to the office two days a week, but soon stopped due to concerns about the Delta variant. Three of her teammates left and were replaced by four new hires.

“I barely know anyone on my team,” Joyce continued. “I can dig up documents really easily, but other than that, I might as well have joined yesterday.”

Joyce isn’t alone in feeling new to a company she’s worked at for years. As an expert on emotions at work and the head of content at Humu, a company focused on workplace behavioral change, I regularly help leaders, managers, and teams establish better ways of working. In the data and in conversations, I’ve seen two forces that are destabilizing employees: unprecedented turnover and uncertainty. The number of people switching jobs has skyrocketed to historical highs in what experts are calling “The Great Resignation.” At the same time, teams are starting to transition to hybrid work.

These upheavals mean that even long-time employees — who have spent years building their reputations within an organization — may now feel they’re starting from scratch. That has enormous implications for performance, innovation, and well-being. When we start working in a new environment or with new colleagues, we tend to feel insecure because we haven’t had a chance to prove ourselves yet. Our self-doubt makes us less likely to suggest out-of-the-box ideas, ask questions, or take needed breaks.

Great onboarding helps individuals regain their confidence and cuts down the time it takes for them to get up and running. But new hires aren’t the only people who could benefit from this type of structured support. Right now, *everyone* at your company needs some form of onboarding.

If you're a leader, you can't sit back and hope your employees will successfully navigate so much turbulence. Hope is a terrible strategy. Instead, take advantage of the fact that August tends to be a slower month at work and prepare managers now for team-wide onboarding in the fall. Here are five steps you should encourage managers to take this fall.

Kick off with connection.

When I asked Joyce what her manager had done to bring her team together, she shook her head. "Not much."

It's no wonder that Joyce felt disconnected at work. During periods of high turnover, you need to be especially intentional about creating opportunities for employees to get to know each other.

To set your team up for success, invest in emotional connection as soon as possible and as often as possible. Schedule random, 30-minute 1:1s between members and kick meetings off with a lighthearted prompt. (A personal favorite: "What food is underrated?") Rituals are also a great way to create space for people to open up. Try "High, Low, Ha," where each person shares one highlight from their week, one low point, and one thing that made them laugh.

Welcome unique contributions.

One of the first messages your reports should hear is that they will be valued for everything that sets them apart. In an onboarding experiment, researchers randomly assigned new hires to one of three different welcome sessions. The first prompted people to reflect on how their unique perspectives could help them succeed in their new roles, another asked them to think about why they were proud to join the company, and the third focused on skills training. After six months, employees in the first group were less likely to have quit and delivered higher customer satisfaction scores.

In 1:1s, ask each person to reflect on what they're good at and how they can apply those skills to their current role. Based on these conversations, assign initial tasks that let individuals showcase their abilities. In team meetings, explicitly recognize novel suggestions. Try something like, "I hadn't thought of it that way, thanks for pointing that out."

Help people learn who knows what.

The most effective teams have a high level of "shared knowledge," or a collective understanding of individual expertise, who's responsible for what, and how everyone works together to get things done. To build shared knowledge, create early opportunities for team members to collaborate and discover each other's unique talents. You can also start an email thread or channel where team members can post a problem for others who may have relevant experience to share their insights.

One manager I spoke with ran a three-hour sprint in which she asked her newly formed team to redesign a sales pitch deck. Afterwards, she facilitated a debrief in which the group discussed each person's unique contributions. The exercise energized the team — and helped them get a better sense of everyone's unique talents.

Rally everyone around a three-month mission.

Quick wins boost motivation and confidence. To empower your team to accomplish shared victories early on, unite the group around an ambitious but achievable short-term goal. Alex, an engineering manager, set a three-month mission for his team to launch a new product feature customers had been asking about for years. Having a specific, impactful goal made it easier for the group to establish clear roles and processes. Alex's team created 30-, 60-, and 90-day plans and, at the end of every week, met to celebrate their shared progress and shout out each other's individual achievements.

Set clear cultural expectations.

When you're new, seemingly small uncertainties ("Can I turn my video off during longer calls?") can become a big source of stress. To combat these anxieties, schedule time for your team to agree on cultural and emotional norms. Science shows that setting clear expectations up front can have a powerful influence on employee performance. Here are a few prompts to get you started:

- How can we ensure teammates who aren't in the office still have a voice?
- How will we track progress and update each other throughout the week?
- How do we each prefer to receive feedback?
- What guidelines should we set for meetings?
- What is it "okay" to do? (e.g., take breaks or ask questions)

Make sure to write your answers down, and save them where they're easily accessible to everyone.

Reinforce healthy, productive norms with recognition.

Showcasing stellar work or giving kudos for supportive behaviors is one of the fastest ways to boost motivation, create a clearer picture of what is valued within your team, and positively reinforce healthy norms. Consider celebrating the efforts of a small group of people, rather than just one person or everyone. In a field experiment, researchers split employees into groups of eight, then randomly sent either the top performer, the top three performers, or everyone in the group a thank-you card for their efforts. Recognizing the top three performers in a group led to the strongest overall performance increase.

Finally, create opportunities for peers to recognize each other, too. Research shows that getting a compliment from a colleague can make new hires feel connected to the organization even faster than receiving praise from a manager. At Humu, we created a Slack channel called #cheersforpeers. Every month, anyone who has been mentioned in the channel *or* who recognized someone else is eligible for a raffle prize.

High turnover, the shift to hybrid work, and continued uncertainty about the future mean that your entire workforce may be feeling unmoored. By seizing this fall as a moment to re-onboard everyone, managers can boost team cohesion, performance, and well-being.

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