

Onboarding for new hospitality managers? Yeah-nah

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Catherine Watkins recently completed her Masters in International Hospitality Management at AUT. Her study focused on the onboarding of new managers in food and beverage operations and the influence of gender. She is now working as the Compass Group Lounge Manager for Air New Zealand's Auckland lounges.



We have all been the workplace “new kid” at one point or another, but how do you handle being not just the new person, but the new leader also? Little is known about the onboarding experience those new to leadership roles in a hospitality business; behaviours towards a new leader are thus an important area to investigate. The aim of our study was to explore how subordinates influence their new leader through socialisation behaviours.

Organisational socialisation refers to the processes and outcomes in relation to introducing a newcomer to an unknown work setting [1]. To become fully socialised in an organisation, new entrants will actively seek to understand its organisational politics, culture and processes, and to become accepted as insiders [1, 2, 3, 4]. Previous socialisation research has examined the newcomer experience in different professions, but has largely focused on general new entrant experiences, rather than those of new leaders, who face additional challenges due to their roles as potential changemakers. Various occupations have been studied in relation to organisational socialisation: for example, Van Maanen [5] explored the ways police officers become assimilated into their peer groups, and the associated expected behaviours of squad members.

To understand the new manager experience in hospitality, the primary researcher interviewed food and beverage industry professionals in New Zealand and the United States about their formative experiences when they joined a new organisation. Thematic analysis [6] identified key factors that influenced their perceptions about being accepted by current employees, and the impact of communication and trust during the newcomer processes in terms of gaining organisational knowledge.

The findings indicated a significant relationship between behaviours of existing organisational members and the experience of the new leaders. Informal training practices, frequently through on-the-job learning, were identified as the primary induction process for newcomers. Therefore, the new leaders depended on socialisation behaviours and their subordinates' support to gain vital institutional information. Learning was not confined to the operational role, but encompassed the company's political dimensions and the behavioural expectations.

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Utilising the knowledge of existing members is an excellent way for a newcomer to learn, however, they must first develop their “motivation, trustworthiness, ability, and loyalty” [5] potentially slowing the learning process and creating disadvantage.

A key component of leadership development is that of building a relationship based on trust with existing organisational members. Most participants reported that their human resources (HR) manager was responsible for recruitment - HR is the first point of communication for a newcomer. Although the induction process for newcomers sets the direction of their onboarding, there was evidence of a missing link in the HR management processes that regulated the period between accepting the job offer, and being acknowledged as an effective team leader. This period was described by one interview participant as “turbulent” for both the new leader and the existing team members. Part of this turbulence is attributed to the leader’s need to learn the organisation’s politics, which cannot be captured in a manual; therefore, the support of existing members is imperative.

While it is important to learn the important dimensions of organisational culture and the team dynamics through any means, having to ask subordinates for help can undermine the authority of any new leader. Conversely, this form of knowledge sharing could be beneficial to the new relationship, affording the subordinate the opportunity to feel empowered. However, if senior managers or peers are the main vectors of formal and informal socialisation processes, the risk of power imbalances can be prevented. Through effective onboarding practices based in knowledge sharing, organisations can change the way they introduce new leaders, affording them the opportunity to become effective change-makers more seamlessly.

The study on which the article is based can be accessed at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10292/15282>

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