

Soft Skills at Work: New employees need to learn the company's culture

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
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"Will I like the company? Will I fit in?"

As people start a new job, it is natural to wonder about these questions and what the company's "culture" will be like. New hires really want to know, "How will they do things around there?"

I had an interesting conversation with Wendy Ellis, SCMD, director of Mall Marketing & Business Development at Arundel Mills in Hanover, about this topic and ways employees can thrive on the job. First, she told me her definition of workplace culture.

"It's, 'How does everybody get along?'" Wendy said. "It's the answers to questions like, 'Does this office socialize away from work? How family friendly is it? If my child gets sick, is it okay to stay home and work from there?' A good indicator is asking, 'How are conflicts handled?'"

According to Wendy, employment perks are not workplace culture. Instead, it is looking at how a company functions - the good, bad and ugly. And no two companies are alike.

"Don't expect them to be the same," she observed.

Wendy talked about how new employees can learn about a particular company's culture.

"Have common sense to ask," she said. "Then, adapt to what it is in that office."

Wendy gave examples of workplace situations that may not be treated the same at all companies, such as cellphone usage.

"Ask, 'What's your policy about using cellphones?'" she said. "You can ask your co-workers. It doesn't have to be your boss."

Situations involving what people wear or even food odors may be handled differently, too.

"A businessperson in shorts and a T-shirt is not appropriate for our office. In some companies, shorts are acceptable," Wendy said. "The smell of popcorn does me in, nauseates me. In other offices, it would be fine."

Wendy further illustrated this point by relaying what happened to her when she started a new job. She was in a meeting with her boss when his phone rang.

"I wondered if I should leave or not, so I got up and left," she said. "Later my boss told me, 'If you need to go, I'll tell you.'"

Here was an example of a policy that was suitable for that office; in another company, the boss might have reacted differently. The key is to ask when you don't know what is acceptable at a specific company.

However, there are behaviors most all employers expect regardless of workplace culture differences. For instance, knowing to not disrupt a meeting by talking on a cellphone. Wendy carries two phones but makes sure they do not ring in a meeting. Instead, she glances at them to see if a call is urgent and must be answered. She then steps out and tells people ahead of time when possible. This is the type of etiquette employers want demonstrated.

"It comes down to respect, common sense, and courtesy," Wendy said.

Wendy had advice for people wanting to adapt quickly to their new environment.

Take time to learn, be a team player, and have a good attitude.

Find a mentor - that never ends.

Treat the people you work with, with common courtesy and respect. And show respect and courtesy up and down the ladder.

Be open to opportunities. Wendy recalled, "I knew I wanted to work at a ski resort and

I skied my way through college. But I was offered a job as a marketing secretary in Salt Lake City. I could have just put in eight hours, but because I showed interest, I was able to step into the assistant marketing director position when it became available."

Everyone makes mistakes. It is how you handle them that counts.

Adapting well to a new workplace culture requires the ability to observe and learn, use common sense and courtesy, and ask when something is unclear. It is also essential to demonstrate soft skills employers value.

As Wendy said, "I can teach someone how to use (M.S.) Excel, but I can't teach him a positive attitude."

CONNECT! Coalition

CONNECT! members provide soft skills tips as part of the mission of the coalition. In keeping with the theme of this column, Cheryl Townshend with the Parenting Center at Anne Arundel Community College offered advice about telephone manners:

- Respect and courtesy are the key words when beginning, continuing and ending a phone conversation

- Use a proper greeting - "Hello, this is Mary Smith. May I speak with Susan, please?" Speak clearly, and use a tone that is friendly.
- If the person for whom the call was intended is not at home ask if the caller wants to leave a message or have their call returned. Be sure to write the message down and deliver it.

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