

## MARICOPA COUNTY TRIAL COURTS NEW EMPLOYEE ORIENTATION: ASSIMILATING NEW EMPLOYEES AND PROMOTING COURT MISSION AND VALUES

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The trial courts in Maricopa County, Arizona, faced a problem—a tight labor market and increasing employee turnover rates. Recognizing the problem, and realizing that the courts could not earn employee loyalty by matching private-sector salaries, administrators sought alternatives to attract and retain a skilled workforce. They began by changing the way they welcome new employees to the court system and made dramatic changes in the way they acculturated new employees into the court environment.

Many employees make the decision to leave or stay in an organization within the first few days in their new job. During this “getting to know you” phase, the new employee develops opinions about the position, coworkers, management, and the overall organization. Are their positions valued and an essential part of the overall success of the department? Who will assist them in navigating their new work environment?

Because orientation programs are the primary tool for organizations to acculturate new employees, the principal court administrators charged the education department with assembling a group to assess the then-existing orientation program. The education department formed a team composed of educators, human-resources specialists, and civil- and criminal-court administrators. Surveying orientation programs in both private- and public-sector agencies, the team found that effective orientation can reduce turnover rates by as much as 25 percent. Where did Maricopa County’s program fall, they asked? Was the program successful in acculturating the new employee and in presenting the court as an appealing employer?

The team found that the program was loaded with content yet was missing clearly articulated goals. The program covered court and county structure, judicial branch mission and vision, and benefits—all in four hours. If new staff were not intimidated before having the orientation, they were guaranteed to be overwhelmed after completing the course. This examination persuaded the group that orientation needed an overhaul; indeed, it needed to be completely reinvented. The court’s leadership charged the group with creating a new employee orientation with an explicit goal of assimilating new employees and fostering commitment to the court and to the judicial branch’s mission and values. The new orientation would assist new employees in their transition from being members of the public to being members of the court community.

The team designed an education experience that would help new employees understand the purpose and structure of the judicial branch, better assimilate them

into the court environment, and help them understand their roles in promoting the organization's mission and values. New employee orientation in Maricopa County is more than a civics lesson. It aims to be a transformative education experience where new employees are welcomed into the court community and in turn become committed to the organization's mission and values.

We consider the orientation experience as two people dating; they are exchanging information to determine compatibility. The new employees shared information about themselves in the job interview. Orientation is an opportunity for the court not only to share information but also to sell its attributes.

### CREATING THE FOUNDATION: NEW EMPLOYEE ORIENTATION'S SIX CORE ELEMENTS

Court operations are mystifying to most new employees. Like many members of the public, they view the court as an episode of *Law and Order*. Most new employees are not familiar with court administration and certainly not with its complexity. To a new employee, entering the court environment is like traveling to a foreign country. Like so many organizations, the court has its own vocabulary, using legalese and acronyms as shorthand. One new employee remarked that the language of the court sounded "a lot like Shakespeare," antiquated and difficult to understand.

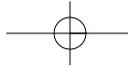
The challenge for the development team was to portray the "big picture" of the court without overloading the participants with context and to ground the new program in a common language that was easily understandable. Thus, the team needed to decide what information, resources, and tools were essential for the new employee.

Through its survey of successful public- and private-sector orientation programs, the development team identified six core elements:

- Description of the organization, mission, structure, and customers
- Discussion of how a new employee's position fits into the organization structure
- Review of ethics codes and organization policies
- Information on compensation and benefits
- Logistical information about the work environment, facilities, and security
- Information on career growth and professional development, training, and mentoring programs

With content and core parameters generally defined, the team and administration established program goals.

Next, the group asked who should serve as faculty for the program. Because employees often perceive court administration as inaccessible and removed from the frontlines, use of court leadership as faculty is a key program innovation. In Maricopa County, the trial courts presiding judge and senior court administrator welcome the new employees and teach the first session. By committing to serve as faculty, the presiding judge and senior court administrators send the powerful messages that introducing new employees to the court is a priority and that each new employee is a valu-



able member of the court team. Their presence also conveys that administrators are interested in hearing from new employees and seeking an ongoing dialogue.

The team also concluded it would be impossible to achieve program goals using the previous orientation's time parameters. It would take two days simply to address core topics and associated learning objectives. In presenting their ideas to administration and department directors, the team acknowledged that committing staff to two consecutive days presented an administrative hardship, but the potential long-term benefits made the sacrifice worthwhile.

The two-day agenda for the New Employee Orientation progresses from the "big picture" of the court to resources for new employees. Day one is devoted to mission, court structure, and judicial partners, and day two focuses on select court policies and employee resources. The latter is important because, while we may like to think that a new employee should be more attentive to learning about the organization's structure and culture, many new employees are most concerned about obtaining information on education opportunities and tuition reimbursements as they decide whether it is worth making an investment in the court organization. The sessions are related in that they pinpoint areas of mutual interest and benefit.

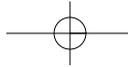
#### NEW EMPLOYEE ORIENTATION: DETAILS

New Employee Orientation is divided into the following categories:

**Day One: Laying the Foundation.** The program begins with a description of the mission and values, structure, and history of the Maricopa County Trial Courts. Discussion of organization mission and values can seem clichéd and disconnected from the reality of the tasks staff are hired to perform. In fact, as faculty tell participants, working for the court is unlike any other job. "You will be impacting lives through your service to the public. Your role in stewarding the court mission will make a difference."

The program then moves from underlying philosophical values to the concrete structure and history of the judicial branch and of Maricopa County. Discerning the amount of information to cover is particularly critical in this area. It is tempting to sprint through an exhaustive list of statistics in an effort to cover court facts, but without anchors or context, it is impossible for participants to retain this information. Faculty introduce basic concepts about case types, organization hierarchy, and court trends, and engage participants in a guided discussion, using handout materials to explore discrete facts and to introduce the materials as a future information resource.

**Day One: Ethics, Code of Conduct for Judicial Employees.** To preserve the impartiality of the judiciary, court employees are held to a high standard of ethics, and the Arizona Supreme Court Code of Ethics for Court Staff establishes a uniform set of standards for all judicial staff. During orientation, the expectation is established that Maricopa County Trial Court employees will conform to the judicial employee code of conduct. Rather than summarize code provisions, faculty present participants with a set of scenarios describing ethical dilemmas. Groups assess each scenario, consult



the code, and decide the proper course of action. A judicial officer serves as faculty and leads the participants in consulting the code, weighing the scenario factors, and arriving at a conclusion.

**Day Two: Diversity and Sexual Harassment.** The development team did not want to overwhelm new staff with a litany of policy guidelines. However, because of its commitment to cultural competency and a safe work environment, the team determined that diversity and sexual harassment should be included in the program. The orientation provides an opportunity to underscore the judicial branch's ongoing effort to create a bias-free workplace.

Maricopa County strives to create a justice system free from actual or perceived racial, ethnic, gender, or economic bias. But how are those values implemented in the actual work of the court? Exercises providing context to diversity issues are a key part of this session. Participants discuss diversity issues as they relate to victims' rights, overrepresentation of minority youth in the justice system, and cultural barriers to justice. Faculty guide participants through an activity called "My Home," where they discuss the environment of their childhood home. The activity provides a nonthreatening context in which to explore geographic, cultural, educational, and economic differences among coworkers. Faculty instill the theme that differences add interest and richness to the work environment.

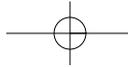
It is also important to communicate to new employees that the agency will not tolerate sexual harassment. Although discussions on what constitutes sexual harassment can be uncomfortable, it is important that the court clearly communicate what is considered unacceptable behavior. Actions and dialogue that qualify as sexual harassment are identified through discussion.

**Day Two: Customer Service.** Public perceptions about fairness and impartiality are formed through the public's interaction with court staff. Public-sector agencies have only recently adopted the concept of creating satisfied customers. The customer-service session clearly presents the court's expectation that staff will be courteous, responsive, and accountable.

Just as members of the public form opinions about court staff, it is only natural that court staff form conclusions about parties entering the court. Although it is tempting to make assumptions about litigants based on their demeanor, appearance, and communication skills, court staff must remain impartial. Faculty ask new employees to refrain from judging and remind them that only judicial officers decide guilt or innocence.

Coworkers, other court departments, justice partners, and other judicial branch agencies are known as internal customers. Identifying other judicial departments and agencies as customers conveys the expectation that staff will direct resources toward satisfying their requests.

**Day Two: Employee Benefits.** County human-resource analysts have found that public-sector health and retirement benefits, combined with generous tuition reimbursement benefits, attract new employees to the court. The Arizona State Retirement Plan



is a benefit that gives the court an advantage over the private sector, and the New Orientation development team designated time to showcase this benefit. Another attractive marketing opportunity for the court is that Maricopa County reimburses tuition for approved college programs for up to \$5,000 per year. Many new employees are still working toward obtaining a college degree, and if they are interested in investing the time, the court will cover a significant amount of the cost. Attention is therefore given to this benefit.

**Day Two: Facilities and Security.** Part of a meaningful orientation program is introducing new employees to their physical surroundings. The Maricopa County Judicial Branch complex in downtown Phoenix includes a grouping of buildings at the core, with satellite buildings within a few blocks. The Judicial Branch also has regional centers in the Southeast, Northeast, and Northwest Valley parts of the county. At the beginning of day two of the orientation, participants take a walking tour in the central court complex, with stops at the law library, jury assembly room, and other county offices.

Security is a visible presence in the trial court complex. When participants begin orientation, they are already familiar with the security checkpoints at each court entrance. The director of security explains that it is important that staff recognize their role in ensuring their own safety and the necessity of being part of a coordinated security effort. Lockdowns and bomb scares are rare, but they are nevertheless a reality in the court. Court staff must know how to respond when there are threats of violence, medical emergencies, or fire evacuations. Participants in the orientation are assigned the task of locating their department's fire extinguishers, emergency exits, evacuation plan, and meeting place.

## EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

After each New Employee Orientation session, participants complete a written program evaluation. In evaluating each session, they rate faculty performance, relevance of content, quality of program materials, and the value of the session to them as new employees. From this, those in charge of the orientation program have learned, for example, that new employees found meeting and interacting with the presiding judge was the highlight of their first few days on the job, and that the session on court mission and values resonates with participants. "I had not realized how working for the court affected so many people," said one employee; "I felt like I was doing more than just a job." And the orientation faculty has observed that employees are very attentive while the human-resources director outlines benefit programs.

The education department and faculty evaluate the program each year and make modifications based on participant and faculty recommendations. Education specialists elicit feedback from past participants to gauge how effective the program is over time. By contacting a sampling of new employees and asking them to reflect on whether the orientation adequately prepared them for their roles and responsibilities, curriculum developers can assess the program's effectiveness.

In 2007 the New Orientation Program of the Trial Courts of Maricopa County entered its third year. The contrast between the new and revised programs is dramatic. The program length has increased and is focused on critical core topics. Employees more quickly assimilate to the court environment, and they understand their departmental role and their part in the overall organization. Maricopa County has developed an innovative approach to cultivate employee allegiance. In designing a program to welcome and acculturate new employees, the court system has reduced employee attrition rates and gained commitment to the organization. **jsj**

