



BEST PRACTICES IN UNION NEW HIRE ORIENTATIONS

Effective orientation programs can have a lasting and outsized impact on the strength of unions. The following best practices offer practical ways that union leaders and staff can develop and enhance their orientations for new bargaining unit members.



Orient new hires as soon as possible

- First impressions matter.
- Hold orientations as close as possible to a new hire's start date to lessen management's influence on the new hire's views of the union.
- Negotiate for the union's right to a structured time during the employer's orientation program.



Use intention when selecting facilitators

- Train orientation presenters.
- Pay attention to the race, gender, and age of new hires when choosing union orientation facilitators and informal representatives.
- Select an experienced leader and a younger member to co-facilitate orientations.



Extend length of orientations

- The longer the orientation, the more likely new hires are to find it helpful.
- Unions will get a greater return on their investment if they lengthen their orientation up to three hours.



Encourage new hires to join the union

- Explain how being a part of the union advances members' interests both inside and outside of the workplace.
- Ask new hires to join the union, and encourage their participation in union activities.
- Avoid the temptation to oversell what the union can do.



Provide quality handouts and freebies

- Present information in multiple ways to improve participant comprehension.
- Professional-grade materials and an understanding of how new hires prefer to communicate can encourage sign ups and commitment.
- Free union swag can build new hires' identity with the union, and contributes to longer-term commitment.



Strive for excellence

- The quality of the union's orientation, both in substance and style, influences commitment to the union.
- Shoddy presentations, typos, outdated information, and poor presenters can cast doubt about the union.
- Remain mindful of the real-world issues new hires face.



Follow up with new hires

- Recruit and train people tasked to follow-up.
- Union commitment is strongest in new members who experience both formal and informal introductions.
- Union leaders, stewards, and other representatives should reach out to new employees in their first days on the job, and establish the union as a trusted resource.



Be systematic

- Track orientation participants to assess their engagement in the union.
- Take time to celebrate new members.
- Regularly evaluate and adjust orientations as needed.

NEW STUDY PROVIDES EVIDENCE OF THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF NEW HIRE ORIENTATIONS



Data from a longitudinal survey of new union members demonstrates the value of investing in a high-quality new hire orientation. Paul Clark, Director and Professor of Penn State's School of Labor and Employment Relations, conducted the survey of new union members in 2016 and 2017.¹ The study sought to determine the percentage of new members who participated in a formal orientation program, their assessment of the quality of that experience, and the impact that experience had on their attitudes and involvement regarding the union. The following are key findings.

New Hires Who Attend a "Helpful" Orientation ...

- ✓ Are more likely to volunteer for the union,
- ✓ Are more loyal union members, and
- ✓ Feel greater responsibility towards the union.

Even after one year, their union commitment remains higher than that of new hires who did not attend an orientation or attended one that was "not helpful."

A high quality orientation program increases the commitment of members to the union.

- Members who participated in a union new hire orientation program, and found it helpful, had a significantly higher level of commitment to the union than new hires who did not take part in a formal orientation program.
- Members who found a new hire orientation unhelpful had a significantly lower level of commitment to the union than those who had a positive experience.

Highly committed members are more likely to participate in their union than members with lower levels of commitment.

- Members with high overall levels of union commitment participated in union activities at a rate that was 35 percent greater than members with low overall rates of commitment.

Elements of an effective orientation include:

- Informative materials and handouts.
- A length of more than one hour.
- Coverage of four to six relevant topics, including the purpose of the union, the contract, local and national union structure and activities, an explanation of dues, and the grievance procedure.

Despite the proven value of orientations, many local unions do not take advantage of this opportunity to form a positive first impression:

- Approximately half (46 percent) of new members who completed the survey indicated that they had no contact with the union during their first month as a member.
- Only a little more than one-third of new members participated in a new hire orientation.

¹Research was conducted on behalf of the Jobs With Justice Education Fund through a grant from Union Privilege. The study is of 494 new members from six different states who joined the same national union the previous year, representing a response rate of 33 percent of all surveys mailed. A follow-up survey of the same group was conducted in spring 2017. The results include 121 completed and returned surveys with a response rate of 25.4 percent. While the sample from the second survey is smaller, there are sufficient respondents to draw some general, and important, conclusions.

