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12-2022

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Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development, "How Can Supervisors Support New Employees?" (2022). *QIC-Tips*. 5.

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How Can Supervisors Support New Employees?

When the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD) recently asked public child welfare agency staff and leaders about their concerns related to improving the workforce, one of the questions was, “How do we support new employees?” This QIC-Tip aims to answer this question with research-informed recommendations and practical advice from the field.

The process by which newcomers make the transition from being organizational outsiders to being insiders is known as onboarding, or [organizational socialization](#) (Bauer et al., 2007). The overall goal of onboarding is to facilitate newcomer adjustment, meaning that new employees understand the key tasks of their job, have confidence in their ability to perform their job, feel like they are an accepted member of the organization, and understand the organization’s culture. Many people in an agency are involved in this process including those in human resources (HR), training, and information technology, but supervisors are essential in this process.

There is a research-informed onboarding framework, often referred to as [“The 5 Cs of Employee Onboarding,”](#) developed by Talya Bauer, PhD, which incorporates these approaches and that supervisors can use to assist new employees. The 5Cs are:

- **Compliance.** Supervisors must comply with agency rules and requirements for new employees. Ensuring that HR and other paperwork is complete and that new employees have a computer, clean office space, an email address, computer log-in, identification badge, and adequate office supplies, among other things, is essential. Most of these tasks should be done before the employee’s first day. A checklist is a good way to ensure that new employees have everything they need to be successful when they start the job. When a worker arrives, show them around the building and point out breakrooms, conference rooms, bathrooms, and rooms for new mothers.
- **Clarification.** Child welfare work is complex and there are a lot of moving parts. Let new workers know what will be covered in training and let them know that training *is* the job at the beginning. Also consider strategies for maximizing [training transfer](#) and supporting trainees to apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained in training to the job.

Review policies and procedures with new employees to provide clarification. If policies and procedures are unclear, supervisors, as a group, are in the best position in the agency to advocate for changes to ensure that policies are clearly written, well organized, and easily accessible for new employees.

Supervisors need to convey both general and specific information about what is expected from a new worker. Similarly, new employees need to understand what they can expect from their supervisor. Constructive feedback and ongoing **coaching** are strategies to manage expectations in the supervisor/worker relationship and can help improve clarity in this complicated job.

- **Confidence,** or more specifically, self-efficacy in the workplace, is belief in one’s ability to succeed in a particular situation. Self-efficacy plays a major role in how goals, tasks, and challenges are approached. Supervisors can model (or have other staff model) successfully completing job tasks and offer job shadowing, a strategy incorporated into the [Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians onboarding program](#). Verbal encouragement is another tool to build confidence; formal [teaming structures](#) can also create opportunities for co-worker support. The most

effective way to help people build confidence in their job is to have them repeatedly perform a task and increase their comfort level and sense of mastery.

- **Connections.** Supervisors should foster connections between new and experienced employees so that employees may feel accepted and valued. [Research](#) has found that the more connections people have in an organization, the more likely they are to experience positive work outcomes. To build connections, supervisors can ask established workers to guide and nurture new employees and create opportunities for informal social interactions. Activities such as potlucks, outings (e.g., escape room, hiking, bowling), happy hours, walks, and team lunches can help new workers see their co-workers in a social setting. Shadowing is another strategy to build connections and can be done within the unit or with those in other parts of the agency. To make the most of shadowing, suggest that existing staff share their thoughts with the new worker in response to the following questions:
 - What do you wish you'd known when you started with the agency?
 - What is your favorite thing about working here?
 - Tell the new worker about a family that you've worked with, and why that experience made you proud of your work.
- **Culture.** Culture refers to the agency's values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors. In child welfare, aspects of culture apply to working alone, with supervisors or coworkers, with children and families, and with external partners. In-office examples include responding to emails within a certain period of time, having routine protected time, leaving office doors open, or using text messaging more often than emails. For working with children and families, examples may include valuing child and youth voice, using or not using certain language with families, and always seeking to involve both parents. It is important for new employees to become familiar with the organizational culture, and supervisors can facilitate that process. It can sometimes be challenging, however, to identify the culture in which you work. Moreover, culture is less about what people say they believe or value; it's about how those beliefs and values are enacted in the workplace. In addition to doing some self-reflection to identify the agency and office culture, supervisors should consider speaking with people who have been on the job for six months to a year to get their insights about the things they recall having to learn as a newcomer.

Effective onboarding is important because it influences how an employee perceives their fit in the organization, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intentions to quit. To support new employees with a successful onboarding process, supervisors can go through each of the 5 Cs to assess where they stand on each one. They can also chat with employees to get feedback on onboarding or do a formal assessment using tools such as the [Newcomer Socialization Questionnaire](#) or the [Organizational Socialization Questionnaire](#).