

Jemima Almey is the CEO of a small but successful consultancy group...

The situation:

It was very exciting to be able to recruit five new staff. There were 20 of us working in Systems Associates, so an increase of five was a big change. We needed new staff badly. We are a small consultancy firm in a specialised niche market and we had taken on more work than we could cope with. Most of us felt exhausted and burnt out, despite being excited by what we were doing. We also had ambitions to move into a new and important market sector and needed to build our capacity to do it.

Staff induction:

It was a long time since we'd recruited Cliff and it had taken him a long time to settle in and start making a contribution. We had to do better this time but there were a lot of company expertises for the new staff to get to grips with. I couldn't find out much about staff induction from the Web or from the library so I had to work out what to do from scratch.

Identifying perspectives:

My starting point was the recognition that it was my job to ensure that the new staff were brought into the organisation properly. When Cliff arrived, we assumed that we would all somehow help him find a role for himself. We do a lot of project work, each project can last up to five years and we work in project teams and each consultant strikes a balance between engaging with projects that interest them, supporting those that need additional effort and dealing with 'chores'. Nobody told Cliff this and so he spent three months waiting for someone to tell him what to do. It would be my job to make sure an effective and efficient induction process happened so that the new staff didn't suffer this confusion. Cliff's experience got me thinking about the perspectives of the new people. What would need to happen so that they would be able to get stuck in confidently and effectively? I also thought about the perspectives of other staff already here. What would need to happen so that they felt able to work supportively with new people?

Objectives and constraints:

I next listed the objectives. I tried putting them into an objectives tree but a systems map worked better and enabled me to separate ideas about what I wanted to do from how I was going to do it. (I also had ideas about how I didn't want to do it.) I also listed the constraints and incorporated them as part of the system environment in my systems map. My system had three main subsystems, meeting the needs of the organisation, the needs of the new people, and my own preferences. The latter was mainly about having a process that was do-able and one that worked naturally with my own work styles. The systems map developed on my pin-board for several weeks and I added to it as ideas emerged (often in the bath or on the train).

Metaphors:

While the systems map was developing, I noticed some metaphors kept recurring in the way I thought and talked about the issue. I next explored these metaphors.

Burying them in information

I didn't want to drown the new people in information but there was a lot they would need to know and a lot of new skills they would need to acquire. I decided that instead I would set up for each of them a broad set of experiences that would enable them to both find out for themselves and to collect networks of 'people to ask'. This seemed to me a bit like giving them the catalogue of a useful library rather than an enormous and intimidating pile of books to read.

Throwing the Christians to the lions:

Most of our projects were so stretched that I was concerned that the new staff would be snapped up by my pressured colleagues. I didn't want them devoured by the needs of individual projects and the development of the long-term potential of our new staff would be swallowed up and lost in immediate needs. (This was quite a mixed-up metaphor!)

What nice hostesses do at parties:

This was a very significant metaphor. I had an image of arriving at a party full of strangers where my hostess introduces me to, and leaves me with, a group of people whom she knows will interest me and who will be interested in me. She's given me a drink, shown me where the loo is, where the drinks are and when the food will be served. I then feel happy and confident to mingle without her constant escort.

Hitting the ground running:

This metaphor came a many times as people discussed their hopes for the new arrivals. I imagine this is a military metaphor. I picture troops landing, dropped from a plane perhaps. They immediately scatter into the darkness of the war zone to fulfil their mission. The ability to hit the ground running is obviously valuable and, in Systems Associates, it was clearly hoped that the fresh troops would reinforce the troops already on the ground. The metaphor does not reveal that in order to be useful on the ground, even to survive, the new reinforcements would have to be trained and equipped to some minimum standard. This alerted me to the dangers of inadequate preparation of the new arrivals, even though we knew they were very enthusiastic and talented people.

Developing metaphors, generating idea:

This thinking generated lots of interesting ideas, which I checked against the objectives and constraints. I was checking to see whether each idea could function as one of the subsystems in the systems map.

What we did:

Each new recruit would have:

- *A regular meeting with me each fortnight to discuss their progress and development needs*
- *A mentor, with whom conversations would be confidential, and who would not be working directly with them*
- *A designated project team where they would work for the first six months.*

The 'deal' with the project team was that they could have the extra team member but only on condition that they gave that person lots of support in learning on the job. I would monitor whether the deal was working through the fortnightly meeting.

- *An 'advance development' team.*

These are teams that have shared interests and work together to develop their knowledge and skills so that the organisation can keep ahead in areas where we are, or want to be, active.

- *An admin task that would necessitate speaking to every member of the organisation and which would, incidentally, make use of their 'fresh viewpoint'.*

In addition, before they arrived, we

- *collected a 'welcome pack' for each of them, with maps of the locality, an telephone directory, an organisation map, introductory guides to our email systems and assorted other bits and pieces*
- *Organised an office, a desk and a computer for each of them. By doing some reshuffling we arranged for each of them to have an office mate who would provide another network of contacts. We put name plates on their office doors and set up email*

accounts for them.

- Ordered extra keys for their offices, obtained the forms for security passes to the building and the car park.

On the day of their arrival we

- met them as they arrived
- Gave them ten minutes in their offices
- Gave them time with their secretaries who helped them with the forms, directed them to loos and where various resources were, got them logged onto the office intranet
- Phoned everyone we could think of and all went for coffee together.
- Showed them the newspapers, notice boards and agencies where temporary accommodation was advertised
- (Three of us) took them for lunch at the local eatery and then for a leisurely walk around the park
- Gave them time to themselves
- Gave them time to collect security cards and keys from the building's security officer

Did it work?

To treat this question systemically, I would have to ask both my new and old colleagues. But from my point of view, it worked well. Six months later, all five people were making a great contribution to our collective efforts. They were taking on major responsibilities and knew more about some of our clients than I did.

Jemima Almey was talking to Rosalind Armson.

Some details have been changed.