

What is a Buddy and a Buddy System?

A buddy system is an approach whereby you use the existing Star Performers on your team, to help onboard and train your new recruits in a formal yet more relaxed setting. A buddy partners with your new recruits during his or her first few days and weeks of employment. They are a colleague assigned to assist the new hire to get through the first nerve-wracking time period of being in a new position. They provide insight into the day-to-day activities of the company and are there to help the new recruit fit in more quickly. Typically, a buddy would make themselves available to show the new hire around, go over procedures and policies covered during induction, and generally help the new recruit become familiar with the company's inner workings and culture. Ideally, a buddy is a great communicator who can easily provide information and encourage the new recruit to express their thoughts and concerns in a safe setting. Your chosen buddies should be the type of employee your company wants to duplicate or clone because of how great they are.

When selecting a buddy, it is important to choose an employee who has a well-rounded knowledge of your business, its purpose, mission, and values. It is equally important that they have a positive outlook and are willing to be the face of the organisation. Some Additional characteristics to look for when selecting a buddy include someone who:

- Has a willingness and ability to mentor others.
- Has demonstrated strong past performance.
- Has the time to be accessible to the new colleague.
- Is skilled in/has knowledge of the new colleague's job.
- Is a peer of the new employee.
- Has excellent communications and interpersonal skills.
- Is well regarded and accepted by current employees.

A buddy should epitomise your company's values and be familiar enough with the formal and informal organisational structures to be a reliable source of information. Your chosen buddy ambassadors will possess a positive outlook on the company and be able to use their perspective to encourage a sense of pride and loyalty in the new employee.

Buddy Responsibilities

Knowing "what is expected of me" is one of the most important questions that anyone can answer in a work setting and it contributes to employee satisfaction. New employees face a steep learning curve when they start with a new company. If your organisation approaches onboarding strictly based on job-related information, this provides little opportunity for communicating information that socialises the new employee. The good news about the buddy system is that you do not need a large staff or a great deal of time or funds to launch an effective program.

Relationships matter. Current employees who act as buddies must want new employees to succeed and be committed to helping them. A workplace buddy may be the first point of contact for your new employee and should be capable of establishing rapport quickly. You want the new employee to feel comfortable and safe asking questions and bringing up issues with their buddy. An effective program primarily requires a culture of openness and teamwork.

The line manager should take buddy selection almost as seriously as the hiring decision itself. The buddy becomes an ambassador for you, communicates your company culture, and relates non-job specific —but important—information. Make sure the buddy employee has time to perform this work and is not on the critical path for urgent deliverables. Consider reducing assignments that could keep the buddy away from the new hire. A buddy should be accessible to the recruit, so position him or her near the new recruit (e.g., in the same physical space, if possible).

Buddies should have the skills and knowledge to perform the following types of tasks:

- Teaching/or tutoring, such as explaining unfamiliar tasks.
- Explaining how to use office equipment, obtain office supplies, make travel arrangements, and the like.
- Socialising the new employee on company's guidelines, norms, culture, and unwritten guidelines.
- Sharing insights on how things are done in your company.
- Involving the new employee in social or informal activities, such as lunch, coffee, or breaktimes

To add structure to the system, the supervisor and the buddy employee should outline what to cover with the new hire and create a planned timetable or checklist to guide them.

A buddy provides moral support during the first few crucial weeks by introducing the new employee to staff members and showing them around their new workplace. He or she should have a good work performance history and be someone whom other employees like and respect. Ideally, buddies are also rewarded formally through performance appraisals and/or gestures of appreciation and respect.

Tips for the Buddy

If you are asked to be a buddy, here are some tips that can help you to make the most of the experience:

- You are not expected to be an expert on everything, so do not worry about living up to this ideal.
- Focus attention on the new recruit, he or she needs to be comfortable and productive in their new role.
- Remain patient - relationships take time to develop.
- Do not try to cover everything right away. Remember, the new recruit will more than likely feel overwhelmed during the first couple of weeks in a new job and will need time to digest all the information they are taking in.
- Stay positive. New employees will grow into their roles in time with appropriate support.
- Do not try to force a relationship. Be available, but give the new employee time to adjust to you and feel comfortable with using you as a trusted source.
- Try to identify the new employee's personality and communication style and adapt accordingly.
- Keep an open mind and do not be too judgmental. The new hire is relying on you to be a safe place to get answers to their many questions.
- Maintain a positive, teaching attitude.

Also, remember that there is an underlying assumption that the new hire will be receptive to the buddy. He or she shares the responsibility for successful integration into the organisation. The buddy should encourage the new employee to ask questions, to be

open and willing to learn, to share knowledge from previous jobs, and to give feedback on their experience with the onboarding process.

Establishing a Buddy Program

You do not need a huge amount of resource or money to launch an effective buddy system. Draft a simple and formal document that outlines what the buddy role is about (use the information in this guide to help you). Find an appropriate staff member to act as a buddy and make sure he or she understands your intent. Finally, evaluate how well the program worked.

Step 1

Decide on and document how you want the work buddy program will work, such as purpose, roles, ground rules, length of time, areas covered etc.

Step 2

Identify the buddy, confirm that he or she is willing and able to play this role and review the buddy process with him or her.

Workgroup peers greatly influence behavioural norms, values, and beliefs in the workplace and as such, the selection of a compatible buddy is vital. Consider the current employees' qualities, physical location, availability, willingness to play this role. For example, do not assign the new employee to a buddy who has a major, career-impacting deadline in three days, or is about to retire, or is your most unhappy, negative, company-bashing staff member. The buddy should hold a job similar to that of the new employee and possess a full understanding of the work environment. He or she should be well regarded by peers, have good communication and interpersonal skills, and have a strong sense of discretion. Review the responsibilities with the selected buddy and provide a list of topics to cover.

Step 3

Provide a template of topics the buddy should cover with the new employee – Create your own 'Buddy Checklist' below.

Step 4

Encourage knowledge sharing.

The new employee arrives with a wealth of previous work experiences. Advise the buddy to take advantage of this opportunity to share experiences. As the buddy explains company methods used in this organisation, he or she can make a point to ask how the new hire how he or she instituted or managed the same processes in prior positions. All new employees may not be receptive to these questions in a formal setting, such as a staff meeting. The buddy relationship is more conducive to this type of informal knowledge sharing. Choose subjects that are easy for the new employee to share and that could also benefit the organisation. Over time continue to ask the new employee about tools, techniques, templates, and the like that they may have used. Doing so will not only open up a dialog for knowledge sharing but will also build confidence in the new employee and give them the feeling that they can add value to their new organisation right away.

Step 5

Evaluate and debrief with the buddy and the new employee.

The onboarding process, in general, needs to be evaluated to determine its effectiveness. At the end of the buddy relationship, the program coordinator or hiring manager should ask the buddy and the new employee about what went well, what could have gone better and what they would change? The purpose of asking these questions is to improve the buddy program for the next new recruit.