



VIEWS & VISIONS

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Onboarding New Leaders

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His career has included global service to the YMCA and leading organizational development strategies for Fortune 500 companies in various industries, including retail, hospitality and education.

Mr. Thompson is a PhD candidate, with a concentration in industrial and organization psychology, and is a certified structural consultant. He is a member and speaker for the American Society for Training & Development, the Society for Human Resources Management and the Association of Consulting Psychology. He was published in the 2011 Pfeiffer Annuals for Training & Development.

Imagine being on your way to drop off your children at school or that you are running late for an important meeting. You jump into your car and turn the key, only to hear the aggressive sputter of an engine desperate to start, but unable. You might have the car towed to your local mechanic, crossing your fingers that he can get the part he needs to finish the work today. He calls Advance Auto Parts, and you are relieved to hear that the part will arrive in 15 minutes and, a little while later, you are on your way. Alternatively, you may head to one of the Advance Auto Parts store in your community. When you arrive, a parts professional confirms your diagnosis of the problem, and ensures you get everything you need in order to complete the job yourself.

It takes a lot to ensure that a single Advance Auto Parts store has the right part and the right team member, capable of helping each customer solve his or her problem. However, the real leadership challenge is to ensure that all 40,000 team members are able to repeat that same experience hundreds of millions of times each year across our almost 4,000 stores spread across 39 states. This is the challenge that the Field Training Department at Advance Auto Parts has been charged with achieving.

Earlier this year, Advance Auto Parts designed a two-year learning strategy. The strategy is designed to move learning at Advance from being a locally generated compliance activity to being a structured curriculum that enables consistent learning and career growth of the team.

The first step in this transformation was the creation of a new General Manager Onboarding Program. This was a group of field leaders that was small enough in numbers to impact quickly, yet large enough to enable the learning strategy to take hold. Every time a general manager is hired or promoted into position, they are invited



to the Advance Auto Parts headquarters, called the Store Support Center, to learn how to be successful in their role. Every Sunday, 15 to 25 new general managers, who typically have been in that role for only a few weeks, arrive in Roanoke, Virginia.

They are greeted by two trainers who immediately begin setting the stage about the transition into the role of general manager and the weight of responsibility that the role holds. Throughout the week, the new managers learn to set clear expectations, use data to make decisions, manage inventory, protect company assets, hire and develop a team, and create a culture where their teams provide excellent service to our customers. The week includes exercises that allow the general managers to practice new skills, visit a distribution center where they gain understanding of Advance's supply chain, and interact with leaders in our company headquarters. At the conclusion of the week, there is a written assessment and a simulation, where our trainers evaluate each general manager. District leaders and area trainers later follow up with the new general managers in their local stores, based on the results of their assessments.

The training team at Advance learned many lessons during the development of this program. They are presented here to help others launch similar initiatives:

Unified Message

During the past several years, Advance Auto Parts provided general managers with onboarding



Left: A group of new Advance Auto Parts general managers at a GM Onboarding session in Roanoke, Virginia

Right: New general managers participate in hands-on sessions during Onboarding class

classes conducted by trainers across the country. Over time, the message of how to be effective as a general manager evolved by location and became inconsistent. New general managers have told us they had grown frustrated during their time with Advance, because as they moved between stores they were taught many different ways of doing things, but not why they were different. By bringing the program to Roanoke, every general manager hears a single message about what is expected. They learn the standards expected in how they run their stores and why tasks are done a certain way.

Skills Require Practice

Like other, similar organizations, Advance had turned to e-Learning during the past several years as a primary method for delivering training. However, e-Learning can rarely provide practice in order to learn skills. The face-to-face method used in our new program allows participants to practice skills and receive feedback. Just as you would not want your 16-year-old child to only learn to drive through e-Learning, when team members need to learn skills, it is important to design a method that allows them to practice.

Experience and Content

Most of the content that we are teaching in the new program was being taught in the past, but in different ways that allow the participants to understand and apply

information. For example, if you tried to memorize these letters, it would be difficult:

J FKFB INAT OUP SNA SAI RS

However, if you apply a different design to the same content, you are more easily able to memorize the letters:

JFK FBI NATO UPS NASA IRS

Learn It, Try It, Do It

Each module in the program begins with an opportunity to learn what to do, how to do it and why it is important. Then, each participant is given the opportunity to practice it in a safe environment. Finally, every participant pulls information about his or her own store, to apply what they learned.

Measure and Learn

Designing a learning program is an iterative process. As the program was launched, many company leaders observed and interacted with participants, measuring the impact of the experience. By looking both at what people say and performance indicators, the training team continuously finds opportunities to improve the program.

The General Manager Onboarding Program is the first of several programs that will help Advance Auto Parts provide

consistently good service to our customers. Later this year, Advance will be launching a new Field Leadership Program and an Onboarding Curriculum for the salespeople and parts professionals in our stores. This strategy will help ensure that any time you walk into an Advance Auto Parts store, you will receive professional service and get the part you need quickly. 