Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I've Got Someone New on My Team and Nobody Has Time to Onboard Them

How to Plan Onboarding, Share Context, and Build Independence Without Leaving a New Hire With a Folder Called “Important” and Wishing Them Good Luck



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

I've Got Someone New on My Team and Nobody Has Time to Onboard Them

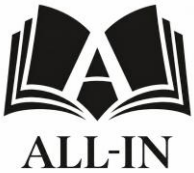
How to Plan Onboarding, Share Context, and Build Independence Without Leaving a New Hire With a Folder Called "Important" and Wishing Them Good Luck

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INTRO

At 10:23 on Tuesday morning, a new employee named Rachel receives her first assignment. Her manager wants her to review a list of customer renewals and identify accounts that might need attention. Rachel is enthusiastic, experienced, and genuinely pleased to have joined the company. There is just one complication. Nobody has explained what the company considers a renewal risk, which customers have unusual contractual arrangements, or why certain accounts must never be contacted without checking with another department. Her manager is in back-to-back meetings. Her assigned colleague is dealing with an urgent customer complaint. The shared drive contains several spreadsheets, all apparently current, despite having different numbers. Rachel opens the first one and begins working. Somewhere in the building, a preventable misunderstanding has just started warming up.

Nobody intended to put Rachel in this position. The company spent weeks recruiting her, conducted several interviews, negotiated an offer, and celebrated when she accepted. Everyone agreed that the team desperately needed another capable person. What nobody discussed seriously was how the team would find enough time to turn a capable newcomer into an effective colleague. Apparently, signing an employment contract was expected to activate a mysterious professional instinct that would reveal internal procedures, personal preferences, and the identities of people who actually make decisions. Unfortunately, even excellent candidates arrive without that particular software installed.

This is the uncomfortable arithmetic of hiring. You recruit someone because your team is overloaded, but preparing that person to contribute requires time from the same overloaded team. During the early stages, an additional employee may temporarily increase the amount of work rather than reduce it. Questions need answering, assignments need checking, and important context must be explained. When managers fail to plan for this temporary imbalance, they often interpret the resulting difficulties as evidence that the newcomer is learning too slowly. The employee feels inadequate, colleagues become impatient, and the manager begins wondering whether the recruitment decision was a mistake. In reality, the organization may simply have expected the benefits of hiring without accounting for the work required to achieve them.

Onboarding often fails because companies confuse introducing someone to the organization with preparing them to operate within it. A welcome meeting, an impressive presentation, and a collection of training materials can be useful. They can also create the comforting appearance of progress while leaving essential questions unanswered. A person might know the company's founding story, its mission statement, and the names of several executives yet remain unable to complete an ordinary assignment. Understanding the organizational chart does not explain how to handle a conflicting request from two departments. Memorizing company values does not tell you which information must be verified before making a commitment to a customer. A beautifully organized induction programme is not necessarily a useful one.

The missing ingredient is frequently context. Experienced employees carry an enormous amount of knowledge that

rarely appears in formal instructions. They know which decisions are straightforward, which require approval, which exceptions matter, and what can go wrong when a seemingly harmless detail is overlooked. Much of this knowledge has become so familiar that they no longer recognize it as something worth explaining. Ask an experienced colleague how to complete a task and you may hear, "It's pretty intuitive once you know how things work." That is rather like explaining a complicated board game by saying that the objective is to win. Technically accurate. Educationally ambitious.

Providing context does not mean telling the new employee everything the organization has ever learned. Nobody needs a three-hour account of why the previous reporting system was abandoned, including a detailed reconstruction of the disagreement between Finance and Operations. What matters is identifying the information that changes how someone performs their actual responsibilities. Why does this deadline matter? Who relies on this output? What makes a result acceptable? Which decisions can be made independently, and which require consultation? These questions transform instructions into usable judgment. They also reduce the number of situations in which employees follow the rules perfectly and still produce the wrong outcome.

Of course, the most obvious objection is time. Your calendar is already crowded, your team has targets to meet, and nobody is volunteering to become a full-time instructor. This book does not assume you have unlimited resources or the authority to rearrange the entire organization. It recognizes that some deadlines cannot move, certain specialists are genuinely unavailable, and unexpected

problems will interrupt even a carefully prepared schedule. The answer is not to pretend those limitations disappear when everyone becomes more organized. It is to distinguish essential learning from unnecessary activity and use the time available deliberately. A short, well-prepared explanation connected to a real assignment can be more valuable than a lengthy meeting covering information the employee will not need for months.

There is another trap worth avoiding: expecting the most knowledgeable person in the team to handle the entire onboarding process. Expertise matters, but experts also have their own responsibilities. Giving your busiest specialist a new trainee without adjusting expectations is an excellent way to create two exhausted employees instead of one capable newcomer. Effective onboarding requires a sensible division of responsibilities. The manager establishes priorities and standards. Colleagues contribute their specialist knowledge where needed. The new employee actively practices, asks relevant questions, and gradually takes ownership of the work. Without that clarity, everybody assumes somebody else is handling the important parts, a remarkably popular management technique with consistently disappointing results.

Independence is the destination, but it is frequently misunderstood. A genuinely independent employee is not someone who never asks for help. It is someone who understands the work well enough to make appropriate decisions, recognize uncertainty, find reliable information, and seek assistance before a problem exceeds their authority or knowledge. Independence develops through meaningful practice and responsibility, not through abandonment. Equally, it cannot develop when a manager

insists on approving every minor choice. There is a difference between protecting a beginner from avoidable mistakes and preventing that person from learning to make decisions. Knowing when to provide support and when to withdraw it is one of the central skills of effective onboarding.

Throughout this book, we will examine the obstacles that make that transition unnecessarily difficult. You will learn how to establish realistic expectations, organize practical learning, share essential context, and assess progress through actual work rather than attendance records. We will also confront the less comfortable situations: conflicting instructions, unavailable mentors, repeated mistakes, shifting priorities, and employees who struggle despite sincere efforts from everyone involved. There are no guaranteed shortcuts, and not every difficulty has a tidy solution. Sometimes the organization must change how work is allocated. Sometimes a training method needs replacing. Occasionally, an honest assessment reveals a mismatch that additional coaching will not resolve.

You do not need to become a professional trainer to make meaningful improvements. You do need to stop treating onboarding as something that happens automatically between completing urgent tasks. Start by considering what a new colleague must be able to do, what knowledge makes that possible, and who can realistically provide the necessary support. From there, the process becomes more manageable. You can identify useful learning opportunities, clarify decisions, and recognize progress without turning every working day into a training conference. The objective is not a flawless programme. It is a person who becomes

increasingly capable of doing valuable work without requiring constant rescue.

Perhaps you are opening this book because someone starts on Monday. Perhaps the new employee arrived several weeks ago and everybody is quietly wondering why the promised relief has not materialized. Either way, the situation deserves more than good intentions and an enormous folder labeled "Important." A new hire should not have to solve the mysteries of your organization before being allowed to contribute. And your existing team should not have to perform miracles to help them.

With a little more clarity, some deliberate planning, and considerably less organizational improvisation, onboarding can become a normal part of building a stronger team. You may even reach the point where the words "We've hired someone new" produce genuine optimism rather than a sudden outbreak of calendar anxiety.

Chapter 1 - The Job Description Was Clear. The Actual Job Apparently Wasn't

On her fourth day at a company that supplies equipment to independent retailers, Sophie receives what seems like a perfectly reasonable assignment. Her manager asks her to contact several suppliers and collect missing compliance documents before the end of the week. Sophie reviews the spreadsheet, identifies the missing information, and sends a series of professional, carefully written emails. By lunchtime, she has contacted everyone on the list. She feels productive. Her manager, however, looks alarmed when he discovers what she has done. Three of those suppliers are involved in sensitive contract negotiations, and the company had agreed to coordinate all communication through a particular account manager. Sophie was supposed to know this, apparently. The spreadsheet contained no warning, the assignment included no exceptions, and the account manager's name had never been mentioned. Nevertheless, the manager's first question is, "Why didn't you check with anyone before sending those emails?"

There is an uncomfortable moment in almost every poorly organized onboarding process when a new employee discovers that the written instructions and the actual rules are not quite the same thing. The written instructions describe what should happen. The actual rules include years of accumulated exceptions, personal agreements, practical shortcuts, and decisions made during meetings the newcomer never attended. Experienced colleagues navigate this landscape without conscious effort. They know which

suppliers require special treatment, which requests demand immediate escalation, and which apparent deadlines have room for negotiation. To an outsider, however, these distinctions are invisible. The organization has hired someone to perform a job while withholding, usually unintentionally, part of the information needed to perform it correctly.

The difficulty is that everyone involved believes the expectations were clear. Sophie's manager remembers discussing supplier relationships during the recruitment process. Sophie remembers being told that supplier documentation would form part of her responsibilities. Both memories are accurate. Neither establishes that she knew about three exceptional commercial arrangements. A job description tells someone what kind of work they have been hired to do, but it rarely explains how that work interacts with the organization's existing commitments. The distinction matters because employees make decisions based on the information available to them, not on information that exists somewhere in another person's head. A manager may regard an omission as obvious evidence of poor judgment when the employee had no reasonable basis for recognizing the danger.

The invisible half of the job

Consider how much of your own working day depends on knowledge nobody formally taught you. You recognize the difference between a routine request and one that needs senior attention. You know which colleague can clarify a confusing instruction, which system contains the most reliable figures, and when a polite reminder is more appropriate than an escalation. You may even know that the word "urgent" means something completely different

depending on who has written it. These judgments develop through repeated exposure to the organization. Eventually, they become so familiar that you stop noticing them. Then a newcomer arrives, and you explain a complex task with the magnificent precision of "Just handle it the usual way."

This is not necessarily carelessness. Experienced people often struggle to describe knowledge they use automatically. Ask a skilled colleague how they recognize a problematic customer request, and they may answer, "You can usually tell." They probably can. They have encountered enough situations to notice details that a beginner overlooks. Perhaps the customer's proposed deadline conflicts with the normal production cycle, or the wording suggests an expectation the company cannot reasonably meet. Those observations can be explained, but first the expert must recognize them as decisions rather than instinct. Telling a new employee to develop better instincts without identifying the relevant clues is approximately as helpful as instructing someone to become taller before reaching the top shelf.

The practical starting point is to identify the gap between three versions of the same job: what the official description says, what the manager expects, and what competent employees actually do. These versions should overlap substantially, but they are rarely identical. The official description might say "coordinate supplier communication." The manager may interpret that as ensuring requests are completed promptly while protecting important relationships. An experienced employee understands that some messages can be sent immediately, others require consultation, and certain contractual discussions belong to designated specialists. A newcomer sees the words "coordinate supplier communication" and reasonably assumes that

communicating with suppliers is part of the job. Until the distinctions become visible, the employee is working with an incomplete map.

Rather than attempting to document every possible exception, begin with decisions that have meaningful consequences. Which actions can be reversed easily? Which could create financial commitments, damage relationships, expose confidential information, or disrupt another team's work? What must be checked before those actions are taken? Sophie does not need the full history of every supplier relationship during her first week. She does need to know that particular categories of communication require approval, where to find the current restrictions, and whom to contact when the information is unclear. This is a manageable amount of knowledge with direct practical value. It gives her room to work independently without expecting her to discover sensitive exceptions through their consequences.

A new employee's prior experience changes the starting point but does not eliminate the problem. Someone moving from a similar role may already understand industry terminology, standard processes, and common risks. That person may need less instruction in the mechanics of the job and more explanation of the organization's particular decisions. Someone beginning their career may need guidance on both. Treating experienced recruits as complete beginners wastes their expertise, but treating them as though they possess your company's institutional memory is equally misguided. The useful question is not simply how many years they have worked. It is which parts of the current job they can already perform, which assumptions

come from previous environments, and what is genuinely unfamiliar.

Find the missing expectations inside real work

A surprisingly effective way to discover hidden expectations is to examine one genuine assignment before handing it to a newcomer. Imagine Sophie needs to prepare a supplier status report. Instead of giving her a large collection of procedures, her manager can work through the assignment with someone who already performs it competently. Where does that person obtain the information? What makes a supplier's status worth highlighting? Which discrepancies can be resolved independently? What happens when the available information conflicts? The important discoveries usually occur at the points where an experienced employee says, "Well, obviously, in that case..." That unfinished sentence is often where essential onboarding material has been hiding.

The result does not need to become a sixty-page training manual. It might lead to a brief assignment explanation identifying the expected output, the approved information sources, the important restrictions, and the conditions requiring escalation. For example, Sophie could be asked to produce a report showing outstanding documentation, confirmed deadlines, and cases requiring intervention. Her manager could explain that she may contact suppliers about routine missing documents but must check the relationship notes before contacting accounts involved in active negotiations. The difference between this instruction and "sort out the missing paperwork" is substantial. Sophie still performs the work herself, but she knows what success looks like and where her authority stops.

Another useful step is asking the newcomer to explain the assignment back in their own words. This is not an examination designed to catch them making mistakes. It is a way to discover whether the instructions have created the same understanding on both sides. Sophie might say, "I'll contact every supplier missing a document and update the tracker." Her manager can immediately clarify the restrictions before any messages leave the company. Alternatively, she might identify a concern the manager overlooked. Both outcomes are better than discovering the misunderstanding after several days of work. The conversation need not be long. A few minutes spent comparing interpretations can prevent hours of correcting results produced from different assumptions.

This approach also helps distinguish several problems that otherwise look identical. An employee who cannot find the relevant information has a different difficulty from one who possesses contradictory information. Someone who understands a task but lacks permission to complete it needs a different intervention from someone who does not know the expected standard. Yet managers frequently respond to all four situations with the same instruction: "You need more training." Training may help, but only if missing competence is the actual obstacle. Additional presentations will not resolve conflicting authority, inaccessible information, or expectations nobody has agreed upon. Diagnosing the wrong problem can make the onboarding programme longer while leaving the employee just as confused.

It is worth examining the team's language as well. Expressions such as "keep everyone informed," "use your judgment," and "make sure it's handled properly" sound

professional because they allow experienced colleagues to understand one another efficiently. For newcomers, they can be remarkably elastic. Does keeping everyone informed mean copying six people into every email or sending one concise update when something changes? Does using judgment mean selecting an option independently or preparing a recommendation for approval? A manager can make these expectations practical by describing an example and explaining the consequence of getting it wrong. Clarity does not require eliminating discretion. It requires showing where discretion begins.

Silence is not proof of understanding

Some new employees ask questions immediately and frequently. Others prefer to observe, take notes, and avoid interrupting busy colleagues. Neither style automatically indicates greater ability. A quiet newcomer may understand everything perfectly, or may be privately attempting to reconstruct an entire process from fragments of conversation. Likewise, a person who asks several thoughtful questions may be developing a stronger understanding than someone who simply nods. Managers should therefore resist using confidence, sociability, or silence as substitutes for evidence of competence. The better indicator is whether the employee can explain what they intend to do, carry out an appropriate assignment, and recognize when additional information is necessary.

The social environment makes this harder than it sounds. New recruits usually want to demonstrate that hiring them was a good decision. Admitting uncertainty can feel risky, particularly when colleagues appear overwhelmed. If the manager responds impatiently to basic questions, the employee may learn to conceal uncertainty rather than

resolve it. This does not mean managers must answer the same question indefinitely or remove responsibility for independent effort. It means making a distinction between someone who has not tried to use available information and someone who cannot reasonably find or interpret it. In the first situation, expectations about preparation may need clarifying. In the second, the organization may have failed to make its knowledge usable.

Managers can learn a great deal by looking at the first few completed assignments and asking about the reasoning behind them. Suppose Sophie's supplier report contains the right information but emphasizes relatively minor missing documents while overlooking a case that could delay an important delivery. The report itself reveals the result, not necessarily the underlying problem. Asking why she ranked the cases that way might show that she interpreted priority according to the number of missing items rather than their operational consequences. That is useful information. Her manager can explain the business significance of different issues and show how priority should be assessed. Correcting the spreadsheet without explaining the judgment would leave the underlying gap intact.

The same process may reveal that the organization itself is inconsistent. Perhaps two experienced employees disagree about what counts as a serious supplier risk. Perhaps the official procedure conflicts with what the commercial team currently requires. A newcomer is particularly well positioned to expose these contradictions because they have not yet learned to work around them. It would be unfair to demand perfect decisions from someone receiving incompatible instructions. When the problem belongs to the organization, resolving it belongs to the

people with the authority to establish the correct rule. A new hire should not have to conduct diplomatic negotiations between departments merely to complete an assignment responsibly.

There is no need to transform every early mistake into a major educational event. Some misunderstandings are small, easily corrected, and unlikely to recur. Others reveal missing knowledge that could affect many future decisions. The sensible response depends on their significance. Correct the immediate problem, identify whether its cause matters beyond the current assignment, and provide the necessary explanation. That is far more useful than creating a general rule that every mistake must trigger another training session. Otherwise, onboarding risks becoming a fascinating system in which employees spend more time discussing errors than learning to avoid them.

By the end of her first few weeks, Sophie should not be expected to possess the judgment of someone who has spent years negotiating with the same suppliers. She should, however, understand the purpose of her core responsibilities, the information she can trust, the decisions she may take, and the situations that require consultation. Her manager should be able to identify real progress rather than rely on a vague impression that she seems more comfortable. This is a reasonable foundation for learning more complex work. It also creates a fairer relationship: Sophie accepts responsibility for applying what she has been taught, while the company accepts responsibility for making essential expectations understandable.

The quickest way to improve an onboarding process is often to stop assuming that newcomers can see what experienced people no longer notice. Look closely at an

ordinary assignment, expose the important decisions inside it, and make the expected result clear. Once that happens, the new employee can spend less energy decoding the organization and more energy contributing to it. That is a considerably better use of someone's professional abilities than watching them fail an examination whose questions were never handed out.

Chapter 2 - Nobody Has Time, Which Is Apparently the Entire Onboarding Strategy

The phrase "We don't have time to train anyone" contains an impressive amount of organizational information. It tells you that the team is busy, that existing deadlines matter, and that everybody would prefer the new employee to become productive immediately. What it does not explain is how the employee is supposed to acquire the knowledge needed to contribute. Hiring someone because you lack capacity and then refusing to invest any capacity in preparing them is an arrangement with an obvious flaw. It resembles purchasing a new piece of equipment, leaving it in its packaging, and complaining that production has not increased. The equipment, at least, is unlikely to develop anxiety about disappointing its manager.

Consider a small technical support team responsible for maintaining commercial equipment across several locations. Its manager, Helen, has hired a new coordinator named Oliver to help organize service requests. An experienced colleague, Marcus, has been assigned to show Oliver the procedures. On Monday, Marcus spends forty minutes demonstrating how requests are categorized. On Tuesday, an urgent equipment failure interrupts their session. On Wednesday, Marcus is covering for a sick colleague. By Thursday, Oliver has a growing collection of notes but has not yet completed a meaningful assignment. Helen asks why his progress seems slow. Marcus explains that he has been too busy to train him. Oliver says he has been waiting for

someone to show him what to do next. All three are telling the truth, which is part of the problem.

When onboarding is treated as optional work, it competes with every existing demand for attention. The immediate customer problem usually wins because its consequences are visible. Training a newcomer promises benefits later, and those benefits are harder to recognize while the team is dealing with today's workload. As a result, the organization postpones learning whenever something urgent appears. The delay creates further dependence on experienced colleagues, which increases their workload and makes the next training session even easier to postpone. Nobody deliberately designed this cycle. It emerged because the company committed to hiring without making an equally concrete decision about how the new employee would become capable of doing the job.

The time is being spent anyway

A manager who believes onboarding requires no scheduled time should observe what happens during an ordinary working day. Oliver asks Marcus where to find the latest service agreement. Ten minutes later, he needs help identifying the correct priority for a request. Another interruption follows because a customer has included information Oliver does not know how to interpret. Marcus answers each question while trying to complete his own assignments. His work is repeatedly interrupted, and Oliver spends considerable time waiting for responses. By late afternoon, neither feels particularly productive. Yet the organization has technically devoted almost no time to formal training. The hours have simply disappeared into dozens of small, unplanned interactions.