

Hiring is one of the most consequential things a nonprofit leader does. But most organizations focus almost entirely on the hire itself — and then leave the new employee to figure out the rest on their own.

This guide presents a practical, eight-stage framework for building a real onboarding process — one that starts before you post the job and extends through the first year of employment. Each stage includes specific, actionable steps you can adapt to your organization's size and culture.

Done well, onboarding is one of the highest-return investments you can make in your people.

Why Onboarding Actually Matters

The research on onboarding is clear, and the numbers should get your attention.

22%

of new employees leave their job within the first 45 days. Most of them didn't leave because they couldn't do the job — they left because they didn't feel like they fit.

58%

of new hires who go through a structured onboarding process are more likely to still be with the organization three years later.

82%

improvement in new hire retention at organizations with a strong onboarding process, along with 70%+ gains in productivity. (Brandon Hall Group)

Onboarding and orientation are not the same thing. Orientation is an event. Onboarding is a process that begins the moment you decide you need to hire someone and extends through the first year of employment. The goal is not just to get someone to show up — it's to set them up to stay, grow, and contribute.

“Organizations with a strong onboarding process improve new hire retention by 82 percent and productivity by over 70 percent.”

— Brandon Hall Group, “The True Cost of a Bad Hire”

The following eight stages walk through what a thoughtful, year-long onboarding process actually looks like — and what you should be doing at each step.

STAGE 01 Pre-hire

Before you write a single word of a job posting, take time to get clear on what you actually need. This stage is often rushed — or skipped entirely — and that's where a lot of bad hires begin.

Ask yourself:

- Is this role the same as it was for the last person in it, or has it evolved? If it has, start fresh rather than recycling an old job description.
- Where does this position live in your org chart? Who will they report to, and will they have direct reports of their own?
- If someone is leaving, can you conduct an exit interview? What would they tell an incoming person? What shifted in the role over time?
- What does success actually look like in this role — in 90 days, in six months, in a year?

Build a position profile that includes more than just tasks. The best ones describe the pace of the work, the type of decision-making involved, opportunities for growth, and the organizational culture. A candidate should be able to read it and know whether they'll thrive.

STAGE 02 Job Posting

Your job posting is a marketing document. The moment it goes public, you are telling the world something about who you are as an organization. Make it count.

Key principles for an effective posting:

- Be honest about what the job is. Nearly half of people who quit in their first year cite unmet expectations as the reason. A posting that overpromises sets everyone up for disappointment.
- Write for cultural fit, not just qualifications. Your new hire is less likely to fail because they can't do the work and more likely to fail because their work style doesn't match your team. Tell them what it's actually like to work there.
- Post it widely. Social media, partner organizations, professional networks, and word of mouth all increase your chances of finding the right person.
- Acknowledge every applicant. A simple confirmation email signals that your organization is thoughtful and respectful — and that matters to candidates who are evaluating you as much as you're evaluating them.

"Your new hires probably aren't going to fail because they don't know how to do their job. More likely, they're going to fail because their work habits and personality don't mesh with your organization's culture."

STAGE 03 Hiring

The hiring stage covers resume review, interviews, and reference checks. A few things to get right here:

- Use consistent interview questions. Ask each candidate the same set of questions so you're actually comparing apples to apples. Note red flags in resumes, even on candidates you're excited about.
- When scheduling interviews, offer specific time slots rather than a wide-open range. It's more respectful of everyone's time, and it makes you look organized.
- Ask questions that reveal fit: What kind of supervision do they find helpful? What would motivate them to start looking elsewhere? What do they need from a manager to do their best work?

- Listen more than you talk. The goal of an interview is to learn about them, not to pitch your organization.
- Be transparent about your process and timeline. At the end of a first interview, tell them what happens next and when. Release candidates who aren't moving forward with a brief, gracious note.

STAGE 04 Before Starting

About a third of new employees decide whether they're going to stay within their first 30 days on the job. That clock starts before they even walk in the door.

The gap between offer acceptance and start date is a missed opportunity for most organizations. Use it.

- Send a personal welcome message, or have a peer call to introduce themselves. A bottle of wine and a t-shirt might be a bit much for most nonprofits, but a warm note from the team costs nothing.
- Share logistics in advance: dress code, parking, what software they'll use, what to bring. Nobody wants to spend their first morning figuring out where to park.
- If you use HR or onboarding software, get them set up before they arrive so they can explore on their own time.
- Send any handbook or personnel guide in advance. Don't wait until day one to tell them things they could have known on day negative-five.

STAGE 05 First Week

You only get one first day. Make it about people, not paperwork.

Research consistently shows that new hires want two things on day one: to meet their manager and to meet their colleagues. If you spend most of their first day with them alone at a desk filling out forms, you've already missed the point.

- Schedule their entire first week in advance. A structured first week signals competence and gives them confidence that someone knows what's going on. Even scheduling blocks as vague as "get your computer set up" is better than open time.
- Spread paperwork out, or better yet, have them complete it before they start. Use online onboarding tools if you have them. This frees up in-person time for actual relationship building.
- Give them a ready workstation. ID, accounts, passwords, supplies — all of it waiting when they arrive.
- Schedule a welcome lunch with the team and pay for it.
- Send a company-wide introduction email so colleagues aren't left wondering who the new person is.
- Schedule one-on-one time with every relevant colleague in the first two weeks. This helps the new hire understand how the work connects, and it lays the foundation for future collaboration.

"Feeling socially accepted was a key factor in newcomer success. Integrating into the social network matters, in part, because it brings greater access to information and resources."

— Harvard Business Review, "Your New Hires Won't Succeed Unless You Onboard Them Properly"

STAGE 06 First Three Months (90-Day Introductory Period)

The first 90 days are a training period. Treat them like one.

Resist the urge to put new hires to work immediately at full capacity. Research suggests it takes up to eight months for a new employee to reach full productivity. Rushing that timeline doesn't speed things up — it creates gaps that show up later.

- Assign a buddy or mentor. Someone the new hire can bring questions to without worrying they'll seem incompetent. The mentor benefits too: it's a chance to demonstrate leadership and build internal trust.
- Set clear, written goals for both the short and long term. Vagueness is the enemy. A short-term goal might be "complete onboarding training by the end of week three." A long-term goal might be "independently manage X by month six." Both should be measurable.
- Discuss expectations for soft skills, not just technical ones. How do they demonstrate initiative? What does good judgment look like in their role?
- Check in regularly — both formally (scheduled 1:1s) and informally (just popping your head in). Make communication feel safe and two-way.
- Take notes throughout these 90 days, both positive and developmental, so the 90-day review isn't a surprise for either of you.
- Hold the 90-day review as scheduled. Don't wait until something goes wrong to have the first real conversation about performance.

STAGE 07 At Six Months

By six months, your new hire has enough context to tell you things you genuinely can't see from where you sit. Ask them.

New employees won't offer honest feedback on day one — they're still trying to make a good impression. But at six months, they have a real perspective on what's working, what's confusing, and what could be better. That perspective is valuable.

- Ask directly: How are you doing? Do you have what you need? Is anything getting in the way of doing your best work?
- Consider using a brief anonymous survey if you're getting feedback from multiple staff, or if you want to create a channel that feels lower-stakes.
- Follow through on reasonable suggestions. Nothing kills feedback culture faster than asking for input and then doing nothing with it.

"In a recent poll, 38 percent of employees felt that when leaders dismiss their ideas, they tend to lack initiative. An active and committed employee base is one of the benefits of listening."

— Society for Human Resource Management

STAGE 08 At Twelve Months (Annual Review)

If you've done the work in stages one through seven, the annual review shouldn't feel like a big deal. And that's the point.

The annual review is not a verdict. It's a conversation — and a good one, when the groundwork has been laid throughout the year.

- Schedule the review at about nine months, so both of you have time to prepare.
- Ask the employee to complete the review form themselves while you complete the same form for them. This parallel process creates a shared reference point and surfaces discrepancies worth discussing.
- Do not use the annual review to surface long-standing problems for the first time. If something has been an issue, it should have come up before now. Ambushing someone in an annual review isn't feedback — it's a failure of the ongoing process.
- Lead with the employee's contributions and growth. Then get specific about goals for the year ahead.
- Ask them: Are you happy? Am I giving you the right level of support? What do you need from me going forward?

By the end of the first year, you should have a team member who understands the work, fits the culture, has a trusted relationship with their manager, and has a clear sense of where they're headed. That doesn't happen by accident.

Summary: The Year-Long Onboarding Process

STAGE 01	STAGE 02	STAGE 03	STAGE 04	STAGE 05	STAGE 06	STAGE 08	STAGE 08
Pre-Hire	Job Posting	Hiring	Before Starting	First Week	First 3 Months	At 6 Months	At 12 Months
Clarify the role before you post	Disclose the real details of the job	Use consistent interview questions	Send a welcome message or call	Make day 1 about people, not paperwork	Set clear, measurable short- and long-term goals	Solicit honest feedback from the new hire	Schedule the annual review at 9 months
Review org chart placement	Write for cultural fit, not just qualifications	Listen as much as you talk	Share logistics (dress, parking, tools)	Schedule their first two weeks in advance	Invest in training without rushing it	Ask what's working and what isn't	Both parties complete the review form
Conduct an exit interview if replacing someone	Post widely: social, partners, colleagues	Check references thoughtfully	Set up systems before day 1	Assign a buddy or go-to colleague	Hold the 90-day review — no surprises	Implement reasonable suggestions	Make it a conversation, not a verdict
Define success criteria up front	Acknowledge every applicant	Communicate your timeline clearly	Signal that you are glad they're coming	Give them a ready workstation	Check in often, formally and casually	Keep communication two-way	Ask what they need from you going forward

Want help designing an implementing an onboarding process at your organization?

Book a free 30-minute discovery call at www.spiegelconsulting.com — or reach Noah directly at noah@spiegelconsulting.com or 615-997-0944.