

A Manager's Guide to Hosting Apprentices

Apprentices are different from experienced employees. They have similar motivations but are just beginning their career journey. They have joined your company to learn about a career and build job skills. Your apprentices will be energized and excited about this opportunity. As the supervisor, you can keep that enthusiasm alive. A few ideas to motivate ongoing engagement:

- Include them in your team meetings or management meetings
- Find time for apprentices to formally share or present their work to management or senior leadership
- Ensure they feel part of a team -- include your apprentices in team lunches or celebrations, locate their desk near others, etc.
- Help them visualize how their work impacts the business -- take them on a tour of facilities and introduce them to customers
- Connect tasks and work output to the success of the organization
- Ensure they meet with their mentor daily

In addition to motivating these young apprentices, you have a great opportunity to help shape the workforce of tomorrow by leading and training them with the foundational skills and technical skills they will not get anywhere else. Here are some strategies for effectively managing apprentices:

Clear Communication Comes First

When it comes to managing Apprentices, start with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. They need to know what professionalism is, and what you expect. They likely do not have the job experience to understand what many of us now assume and infer when we take a new position. This is part of being clear when you communicate.

1. Explain your reason logically and briefly.

While they might not have the knowledge and experience that experienced apprentices have accumulated over the years, teens have highly sensitive lie detectors and can see through bad logic.

This program is designed around learning, so telling the Apprentice to do something just because you said so will not have the same positive outcome as providing a logical and business-based reason that will help them learn how their role contributes to the success of the company.

Also remember that if you over-communicate, teens may start to tune you out. Be succinct and to the point, never talk down to them or patronize them. They may shut down and not ask a great question or bring up a creative idea.

2. Speak directly.

Without being overly forceful or overbearing, speak directly to apprentices. Whether you are relaying rules, tasks, praise, or correction, speak to them directly. Avoid roundabout communication.

Speaking directly to your apprentice does two things: you know your message is undiluted and understood, and you are also helping your apprentices grow. They need the experience of communicating directly with their manager.

3. Outline your expectations.

Tell your apprentices in clear language what you expect from them, both in what they should do and what they should not do. This should happen during the interview and onboarding process, during any performance reviews, and regular one-on-one meetings and check-ins throughout the week. Ensure that your feedback is calibrated with the apprentice mentor.

Tell them what you expect from them in regards to proper behavior. Tell them what needs to be completed this week, or this day. Instead of telling them to “be polite”, tell them how to be polite. They might not actually know. This is how they learn professional behavior and the habit of communicating professionally.

Find What Motivates Apprentices

Everyone is different when it comes to motivation. Some are self-motivated, and you will merely need to point them in the right direction before they are off and running. Others, though smart and motivated, need to be told specifically what you want them to do and when you want it done. Despite these differences, though, there are a few key motivators that all apprentices will appreciate and respond to:

1. Show what’s in it for them.

Every employee wants to know what’s in it for them, and your apprentices are no different. By helping them see “what’s in it for them”, you can help avoid bad attitudes and habits.

- Provide positive reinforcement of their learning and skill advancement
- Public recognition for a job well done
- Input into things that matter. For example, if your apprentices meet a goal, reward them
- by letting them choose the next project or team activity

2. Let them know their voice is heard.

Your apprentices will want to know that they have a voice. This young workforce prides themselves on being individualistic, and have strong opinions. Give them a chance to share thoughts and ideas about the workplace, and put into place a system for valid ideas to actually happen. Get their input on:

- Processes
- Products
- Social media marketing
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By opening the door for input, you may find an apprentice who has a creative streak or a skill you weren’t aware of. Give them duties that fit those skills, and watch his or her self-motivation skyrocket. Whether you use a suggestion box, meetings, or a break room chart where apprentices can vote on an idea, success with this will mean providing a format to safely share ideas and vet them.

3. Let them know they are safe.

Apprentices need to know they are safe. They want to know they will not be bullied, threatened, or embarrassed by other workers or by management. While you still need to enforce rules, it is important that you do not use public shaming. Shame and humiliation de-motivates apprentices in the long run and does not reinforce the program. Let your apprentices know you have an open door. Provide a way for them to share ideas safely, even if this means anonymously.

4. Show them you care about them.

Apprentices will want to know that they matter. As their manager, you are a role model and a different influence in their lives than parents or teachers. You have the unique ability to help them learn what it takes to do well in their future careers.

Help them build a network within your own network. Help them discover skills or abilities they aren't aware they have. Give them a chance to flex their own "work" muscles by giving them leadership opportunities right there at work.

One huge caveat: even though you care about your apprentices, you must remember that you are their manager and not their parent or friend. Maintain that distinction. When a manager disciplines or says "no", it might sting but most apprentices will get over it.

Dealing with The Challenges

Every generation has its quirks, and the current generation is no different. Today's youth need face-to-face time in order to feel like they are important. Additionally, they may have been highly supervised by their parents for most of their life meaning that they expect you, the manager, to continue the practice. They will not arrive with the ability to see what needs to be done; they will need you to tell them what to do and how to do it. They have not always been used to the kinds of work other generations have done, and so you will need to train them.

More quick tips:

1. Keep apprentices occupied.

Don't give them a chance to get bored. Not only does time pass more quickly when we're busy, the apprentice is here to learn. If in training, have the apprentice actually do the work, not just watch you or an experienced co-worker. If working independently, provide a list of tasks and discuss the order of importance.

2. Course correct immediately.

If you find that your apprentices are off task, making mistakes, not understanding, or behaving poorly, deal with it immediately. Otherwise, it becomes a habit and your apprentices will get the idea that you're not all that serious about your expectations and policies. Remember, they are here to learn and your feedback is an important part of that process.

Of course you should handle corrective conversations one-on-one, in private, and not shame them in front of others. Give them the opportunity to include their mentor or HR if it makes them more comfortable. In a caring and candid manner, directly explain the situation, the impact on the business and/or the team, what you expect from them from here on out, and what will happen if the behavior continues.

3. Know the difference between willful behavior and immaturity.

Not all apprentices of the same age are at the same maturity level. What might seem like bad behavior might not be willful at all, but immaturity or simply not knowing better. For this reason, the above method (handling it privately) is always the best first step. If bad behavior is based in immaturity, your apprentice simply needs to be reminded of their career readiness training and company expectations.

4. Ask the apprentice what they think.

Sometimes asking the apprentice why they think they are having the meeting, and then asking them what they think the solution is will reveal surprising answers. Let the apprentice be given a chance to critique their own behavior and explain the situation in the context that they understand it. By doing this, you are allowing them to tell you what they think happened, which feeds into their need to know that they have a voice and that their voice matters.

5. Follow-up with positive feedback or readjust.

Bring the apprentice in for follow-up at a later date. Commend their progress, ask how things are going, and if there are any problems. Be genuinely interested. Doing this helps the apprentice feel like you care, you weren't simply handing out mindless punishment, and that you really meant what you said.

Your apprentices will be full of energy and creativity, and when channeled in a positive way, they are a huge asset to your team and your company. As with any employee, your key to success will lie in communication, motivation, and solid skill development that is engaging and rewarding.