

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/a-well-designed-first-day>

Chip Heath, professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, shares an example of how a company can make a new hire's first day the special occasion it should be - but often isn't because organizations fail to seize the moment. Heath, an expert in organizational behavior, describes how the tractor maker John Deere fills an employee's first day with experiences that build pride and insight about the company, and meaningful connections with colleagues.



Transcript

- Well, I think there are certain moments when you can make a big impact on your employees or on your customers and these are the tools that you have available to you.. So one of the stories I love from the book is John Deere.. Classic American company, they make tractors and in this country a lot of people know John Deere because we're only, most of us are only, a couple of generations from people that actually farmed the ground, but as you enter China and India, there's not that history and there not that connection.. And so they took something that is an important moment of life, but we typically don't honor it much, is the first day on the job.. And I don't know about you and your last job, but the typical experience I think, of the first day on the job is you show up and the person at the reception desk is really happy to see you, but they actually thought you were coming in early next week, you know, and so somebody will stop by and rescue you and take you to your cubical, which is the monitor's there, but the CPU unit isn't hooked up and the person is late for a meeting and so they kinda drop you off and they grab for an employee manual that's sitting in the cubical from the last owner and say, well, here, why don't you read, look through this for a while.. And so you spend your morning reading expense reimbursement policy and assorted other technical things.. Finally somebody, right before lunch, takes pity on you and whisks you around the office to meet 23 people who are themselves late for a meeting or late for lunch and so you feel a little guilty for interrupting them.. It's not an optimal experience, as a first day.. And so what John Deere did is they said, let's design this so that it makes an impact on people and you only have one first day on your job, so what they did was they assigned everybody a texting buddy and so you've been texting back and forth with this person and they tell you what, how to get to the location, they tell you how to dress for the first day, but they show up and they hand you your favorite beverage, it's a caramel latte or chai latte or you know, whatever it is that you've been talking about, cause they worked that into the text message.. On the monitors on the front wall have your name on it, say Welcome, you know, Chip Heath, and as the person takes you to your cubical, there's a banner that stretches up a little bit above the cubical farm, couple of feet above and so people can look across and see that there are new people on the floor and then stop by at their leisure during the day..

Your first, the monitor is set up, is hooked up and it's showing beautiful pictures of, screenshots of tractors and you wouldn't think that there were beauty shots of tractors, but you get a tractor out in the sunset and you're plowing the last few rows before the evening and it's a beautiful thing, scrolling by, and you click the screensaver off and your first email is there from the CEO of John Deere and he appears in a little video and he talks about the 175 year history of this company, this was a company that was founded by John Deere.. He had a patent for a plow that looks pretty innocuous, but it was a plow that was less likely to foul up with roots as you're plowing the ground.. And over on the side of the desk, there's actually a little toy model of the plow and so you look at this thing and say, 175 years ago, John Deere got a patent on this because he saved farmers time and allowed them to plow more and the CEO talks about the fact that this is a company that's devoted to helping the world have more food and more shelter, those are two needs that we desperately need and so he says welcome to the most important work you'll ever do and you know, we hope you'll have a long history with John Deere.. Your manager stops by right before lunch and says, you know, I'd love to have lunch with you tomorrow, but today, I'd like you to go out to lunch with a few of your peers.. And so you meet up with four or five of your peers at lunch and they talk about the projects that they're working on and why they think they're important and so you think at the end of that day, elevation.. Sensory experience, there's not a lot there, but you got your favorite beverage in the morning, you got the model of the plow that you can pick up and hold in your hand, you've got the beautiful shots of tractors.. Lot more on pride and insight.. I mean, you may not have known the history, the 175 year history of this company.. You may not have thought about the fact that I'm doing work that I can be proud of, cause I'm helping people eat, I'm helping people have shelter over their heads and connection is just off the

charts.. You've got your texting buddy, you've got the people that you meet at lunch, you've got a first email from the CEO and that's a good first day..

And, in fact, the reaction was a lot of people that had been in the company before they started this program, was like, can I quit so I can go back and have that as my first day? Now, my question to all of us is, why isn't every first day kinda like that?..