The 8-Step Framework diagram:

1 — DEFINE the employee behaviors (Fundamentals) that drive your success
2 — RITUALIZE the practice of your Fundamentals
3 — SELECT people who are the right fit for your culture
4 — INTEGRATE new hires into your culture
5 — COMMUNICATE your culture throughout the organization
6 — COACH to reinforce your culture
7 — LEAD your culture by example
8 — DRIVE your culture through accountability

INTEGRATE new hires into your culture

Think about the last time you started in a new job. You probably felt a bit uncomfortable, even nervous, not really knowing what it would be like. What will be expected of me? Will I fit in? How will I ever learn the written and unwritten rules that govern the way things get done? You were like a sponge, trying to figure it all out.

If you've been at your company for many years, and especially if you're the CEO, you may not remember what's it's like to be new, and consequently, you may fail to appreciate just how impactful those early days are. I often say that the first week a new employee spends in your company is actually the most important week in their entire career. It's that impactful.

First impressions

This is the first impression new hires are getting of how the company functions. Are people friendly? Do they work as a team or is it "every man for himself"? Is leadership respected? Are people passionately engaged in the company's mission or just "punching the clock"? Do they have pride in their work or are they doing the minimum necessary to get by? These first impressions are typically imprinted in a powerful way, and they're difficult to change later.

And by the way, those first impressions actually start long before a person's first day of work. They start as soon as the person has any interaction with your organization, certainly with the interview at a minimum. What was the experience like when they applied for the job? How about when they were scheduling the

The Fundamentals In Action
The tagline for Northwestern Benefit Corp. of GA, an Atlanta-based employee benefits consulting company, is "Intentionally Different," and their difference is mostly driven by their culture. They've been practicing their Fundamentals (they call them "Tenets") for more than twelve years, and have grown in that time from a staff of 20 to now more than 130 professionals. Given that rapid growth, it's not surprising they place tremendous emphasis on how they integrate new employees into their culture.
Their CEO, David Asbury, is intimately involved throughout integration. "It actually starts pre-integration," says David. "Before a person's first day of work, we send a book, our Tenets, a welcome letter, and even the integration schedule. On their first day, their workstation is set up, they have business cards, passwords, etc. I personally spend two hours with them on that first day, mostly focusing on our Tenets. We want to show new people from the very beginning just how serious we are about doing things right."

interview? Remember that they're a blank slate and every experience is creating an imprint.

Are you orchestrating every aspect of that experience to create the impression you want, or is it happening haphazardly? Too often it's the latter, and it has an enormous impact on your success in building the culture you want. In this chapter, we'll take a closer look at how you can build a world-class integration program that supports and deepens your culture by managing those early impressions and setting people up for success.

Writing the prescription

There's an analogy I like to use when thinking about the importance of orchestrating those early experiences. Imagine you're starting at our company and on your first day I hand you a pair of prescription glasses to wear. The glasses serve as a filter through which you see everything. I could hand you three different pairs of glasses with three different prescriptions, and if you looked at the same thing it would appear different based on which glasses you were wearing. The glasses influence your perception.

You have the ability to write the prescription for the glasses a new person puts on. They're going to see, hear, and experience a variety of things, and you can influence the interpretation they apply to those events. Done properly, you have an opportunity to shape their perceptions. In a sense, it's like brainwashing, but in a healthy, productive way. And if you don't take advantage of that opportunity at the very beginning, it's like allowing the new person to walk up to a pile of eyeglasses and randomly choose which ones to wear. And who knows what the prescription is or what they're seeing? Even worse, what if one of those cynical

jerks I referred to earlier gets to the new person and gives her their glasses? Just think of the impact that would have.

Remember, as well, that these early impressions tend to be lasting. It's like a mold that at first is flexible and malleable, and over time it becomes hardened and more rigid. We tend to be the same way. Once we form our judgments and opinions, these views color our perception in a way that supports what we've come to believe. It's incredibly hard to undo this later. That's why it's so critical that we seize the opportunity to write that prescription as early as possible.

Integration

You may remember from my overview of the 8-Step Framework in Chapter 3 that I prefer to use the word "integration" vs. "orientation" or "onboarding" because I think the word carries with it a different connotation. It's a word of assimilation that conveys a sense that we're going to help you to become a part of who we are. I'll be using that word throughout this book, though you can of course use whatever word you prefer.

To be clear, as I talk about integration, I'm referring mostly to how new employees get inculcated into the organization. I'm generally not including their job-specific training in this definition, but rather how they learn all about the organization, its culture, what it does, and how it does it.

A long-term perspective

As you think about the investment in time and resources you're willing to devote to integration, it's important to view it

from a long-term perspective. For example, let's assume for the sake of illustration that your integration process is one week long (yours may be shorter or longer). If you look at this from the perspective of the first month, you'd think, "That's crazy. We can't afford to lose 1/4 of the productive time available for this person!" But if you look at it from the perspective of a year, it's only 1/52 of the year, or less than 2% spent on integration. And if you look at this from the perspective of a five- or ten-year horizon, it would be virtually inconsequential. Think of someone you hired ten years ago and imagine that for the first week you didn't let her do any real work. You probably wouldn't even remember that fact, and yet, the impact of integrating her effectively would be felt throughout her entire career. That's what I mean when I say you have to think of your investment in integration from a long-term perspective.

Being uncompromising

I would also suggest that the consistency with which you approach integration should be "uncompromising." By uncompromising, I mean that every single employee goes through integration. This is the same kind of approach I advocate for selecting the right people for your team. Just as we don't want to ever bring in someone we don't believe is going to be a good fit, we also don't ever want to start someone without having him go through a proper integration.

Being uncompromising here also requires the same kind of leadership discipline I referred to in the selection process. There will always be times in which expediency challenges you to compromise. When a key manager suggests, "I know we usually like people to go through integration first, but we're really desperate to get this person online and productive, so how 'bout we skip it

this time and just catch up on it later," you have to be the leader who keeps that long-term perspective in mind and insists that we bring the person in the "right way."

At RSI, all employees went through the exact same integration, whether they were a manager or a receptionist or a bookkeeper. Once they completed integration, they went to more job-specific training for their role, but the basic things they needed to learn about our company, and the way in which they learned them, were the same.

While that worked for RSI, I recognize that many organizations have people at vastly different pay levels and with vastly different levels of turnover. It may not make any sense at all to spend an entire week integrating someone who's a part-time, hourly worker in a high-turnover position. With that being said, the critical point is that you design an integration program that's appropriate for your workforce, and that you're consistent in having every new person go through that program.

In some companies, it may be entirely appropriate to have different integration programs for different people. Perhaps the full-time salaried employees have a one-week integration, the full-time hourly staff have a one-day integration, and the part-time staff have a two-hour integration. Again, the key issue is consistency. Every new person goes through the designated integration program before beginning to work. This discipline will pay big dividends not only in terms of the culture, but also in terms of their ultimate productivity.

I'll share with you in this section some of the elements of the RSI integration program simply to give you a sense of what a world-class program can look like. I should point out that what I'm describing didn't start that way. Rather, it was the result of years of iterations of improvement that came from a disciplined

commitment to creating maximum impact. I offer it both as a source of inspiration as well as a source of some good ideas that you can apply. But while it's great to envision what it can eventually look like, it's equally important that I provide you with a blueprint for how to begin, no matter where you are, and how to build from there.

RSI Integration

At RSI, our integration began long before a person's first day of work. Every interaction that a potential candidate had with us, from speaking to our internal recruiter to coming in for an interview, was handled in a way that created the impression we wanted—namely that we were professional, friendly, helpful, and extraordinarily well-run.

Once a hiring decision was made, our HR director would give me the person's name, home address, and a little background information. I would then send a personal, hand-written note to the employee at home. It wasn't a form letter, and it wasn't something signed and sent by my executive assistant. It was a handwritten note from me. This was an important opportunity to demonstrate two of our Fundamentals: "Practice the 'human touch'" and "Create a feeling of friendliness and warmth in every interaction."

Several days later, the new person would get another piece of mail from me. This included our Fundamentals card and a personal note explaining what this was and asking them to review it before their first day. Several days later, yet another letter would arrive that included a one-page description of a group of five Fundamentals that were collectively known as "The Collaborative Way." And believe it or not, they'd get one last piece of mail from me before their first day! This was a CD that I recorded with

a further description of our philosophy, as well as a bit about our differentiation.

When the new person showed up on the first day, there would be a mentor waiting to greet her, there would be a welcome sign in the reception area, her workstation would be ready with her nameplate, her business cards would be printed and at her desk, and there would be a welcome plant at her desk as well. There would also be an "integration binder" that included the complete schedule for integration as well as all the supporting documents, reading material, and homework assignments she would need throughout integration. The schedule detailed every hour, where she would be, with whom she would be meeting, and the topic to be covered.

The length of our integration grew and shrunk many times over the years as we experimented with different ideas, but it typically ranged from about 5–8 days. During that time, the new person would meet with many different employees who would teach her everything from our strategy to our history to our differentiation to how we made money (we practiced Open Book Management) to what each department does to how to work the photocopy machine.

Every integration began with me on the first morning of the first day, as this was my best chance to "brainwash" people from the very outset. I spent two hours talking about our culture and our Fundamentals, demonstrating my passion for our culture. If we were trying to schedule an integration class and I wasn't available on the intended first day, we'd hold off their start until I was! It was that important to start people in the right way.

Given the amount of time and effort our entire organization put into how we brought in new members of the team, we always tried to group people together so that there would be an

integration class of typically 3–5 people. We would simply speed up hiring in one department and slow it down in another so that we could make this work. Beyond the obvious efficiency from an organizational perspective, there's also a special bond that forms between employees going through a common experience, and they stay close to their integration "classmates" throughout their career.

On the last day of integration, the group would work together on the "RSI test." This was an open-book test that required them to answer a wide variety of questions that ranged from being able to explain our differentiation to knowing trivia about our employees. It was almost 20 pages of information and typically took 3–4 hours to complete. They would also complete a self-assessment that asked them to rate their understanding of a variety of topics on a 1–10 scale, as well as to provide feedback and suggestions for improvement. I should note that every single integration we did included some incremental improvement over the previous one based upon this feedback.

Below are some actual comments from employees' self-assessments. They give you a sense of just how impactful this process was:

- *"I was impressed by many things, but the most important was the company's culture. It is truly amazing how much effort is taken during the recruiting process to find employees who are the right cultural fit for RSI."*

- *"Any company can explain their vision, mission, and values, but I was impressed to find that the Fundamentals were actually practiced by all RSI employees."*

- *"I have been most impressed with the unified culture that has been promoted here. Everyone truly believes and adheres to this code, and that is extremely impressive."*

- *"The culture created within this organization is one I heard a great deal about during the interview process, but even still, I would never have imagined it being so real and complete."*
- *"I have been most impressed with RSI's culture and how each employee actually fits the culture. It is continually practiced by everyone, including the executive management, which I feel is very important."*

About 4–6 weeks post-integration, I also took the group to lunch. It was a chance for me to check in with them to see how things were going now that they were actually doing work. It was also a chance to get additional input about improvements we could make to better prepare them to be successful in our organization.

I could write an entire book just on integration, but I imagine by now you're getting a pretty good sense of what this was like and its impact on our people and our culture. What was happening in integration was actually happening on two concurrent levels. On one level was the foundational information they were learning to prepare them for success. In fact, after one week with us, they probably knew more about our company and our people than they knew in ten years at their previous company!

But on an entirely different level, think about the messages they were receiving about *how* we work. They were learning about planning and preparedness and details and execution. They were realizing that they'd joined a "major league" organization and that we play at an incredibly high level. And if we hired right, they were so

excited about this. We hadn't let them do any work yet, and they'd be chomping at the bit, eager to prove to us that they're worthy of this opportunity! Note as well, that it would be rather incongruous of us to expect them to do high-quality work with our clients, but not be fully prepared for them. We need to show our people the same kind of focus and attention that we expect them to show to our clients.

Now compare this to how most of us begin our careers with a company. We show up on the first day and the company may or may not be prepared for us. We don't have business cards. Our phone isn't set up yet, but we're told that IT should get to us soon. We're whisked around and quickly introduced to some of the staff but can hardly remember their names by the end of the day. We spend half the day filling out HR paperwork and benefit enrollment forms. Does this sound familiar?

Companies spend so much time, effort, and money in recruiting, trying to identify and bring in the best people, but then so often fall woefully short in how they integrate these people. And then they wonder why it didn't work out. If they took just a fraction of those resources that were spent on hiring and dumped them back into integration, it would have an enormous impact.

How to begin

At this point you understand how important integration is and have at least a mental image of what it could ultimately grow to be. But that's not where you are now and you need to start somewhere. How do you begin?

The first thing I would tell you is that I'd rather you start small and be consistent than build the most amazing program that took so much time and effort that you stopped doing it after a few times. As I constantly repeat throughout this book, if we can't make it last, it's not worth doing.

There are three elements that *every* integration program should include. Let me explain them here.

Culture

As a new employee, somehow during integration I have to be *taught* the culture of this company. When I say taught, I mean that someone has to actually sit down and explain it to me, rather than having me try to figure it out on my own. The best person to do this is the CEO. No one can speak about it with as much passion and conviction as the CEO. If that's not feasible, because perhaps the employee works in a different location, then it should be the highest-ranking person who is available—perhaps a VP or a plant manager.

Beyond the passion that the CEO can demonstrate, there's also the symbolic significance that's communicated when it's done by the CEO. We're showing the new person just how serious we are and how committed we are to our culture.

This could be as simple as a 30-minute discussion, with the CEO talking about the Fundamentals and their importance and then highlighting a handful of her favorite ones. Over time, this can grow to a much more in-depth discussion that includes a variety of executives and other employees. It could eventually include an eLearning component, video training, and any number of other components. The key is that the culture has to be specifically taught to new people.

Context

The second thing I have to learn as a new employee is what I call "context." By context, I mean that the new employee has to learn how what he does fits into the larger picture of what your company does. If you simply put them in the corner and tell them to do their job, but they don't understand how it connects with the big picture, not only will it be less satisfying for the employee, but you'll also be limiting the extent to which they can make a meaningful contribution.

At RSI, this included learning our history, our strategy, how we differentiated ourselves, who we sold to, who our competitors were, how we made money, what each department did, etc. This helped people to feel a part of something larger and helped them to understand how they fit in.

Here again, this can start very small and doesn't have to be complex. In fact, it can be as simple as a 30-minute review of the organizational chart, explaining each department and their role, and perhaps highlighting the department in which the new person participates. Or for some, it might be some kind of linear chart that shows each of the steps in the value chain from sales to operations to finance, again highlighting the new person's role and explaining how her job connects to the people before her and after her.

This could grow in time to perhaps meeting with people in each department who explain their roles, or even spending time in those departments seeing what they do, or if appropriate, actually working in other departments. But it can start with as little as a brief overview with a chart and a highlighter. The point is that the better I understand my role, the greater my potential contribution will be.

Logistics

The third element that every integration program should include is what I call "logistics." By this, I mean the day-to-day mundane things people need to know in order to function in the organization. These are simple things like

- How do I work the photocopy machine?
- Who do I talk to if I need new business cards?
- Where do you get lunch around here?
- Who do I talk to if my computer breaks down?
- How do I work the voicemail system?
- What's the combination for the back door?
- Where do you get more toilet paper for the men's room?

As mundane as these topics are, we often fail to explain them to new people, and as a result, we slow the process of their becoming fully functioning, productive members of our team. The faster a new person starts to feel relaxed, comfortable, and confident, the sooner he'll be productive.

Here's the easiest way to address this topic: Go to the last five people you've hired and ask them one simple thing: "Name three things you wish people told you on the first day but they didn't." Then compile the list and make sure someone meets with the new people and explains everything on the list. Here again, we don't want to simply stuff the list in the new hire paperwork. Rather, we want to actually review these items with them.

Again, start small. Even if it's just a two-hour program, make sure you cover culture, context, and logistics, and make sure that every integration includes at least one iterative improvement from the previous one. If you do this, over time, you'll develop a truly world-class integration program, and more

importantly, you'll begin to see the powerful impact it can have on your culture.