

Internal medicine

It's intern season—no, that's not when we don our camouflage and head into the woods to reduce the surplus population of interns (though it may seem that way to some of the interns).

Rather, it's the time of year when workplaces are flooded with college students and recent graduates who want to learn how to work (a skill they're too-seldom taught in the classroom or at home—but that's another diatribe for another day).

We more-seasoned professionals are their teachers, and as such, we should set high expectations. We're not doing interns any favors by acting like they're doing us a favor.

Yes, interns get paid little or nothing. Yes, they get stuck with grunt work. Yes, they're working on spec, with no promise of a real job. And yes, we senior people should be encouraging and nurturing.

But that doesn't mean we should expect less from an intern than we would from any other entry-level co-worker. These interns will someday be our colleagues, and now is our chance to make sure they don't turn out to be slackers or screw-ups or sycophants.

So instead of worrying that we will squash their fragile spirits, let's get them in shape for the real world. A few examples:

- A satin strapless dress is not appropriate office attire. Same goes for dirty feet in rubber flip-flops. As a senior person, you should say so (unless of course you're a senior person in a satin strapless dress or rubber flip-flops).
- Hangovers, dead cell phones, love affairs gone wrong: none of these is an adequate excuse for missing work. Make your expectations clear, and hold interns to them.
- Sitting through a three-hour meeting without contributing is unacceptable. Require your intern to speak up—and promise forgiveness if she or he says something silly.
- When an intern is doing something disastrous, step in and stop him or her. Waiting for a more private “teaching” moment could cost you money, customers and your reputation.
- A bad intern is a bad employee. If you've made an honest effort to improve an intern's poor performance and nothing has changed, fire her or him. That, too, is valuable preparation for a real job.

I've worked with probably 100 interns over the years, and I've hired three of them for permanent positions. The other 97? They're working with you now.

Well said.

“The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say, ‘The children are now working as if I did not exist.’

Maria Montessori, Italian educator