



Developing Your Kitchen Staff

CULINARY CONNECTION



Tactics on how to hire and retain the kind of employees you need to succeed

Keeping our kitchens well-staffed is one of the biggest challenges we face in health care and senior living today. While steady work and early evenings—relative to a typical restaurant or hotel—are practical advantages to working in a senior-living kitchen, these benefits are often not enough to attract the best workers to our corner of the industry. Promising workers the opportunity to work their way up the ladder as far as they can go, and then delivering on that promise, is a great way to hire and retain the kind of employees we need to succeed.

Our industry's relatively low barriers for entry-level positions is coupled with a constant need for well-trained, capable workers and leaders. Because the abilities and

knowledge required to succeed can be learned on the job, those willing to work hard are presented with the perfect opportunity to stand out and be rewarded for their efforts, to everyone's benefit. Our job as managers is to give our workers the opportunity to stand out, and then reward them when they do. Let's take a look at just how to accomplish that.

LOOK FOR KEY APTITUDES

The key aptitudes of any successful kitchen worker, from pot washer to chef, are: organization, attention to detail, speed, curiosity, consistency, and the ability and willingness to accurately follow directions. I consider



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these traits aptitudes because, even though they can be improved upon, some natural ability and comfort level with each skill is important. If someone doesn't show at least some spark in each of these areas, trying to move them up the ranks might prove to be an uphill climb. For both of you.

Once you identify someone with the right aptitudes and attitude, keep your eyes open for opportunities for them to learn new skills and advance. At the same time, realize that some people don't want to advance! It's okay for someone to stay in the same position year after year, doing a great job, if that's what makes them happy. But be sure to notice when someone is doing a great job and can't wait to move up. With that person, your two choices are to give them new opportunities or to lose them. Part of your job is the ability to tell those two kinds of workers apart. A conversation, where you really listen, can work wonders in understanding the mindset of your employees.

HELP STAFF SHINE

Basic culinary skills are the building blocks defining the various positions through which a kitchen worker

aspires and progresses, from pot washer to executive chef. While not everyone can rise to the top, it's not that great a leap from pot washer to prep cook. The basic work ethic that would make a pot washer stand out—showing up on time, an eagerness to work hard as part of a team, plus the aptitudes noted above—are exactly what you want in a prep cook. If their curiosity is higher-than-average, you've got someone with real potential.

When you identify a worker as a good candidate for advancement, the first competency to teach them is knife skills. Knife skills can't be faked and are one of the easiest ways to spot a real professional in any kitchen. Be sure that your budding prep cook gets the guidance of an experienced hand who will patiently show them the right way to use a knife, and even a potato peeler. No one learns something perfectly right off the bat, so take the time to demonstrate, reinforce, praise, and correct as necessary. It will be time well spent. Start someone off peeling carrots, rough chopping vegetables for stock, or washing and trimming parsley. Before long, with some ability, they'll be turning those

carrots into tiny dice, and boning chickens like a champ. Throughout the training process, which never really ends, your newest cook should be taught the importance of organization, sanitation, speed, accuracy, and consistency.

The next step up in a kitchen—and it's a big one—is the application of heat; actually cooking the products that have been prepped. Besides the qualities required of a prep cook, cooking requires a working knowledge of various techniques, plus the ability to discern just when enough heat and time is enough. Most residents will probably overlook an irregular dice in the mixed vegetables. But every one of them will notice dry, overcooked fish, beef not cooked to the desired temperature, or undercooked chicken. (Of course, if your residents are given the opportunity to notice any of these things, you not only have a problem with your cooks, but with your management, too.)

Realize that not all cooking methods are created equal as far as how hard it is to become proficient with them. Deep-frying is a good example of a relatively easy

Continued on page 14

form of cooking, and a good place to introduce a worker to this next step up the kitchen ladder. Assuming a chef has pre-determined the size of the item being fried, the breading, the oil and its temperature, it's not too difficult for a cook to be able to tell "golden brown" from "off-white" or "black," and then remove items from the fryer at the right time so that everyone is happy. Don't forget, the cook must still be trained and supervised to not overcrowd the basket, get too far ahead with their orders, and to use a thermometer on chicken and other temperature-critical items.

For a certain type of personality, baking can be a great introduction to cooking. The essential nature of baking—its requirement of exact measurements, specific ingredients, traditional methods, and precise recipes—make it an excellent fit for people with a particular temperament. While some baking requires considerable training and experience, there is always plenty of simple work to be done in this corner of the kitchen. Rolling cookie dough into balls or baking pre-made pies is a great place for a newbie cook to start, and might be the perfect first step towards more ambitious things.

A wide variety of cooking methods are found in all kitchens. Each method can be learned by a cook in the early stages of their career, as long as they have the right attitude, some ability, and good training. Roasting, grilling, poaching, searing, sautéing, baking, and braising skills are not talents anyone is born with, but they've all been learned and perfected over the years by many people—more than a few of whom have previously washed pots, mopped floors, and peeled carrots.

After the application of heat, the next step in a cook's advancing responsibilities is seasoning. Unlike the manual skill and organization required of a prep cook, or the technical know-how and judgment of a cook, the ability to correctly season an item depends on a level of discernment, balance, finesse, and experience that can only be taught up to a point. Having said that, a lot can be taught, especially about what will appeal to a particular demographic. The most important thing for everyone in a kitchen to understand is that adding salt, pepper, or any other seasoning is a privilege, not a right. And like anything else, it can be learned best through clear demonstration coupled with lots of consistent follow-up.

Finally, in time, your former pot washers may become managers themselves. Remember, it's in everyone's best interest for you to always treat all your workers with respect, courtesy, and understanding. Show them with every one of your actions how a good manager should behave. Let it be clear that you consider it one of your major responsibilities to give your staff exactly what they need to excel at their jobs. You'll be doing everyone a favor, for years to come. **E**



BAKING CAN BE
a great introduction to cooking. The essential nature of baking make it an excellent fit for people with a particular temperament.



This Level 1 article assumes that the reader has entry level knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to ensure a foundation of basic concepts of the subject matter.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. One of the best ways to hire and retain good employees is <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. To promise and deliver on giving workers the opportunity to advance B. To have a casual dress code C. To give workers their birthday off 2. One of our main jobs as managers is <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. To cook family meals whenever possible B. To keep our desks tidy C. To give workers the chance to shine and reward them when they do 3. Key aptitudes for successful kitchen workers include <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Organization, attention to detail, curiosity, and consistency B. Strength, above-average height, and short hair C. Fashionable clothing, a firm handshake, and telling good jokes 4. When a worker is doing a great job and is eager to advance, <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Politely tell them to be patient B. Give them new opportunities or lose them C. Reprimand them for not fitting in | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Basic culinary skills include <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Being able to quote Gordon Ramsay B. Untangling plastic wrap and hair nets C. Knife skills, baking, roasting, and grilling 6. Adding salt, pepper, or any other seasoning <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Is a privilege, not a right B. Is never a bad idea C. Should always be logged on an official form 7. Managers should consider it one of their main goals <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. To be in the front row for any in-service presentation B. To give workers exactly what they need to excel at their jobs C. To have relaxing music playing during prep |
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