

# Heroes at Work

## How Foodservice Managers Have Adapted During COVID-19

MANAGEMENT CONNECTION

Here are six overarching foodservice principles to guide you through the pandemic



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When we started this year, it was unlikely that any foodservice manager could have anticipated a global pandemic. 2020 has truly been a year of learning, adaptation, and finding the right path in this “new normal.”

Yet despite the challenges, some managers were shining stars in the darkest days. Learn more about six overarching principles that guided successful foodservice professionals during the pandemic, and how you can embrace them too.

### 1. EMBRACE CHANGE

During COVID-19, productive managers have been quick to embrace change. Not every decision will be perfect in chaotic times, but making educated choices, thinking creatively, and

keeping a positive work environment are all ways to ensure the best operation possible.

For Joey Rost, CDM, CFPP at Sioux Falls Specialty Hospital (SFSH), this was essential to his job. “Dealing with COVID, we see daily changes, and the best way to deal with change is by embracing it. If you deal with changes with a positive attitude and try to go above and beyond, great things will happen,” Rost says.

Tom Thaman, CDM, CFPP, Director of Food and Nutrition at Eskenazi Health, expressed similar thoughts. “As a seasoned leader to my team, I have always urged them to develop alternate strategies as a back up to any decision or initiative.



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The pandemic upset normal operations and created challenges both operationally and financially that none of us have experienced before. Encouraging creative, “out of the box” thinking has produced really positive results,” Thaman noted.

Keep in mind this does not mean that managers did not experience any negative emotions. It is completely normal to experience disappointment and anxiety during times of stress.

Whitney Thornton, Food and Nutrition Director for the York School Department, acknowledged this. “We are big in our district on choices, taste testing, and scratch cooking. All of these things had to adapt or change temporarily, which has been hard for my staff and I since we enjoy it so much.”

Being able to simultaneously navigate change and find positive coping mechanisms during that stress, though, was a common thread among these successful leaders.

While there’s little research on foodservice managers during the pandemic, experiences of other essential workers provide support for this theory. For example, a study in the *American Journal of Infection Control* found that early in nurses’ pandemic work, they experienced initial negative

feelings of discomfort, helplessness, and fear.

However, as time went on, they embraced self-coping mechanisms like altruistic acts and team support. Researchers found these nurses experienced growth under pressure and found an increased sense of professional responsibility.

Just like the experiences of these nurses, many foodservice managers dealt with the same rollercoaster of negative and positive emotions. By continuing to adapt and find ways to cope, while creatively thinking of solutions and motivating their teams, these

start of the pandemic. “Since exposure seemed to be the crucial focus at the start, we redid our entire schedule to keep our staff safer. In keeping with our reduction in volume in our retail and patient area, we required less staff so we went to a two day on and two day off schedule for all staff including managers and supervisors,” he said.

New policies and procedures were also common for staff and patients. Rost reports, “We take temperatures daily on patients and employees. We want to make SFSH a safe place to come to and still give 5-star quality care.”



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professionals have truly been heroes during this pandemic.

## 2. MAKE SAFETY A PRIORITY

From food safety to employee safety, effective leaders were quick to put protocols into place to help protect everyone.

For example, Thaman took steps to modify staffing at the

Similar procedures were put into place for food preparation. According to Thornton, “We had to implement masks, extra gloves, and pre-packing items. I also trained my staff on extra cleaning, social distancing, and how to serve items that we pre-measure out.”

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COVID-19 regulations and reopenings vary from state to state, so it's essential to stay up to date on guidelines. Here are some common steps to ensure both staff and food are staying safe:

- Follow guidelines on mask wearing (this varies highly based on your state, town, and organization). If masks are required, ensure they are being worn properly over both the mouth and nose.
- Emphasize the importance of frequent, proper handwashing, which can prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses. Review with staff the appropriate times for handwashing, like before starting work, before putting on gloves, after using the restroom, after taking out trash, and other recommended times.
- Review procedures for glove use; specifically, that there should be no bare hand contact with ready-to-eat foods.
- When possible, work to spread staff throughout the kitchen to maintain social distancing.
- Provide guidance on appropriate procedures for cleaning food contact surfaces.
- Review sick procedures with employees. Make sure they know to stay home if experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. At an organizational level, it may be worthwhile to address sick time adjustments to ensure employees are not worried about losing income and thus forcing themselves to work while sick.

### 3. LEAN INTO THE IMPORTANCE OF NUTRITION

As a CDM, CFPP, you likely joined this field with an appreciation for the connection between food and health. Every day, you create meals that are nourishing the bodies of the clients you serve. This connection is perhaps even more important during the pandemic.

Nutrition is intricately linked to overall health and wellness, and may be involved in

COVID-19 outcomes. For example, a study in *Obesity Research & Clinical Practice* linked obesity to an increased risk of COVID-19 deaths, presumably due to impaired immune functions that can occur with excessive weight.

Some researchers believe a Western-style diet—typically high in saturated fat, sugar, and refined carbohydrates—may also be linked to inflammation in the body that leads to poor outcomes (though this is speculative and not proven).

On the flip side, many elderly patients presenting with COVID may be suffering from malnutrition. One study in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* looked at elderly COVID-19 patients in Wuhan, China. They found that 52 percent were malnourished, and another 27 percent were at risk for malnutrition.

Protein-calorie malnutrition can affect immune responses, so this is a serious concern. Even smaller aspects of malnutrition may impact COVID-19 outcomes though—for example, recent research in *Nutrients* found a correlation between Vitamin D deficiency and the severity and rate of deaths from COVID-19.

Successful foodservice managers have kept nutrition at the forefront of their minds, figuring out unique ways to ensure patients are receiving balanced meals. As Rost says, “Nutrition is a big part of healing. Great food and service helps our patients on the road to recovery.”

### 4. THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX WITH MEAL SERVICES

Many managers have had to quickly change meal service methods during the pandemic. Innovative solutions were a necessity, especially in school food service when schools shut down.

For the York School District, Thornton was able to develop a creative plan: “When we got word the schools were closing in March, my



staff and I met and agreed to serve at one location – our local police station. I am very big on public relations and advertising, so I worked hand-in-hand with the police chief, town hall, and safety committees to get the word out.”

From the start, Thornton served free food to any child that needed it, her passion for alleviating child hunger shining through. Luckily, soon after the initial closing, the USDA released waivers that allowed the department to receive a reimbursement for such meals.

As of October, the USDA has extended such waivers, allowing schools to continue to operate under the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) or Seamless Summer Option (SSO). This allows them to offer meals at no cost to children under 18 through June 30, 2021, or until funding runs out.

These waivers provide additional flexibility, like allowing parents to pick up meals for kids, and permitting meals to be served outside of group settings and meal times.

Schools certainly weren't the only locations with challenges, though. Hospital food service and long-term care facilities were also thrust into making adjustments.

Over at Eskenazi Health, Thaman had to suspend room service for six weeks. They transitioned to a straight tray line system with a “house meal.” Despite the fact that it may not have been the preferred system, he was confident that it would be temporary and ensured patients received a balanced meal to support their needs. Thaman reports, “Fortunately, the

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suspension was only six weeks and our patient satisfaction scores have since rebounded to pre-COVID levels.”

Thaman also got creative with changes to help fellow front-line workers: “With a statewide stay-at-home order issued by the state (Indiana) for March and April, we stepped up our inventory and variety for our essential staff. They could actually do their grocery shopping at work without having to stand in long lines at grocery stores. And because of our relationship with our local distributors and manufacturers, we did not have the inventory shortages experienced by grocery or other retail outlets.”

As you can see from these stories, creative thinking about your meal services can enable you to continue operations and find new, successful approaches.

## 5. BE RESOURCEFUL AND SEEK HELP

Across the board, good leaders understand that they do not always have the right answer. They are resourceful in seeking training, getting more education, or talking to peers and mentors to help guide tough decisions.

For example, when the pandemic started, Thaman recognized the need to learn more. “It gave an opportunity for my leadership team to investigate “best practices” primarily through virtual webinars,” he said.

Thornton acted similarly, reporting “We had many trainings and informative sessions from the Maine DOE Nutrition Department to educate us, and keep us up to date on regulations that we need to follow. We also have a great local group of directors, and we share ideas with each other on what is working or what does not work within our districts.”

When struggling, consider taking advantage of the many free and low-cost resources available, from webinars to continuing education articles. Starting a mastermind group with other local managers can also be valuable to share and discuss ideas.

These resources can help you figure out best practices for COVID-19 with the constantly evolving research. But even outside of a pandemic, there is always value in continuing to learn and seek help when needed.

## 6. FOCUS ON POSITIVE CONNECTION

The grind of the workday can sometimes make us forget about the importance of human connection. All the managers interviewed for this article expressed—in one way or another—



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the significance of creating positive experiences, both for employees and patients, students, or team members.

For example, Thornton feels gratitude for being able to address childhood nutrition. “You can’t learn on a hungry stomach, so we try to accommodate as many students as we can,” she says. “My favorite part of the job is definitely seeing the kids eating and happy.”

Thaman has found joy in cultivating leadership and teamwork among his employees during this time. “I really love seeing my team grow during this most challenging time. The creative and collaborative approach that they have engaged in has produced very positive results,” he says.

And Rost never underestimates the power of a smile among his patients. He recounts, “The first day I wore a mask I realized I could not smile at anyone, so I cut out a picture of a smile and pasted it to my mask. Every time I bring food to a patient, they love my mask and think it’s great to bring some humor during this time. Making one person smile can change their world. Maybe not the whole world, but *their* world.”

It may not sound crucial, but research supports how necessary this is for both you and those around you. Studies have shown jobs which fulfill a person’s psychological needs and preferences are likely to enhance their ability to continue working now and long term.

That feel-good moment of helping a child eat, encouraging your team’s growth, or making a resident smile can all contribute to both your own psychological wellness – and that of those you’re helping. **E**

## CE Questions | MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



This Level II article assumes that the reader has a foundation of basic concepts of the topic. The desired outcome is to enhance knowledge and facilitate application of knowledge to practice.

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- In the study in the *American Journal of Infection Control*, which of the following was true about the emotions and changes that occurred in essential workers during the pandemic?
  - They experienced only positive emotions and professional growth
  - They experienced only negative emotions with no professional growth
  - They experienced both negative and positive emotions, and experienced professional growth
- Which of the following is *not* true regarding handwashing?
  - You should wash hands before starting work for the day
  - You do not need to wash your hands if you are putting gloves on
  - Frequent handwashing can prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses
- Which foodservice regulation is *most likely* to vary between different states and towns (making it important to stay up to date on guidelines)?
  - Proper handwashing procedures
  - Proper glove use procedures
  - Requirements for mask wearing
- Which of the following nutrition situations may be linked to poor COVID-19 outcomes?
  - Malnutrition
  - Obesity
  - Both A and B
- Which nutrient deficiency noted in the article may be linked to poor COVID-19 outcomes?
  - Vitamin D
  - Calcium
  - Riboflavin
- Under which program does the current USDA waiver allow for free school meals for children under age 18?
  - Collegiate Foodservice Program
  - Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
  - School Food Service Program (SFSP)/Seamless Summer Option
- Studies have shown jobs which fulfill a person’s psychological needs are likely to lead to what outcome?
  - Increase the likelihood of working at the job long term
  - Decrease the likelihood of working at the job long term
  - Make no difference in work outcomes

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