How to Help Your Kitchen Staff Develop Their Skills

by Chef Joe Abuso

One of the worst but undeserved stereotypes the hospitality industry endures is the concept that it offers nothing but low-paying, boring, dead-end jobs to people who have no better options in life.

Ask anyone who has been a proud member of our fraternity for any length of time and the overall impression you'll get is just the opposite. It is an industry that has been consistently growing for years, has a genuine need for workers at every level of expertise and ability, and is hungry for people who are willing to work their way up the ladder as far as they are able to go, with little or no arbitrary limits placed on anyone willing to rise to the occasion.

This rare, low barrier to entry and relatively low expectations and demands in entry-level positions, is coupled with a constant need for highly trained, capable workers and leaders throughout the industry. It is the nature of the abilities and knowledge required in our industry that they can be, slowly but surely, acquired on the job. This creates the perfect opportunity for those willing to work hard and learn the trade to stand out and be rewarded for their efforts and accomplishments, to everyone's benefit.

At a recent board meeting of the local restaurant association of which I'm a member, the president asked how many of us around the table had started out in the business washing pots. About three-quarters of the board members present -- my self included -- raised their hands. It is our obligation and privilege as leaders to give the same opportunity to those just entering our industry as others gave to us not that long ago. It is to everyone's advantage for us to see and appreciate the potential our entry-level workers possess, and to set systems in place to encourage their advancement in our own businesses, as well as the industry at large.

Hire for Aptitude, Train for Competence

Three basic categories of tasks that we all need to get accomplished in our kitchens are culinary, housekeeping and managerial. To varying degrees, all of these jobs can be given, one step at a time, to certain members of our staff who begin their tenure with us in entry-level positions.

It is our job as managers to understand just what each task requires, and be willing and able to spot the aptitudes in each of our workers that indicate that they have the potential to handle the job. Then we have to take the time and energy to properly train and supervise them, stacking the deck in favor of their success.

Not every attempt will be a home run, but neither is every new hire of a midlevel employee. If we have a current worker to whom we're willing to give the chance to advance, at least we know that they have a track record of showing up on a consistent basis, on time and with a reasonable attitude. None of these things should be taken for granted in any worker, let alone a new hire. Let's look at the basic categories of tasks in our kitchens, and see how we might best promote from within.
Basic culinary skills are grist for the mill of the various levels of positions through which a kitchen worker aspires and progresses, from prep cook to executive chef. Of course, not every worker is capable of rising to the top, nor are all of them interested in doing so; however, in most kitchens, it is not that great a leap from pot washer to prep cook. The basic work ethic and habits that would cause a pot washer to stand out: consistently showing up on time, being eager to work hard as part of a team, organization, speed and the ability and willingness to follow directions are exactly what you want in someone who does prep work. Add curiosity to the list, and you've got someone with real potential.

The foundation of any cook's work, from prep cook on up, is based on the aptitudes of organization, attention to detail, speed, curiosity, consistency and the ability to accurately and willingly follow directions. I call these traits aptitudes because, although each can certainly be improved upon within any individual, a certain natural ability and comfort level with these skills is required. If you have a worker who doesn't naturally exhibit at least some spark in each of these areas, you may be trying to fit a round peg in a square hole if you try to advance them through your kitchen.

After you ascertain that a particular worker possesses the aforementioned characteristic in sufficient quantities to begin his or her move up through the ranks, the first technical competencies at which they must become accomplished are knife skills. Knife skills can't be faked and are, in fact, one of the easiest ways to spot a real professional in a kitchen. Make sure that your nascent prep cook is given the guidance of an experienced cook who can show them the right way to use a knife, and even a potato peeler.

The nice thing about prep work is that the tasks at hand, all of which need to get done, encompass a very wide range of skill levels. Start someone off peeling carrots, rough-chopping vegetables for stock or washing and trimming parsley that will go into a pesto. Eventually, if they turn out to be handy with a knife, they will be turning those carrots into brunoise, thinly slicing avocados to fan out on a plate and frenching lamb racks. Through the entire training process, which really never ends, your newest cook should be learning the importance of organization, working clean and neat, speed, accuracy and consistency.

If you do some of your own fish and meat butchering in-house, be open to moving people into these positions. Even if they don't end up being your main butcher, it will be nice to have an adequate backup. And every cook and chef has more respect and understanding of the products they work with every day if they have had the experience of fabricating them early in their careers.

**Turn Up the Heat**

The next rung up the ladder in a kitchen, and it's a big one, is the application of heat; actually cooking the products that have already been prepped. Many kitchen workers never make it to this point. In addition to all the qualities that a prep cook needs to do their job well, cooking requires not only a working knowledge of various techniques, but the ability to discern just when enough heat and time is enough.

They'll not only be responsible for the final outcome of some of the most costly items you purchase in your restaurant, but also the ultimate satisfaction of your guests. Many guests might be likely to overlook, or not even notice, 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 guests are given the opportunity to notice these things, you not only have a problem with your cooks, but with your management, too.)

Having said that, one should understand that not all cooking methods are created equal in terms of what it takes to become proficient with them. Deep-frying is a good example
of a relatively easy form of cooking. If a chef has predetermined the size of
the item being fried, the breading, the oil and its temperature, it is not too
difficult for a cook to be able to tell "golden brown" from "off white" or
"practically black," and then remove the item from the fryer at the appropriate
time so that everyone is happy. Don't forget, the cook must still be trained and
supervised to not overcrowd the basket, alter the thermostat, or try to get too
far ahead with his or her orders.

For the right kind of person, baking is often a great match, and a perfect
introduction to working with food. The very nature of baking, with its
requirements of exact measuring, standardized ingredients, codified
methodologies, and specific cooking instructions, makes it a comfortable and
satisfying craft for people possessing a certain temperament and discipline. Of
course, much of the repertoire in baking and pastry work requires the utmost
in training and abilities. But there is plenty of work to be done, well shy of
making puff pastry from scratch or cranking out individual soufflés for
hundreds. Rolling cookie dough into balls or baking off already-made pies is a
great place to start, and somebody has to do that, too.

Most kitchens employ a variety of cooking methods, each of which can be
learned by a cook who is in the early stages of their career, assuming they
have the right attitude and a modicum of ability, coupled with good training by
an experienced practitioner. While deep-frying is not hard for most to master,
other techniques require more effort and attention to detail, with a
commensurate increase in training and supervision.

Pan searing, for instance, requires the cook to be responsible for determining
and maintaining the temperature of each pan used, the amount of oil used,
making sure each item is dried before placing it in the pan, the precise time be
fore turning it (within a few seconds), when to change pans, etc. The good
news is that, like many tasks in a kitchen, it is repetitive and, once a cook
learns how to do it, it shouldn't be difficult for them to repeat it -- especially if
a manager is paying attention.

Other cooking methods are similar in that they each require any cook new to
the position to learn just how you want it to be done, taught by someone who
can already do it that way. This is true whether their last job description consisted of mopping your
floor, or being responsible for the cooking technique in question at another restaurant. Roasting,
grilling, poaching, baking and braising are not skills anyone is born with, but they have all been
learned and perfected over the years by many people -- many of whom have previously washed
pots and mopped floors.

**Seasoned Pros**

Beyond the application of heat, the next step in a cook's advancing responsibilities is seasoning.
Unlike the manual dexterity and organization required of a prep cook, or the technical prowess and
discernment required of a cook, being able to season an item correctly depends on a level of
understanding, discernment, balance, finesse and experience that can only be taught up to a point.

Much of the ability to season well is innate. Having said that, a lot can be learned, especially in what
will appeal to a typical guest. Perhaps the most important point for everyone in a kitchen to
understand is that adding salt, pepper or any other seasoning is a privilege, not a right.

The most basic seasoning used is salt. Few things will make a meal as lackluster as not enough, and
almost nothing will make one as inedible as too much. Personal
preferences abound, but so does a general consensus of what
works. If any food, other than a pretzel, reminds one of a
pretzel, it probably has too much salt in it. Chefs should never
assume that his or her cooks have the same idea as they do of just how much salt should be used. Managers should always taste everything, especially if a cook is new to the job. It's always good to be reminded that it's very easy to add more salt, but it's impossible to add less.

The level of spiciness in a dish is another basic seasoning issue of which to be ever-vigilant. Regional differences exist, but always make sure that any cook with only recent access to peppers understands the house rules.

The other main flavor issue in Western kitchens is the acid/fat balance. In its simplest guise, it can be seen in any vinaigrette. If vinaigrette tastes flabby, then there's too much fat present (in the case of vinaigrette, oil) and you should add vinegar (the acid in the recipe). If it's too vinegary, then there's too much acid, and some fat, in the form of oil, should be added. It's the same situation with any dish; just add the appropriate acid or fat to get the desired balance. If your tomato sauce lacks focus, add balsamic. If it tastes too acidic, add olive oil. If your Hollandaise is too tart, add more butter; if it's too flabby, add lemon juice.

Much the same as with giving a cook the leeway to season, allowing someone to come up with menu items is an act that should be done judiciously. However, since an item can always be tried out first for a family meal, why not see what your staff comes up with if they are encouraged to be creative?

A great first step in ascertaining a steward's culinary abilities and interests is to let it be known that you are open to suggestions from any and all quarters. Maybe you'll get a fantastic new sauce concept. Maybe it becomes clear that a particular steward has probably already reached their culinary peak where they are. Either way, everyone wins.

Other parts of the kitchen workload, besides the ones already addressed, can be excellent places for your stewards or pot washers to get a foot into the door of the rest of the operation. Having stewards do housekeeping tasks like rotating dry goods, stocking new product, trimming produce and organizing inventory, all done with clear direction from managers, can help your cooks and chefs be more productive, while giving your stewards a bigger picture of what goes on around them.

Last but not least, in time, your erstwhile pot washers may very well find themselves in managerial positions. It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway, 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 main jobs to give them exactly what they need to excel at their jobs. You'll be doing everyone a favor, for years to come.

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**Letting Go is Hard to Do**

By Chef Michael Tsonton

Chefs have a hard time letting go of preparing and cooking specific items. I know. Many years ago, I had the hardest time letting the kitchen crew prepare my braised lamb shanks. The shanks were prepared with port wine and fresh pomegranate juice along with pomegranate glaze and myriad
spices, some ground and some whole. The dish, of course, had become a signature item.

Proper preparation was not only a matter of technique, but of timing, as well. The shanks had to be browned just right, and then the mirepoix is browned, as well. (The mirepoix is a traditional French cooking term. The traditional mirepoix consists of diced carrot, celery and onion. These items are sautéed and used as the flavor base for several dishes.) All of this had to happen in the same roasting pan. The glazed meat was added, and then deglaze, and then the vegetables. (In this use of the word, the "deglaze" is the product of a process of adding liquid to a hot pan in order to collect the bits of food that stick to the pan during cooking. This is most common with sautéed and roasted foods. Wine, stock and vinegar are common deglazing liquids.)

If the pan got too brown, the sauce would be ruined. It was one of those recipes that you had to feel, not just re-create. I was convinced that only I could make these. Once I found the right person, and we had eaten a batch or two for a family meal, he finally got it. I could finally move on. I had to let go. I assumed new responsibilities as a managing partner. But the delegation was successful. People still thought I made the lamb, and the compliments kept coming.

Another sensitive area for chefs is new menu items. Chefs have the biggest egos, and want full control of anything new. I was that way early in my career. I prepared every new item, and tested every new recipe. Problem was, my sous-chef was not allowed to do his work, and that's how you lose a good sous-chef. Now I make it a point of getting key people involved in seasonal menu changes, as well as specials. I ask for four to eight ideas, with specific notes and drawings. As a group, we toss around dishes, ingredients and techniques. We decide on stations. We test the items.

Of course, I will always get the last word, and may make some subtle changes to a dish, and it is my presentation and pickup. But getting my sous-chefs involved is how they grow out of my kitchen to become chefs.