

Build a Better Brigade

Look beyond the challenge of maintaining staff, and inspire greatness at all rungs of the culinary ladder.

By Katie Ayoub

According to The National Restaurant Association, the restaurant industry is expected to add 2 million jobs over the next decade, for total employment of 15.1 million in 2018. Certainly culinary schools are turning out more degreed graduates than ever before. So, what's the problem? Although there's no hard statistic for it,

many chefs lament what they describe as the revolving door of employment.

"Chefs today are at a crossroads," says Charles Carroll, CEC, AAC, executive chef at River Oaks Country Club in Houston and author of *Leadership Lessons from a Chef: Finding Time to be*

Great (Wiley, 2008). "They either need to inspire and mentor their staff, or they can continue the hire-and-fire-and-watch-them-quit cycle that defines so many professional kitchens today."

The key to hiring the right staff and maintaining that staff is knowing how to motivate them. "You don't need to change the setup of your brigade," says Carroll. "But you do need a brand-new philosophy on communication within that brigade."

Lenny Scranton, CEC, vice president of culinary for Atlanta-based Morrison Healthcare Food Services, a division of Morrison Management Specialists, agrees. "We truly believe, especially when working with the younger generation of employees, that you cannot inspire them from a food standpoint until you get them engaged in their jobs," he says. "Back-and-forth communication is crucial in that success."

Inspiring young cooks, says Christopher Koetke, CEC, CCE, dean of the School of Culinary Arts, Kendall College, Chicago,

Christopher Koetke, CEC, CCE, addresses students at the School of Culinary Arts at Kendall College, Chicago.



An educational trip finds Lenny Scranton, CEC, (third, going up stairs) and his corporate culinary team with staff from The Chef's Garden, Huron, Ohio.

starts in the classroom. “The youth of today are different in certain ways,” he says. “But that’s not a bad thing. Obviously, in the world of education, we think a lot about how students learn. It’s all about motivating people. Great managers, in my estimation, are like great teachers: They know how to mentor, how to coach and how to bring out the best.”

It all starts at school

Koetke’s insight is informed through the experience of both culinary education and professional foodservice. He has been a culinary instructor at Kendall for 11 years, and was appointed dean in 2005. Before joining Kendall, he worked at the helm of esteemed kitchens such as Les Nomades, Chicago, and Les Francais, Wheeling, Ill.

He believes that today’s graduates are just as hardworking and motivated as those that have come before. “The older guard tends to express disdain about the wave of employees joining the ranks,” says Koetke. “I scratch my head at that.”

He says their expectations might be too high, but he sees it as the job of culinary schools to give them a dose of reality. “We have to tell them that they need to pay their dues, work up the ladder,” he says. “But the way we prepare them for the real world is to set the bar of excellence really high.”



He stresses the importance of cultivating soft skills—attitude, teamwork, professionalism, enthusiasm. “The old way of teaching or managing really isn’t the optimal way to do it,” says Koetke. “There is a better way to motivate them.”

To inspire young staff, he says, abandoning military-style management is necessary. His analogy for Kendall’s teaching paradigm is a teddy bear with an iron core. “The soft part of the teddy bear is approachable, but the iron core is immovable. This tells your students: ‘I care for you so much that I’m going to set the bar really high.’ Students do want to be held to a standard, and they thrive in kitchens that hold them to that same standard.”

Engagement leads to commitment

One of the five tenets in the operating philosophy of Morrison Management Specialists is “win through teamwork.” With more than 1,200 registered dietitians, 200 executive chefs and 16,600 foodservice team members, inspiring that team is a tall order.

Scranton with Morrison Healthcare Food Services, with clients such as Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago and the University of Tennessee Hospital in Knoxville, has created a successful system of retention and promotion.

First, a rigid hiring process ensures committed staff. Potential employees are interviewed on multiple fronts—recruiter, manager, corporate chef and regional

Charles Carroll, CEC, AAC, debriefs his kitchen staff at River Oaks Country Club, Houston.

chef. “Of course, they take a written test, but we’re looking for attitude as much as aptitude,” says Scranton. They seek employees that display what he calls “un-trainable traits.” “Are they naturally excited about the business? Do they wear their passion on their shirt sleeves?” he says.

Second, newly hired employees are quickly made to understand the depth of their jobs—after all, they’re working on the healthcare side of foodservice. “We get our

new associates to meet our customers,” Scranton says. “From the patients in hospital beds to the loved ones visiting the patients, it is critically important that our cooks understand that their jobs make a difference in someone’s life.”

Another tactic for engagement in the work is spotlighting cooks on a regular basis. “We feature heritage weeks,” says Scranton. “We ask employees about the traditions and techniques behind the food they grew up with, then run the dishes on our menus.” The effects are threefold, he says. “The associate owns that menu item or that station for the day, and feels a sense of pride, yes, but

also importance to the company,” says Scranton. “Heritage week also teaches aspects of authenticity and technique to other employees. And, of course, it demonstrates to our customers that we’re committed to our employees, and shows them who is cooking their meals.”

Third, Morrison sets out clearly defined career paths for every level of the culinary brigade. “We have clear advancement plans for dishwashers straight through to executive chefs and beyond,” says Scranton. “Retention is all about providing opportunity.”



River Oaks Country Club

Team Evaluation

In *Leadership Lessons from a Chef: Finding Time to be Great* (Wiley, 2008), Charles Carroll, CEC, AAC, offers eight questions to ask to ensure your kitchen brigade is on the right path:

1. Do you have a great team?
2. Is your team inspired?
3. Is your team motivated?
4. Are you motivated, and if not, why not?
5. How do you rate the atmosphere in the kitchen?
6. Do your employees enjoy working for you?
7. Do your employees follow your lead?
8. How often do you lose your temper or raise your voice in your kitchen?

In that vein, the company offers membership in ACF and heavily promotes ACF certification. “The value of certification is for both the individual and his or her peers,” Scranton says. “They push themselves to reach milestones, and they inspire their peers and their subordinates to do the same.”

Team building

Charles Carroll, CEC, AAC, has a fat file of people waiting to get onto his kitchen staff. He can't remember the last time a cook left him (except for a sous chef jumping to another property for a position as executive chef that Carroll helped him plan for and achieve).

Indeed, his leadership and management skills are well-known in the industry. He has toured the country in the last 15 months, delivering 40 presentations designed to inspire culinary leadership.

“Our industry is so scary in the fact that it's 'hurry up, get it out,' busy, busy, busy,” says Carroll. “Somehow, we have to stop and catch our breath. We have to find the time to make a difference in people's lives.”

But it's not just about mentorship and the personal rewards that come with

that. “I'm not the only one worrying about the quality of the food coming out of my kitchen anymore,” he says. “I've got a bunch of executive chefs who care just as much as I do. They're completely invested in their jobs.”

How? Communication and follow-through, or what Carroll names “schedule, empower and follow-up.” Carroll holds a leadership meeting in his kitchen every two weeks. Twelve people make up the team, from sous chefs and stewards to station chefs. “I make it clear that it's a privilege to be a part of this leadership team, and then we hold the meeting where the rest of the staff can see us,” he says. “I want them to aspire to sit at that table one day, and I want them to have respect for the leadership team.”

Minutes are taken, and ways of inspiring and recognizing excellence are discussed. If someone hasn't done an assignment from the previous meeting, he or she is asked to leave the meeting.

Carroll also created a stewarding calendar of success, where he divides the year into quarters and determines goals to which the stewarding staff can aspire. If they score high in all categories, such as attendance,

punctuality and hard work, incentives are awarded. His incentives include a 50-cent-per-hour raise after their first quarter; gift certificates; dinner for two from the restaurant; and \$100 bonuses.

“This forces us to review their progress,” says Carroll. “No one ever asks them about their challenges; it's amazing what you learn. You're also rewarding them for being great employees, and showing them that they are a part of the team.”

Carroll is passionate about how to engage the younger generation. “I was losing the interest and dedication in my younger staff, and I needed to get them back,” he says. “The most powerful tool a chef can have is the 'sit down,’” says Carroll. He schedules a 20-minute appointment with his employees to discuss their goals and how they can get there together. “If you don't show them that you're invested in their advancement, they won't stay,” he says. “I ask them to come in prepared, and we talk about their life and their career goals.” By crystallizing their vision, Carroll helps them map a route to their goals. The strategy also helps him retain employees because they don't feel like cogs in the wheel.

“From a business standpoint,” says Morrison's Scranton, “the payoff in investing in your staff is enormous. You keep the cost of turnover down, and you maintain a staff that embodies your mission.”

Katie Ayoub, an award-winning writer, is based in Keswick, Ontario, Canada.

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—Christopher Koetke