



A FRESH LOOK AT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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Learning Objectives:

- Understand that culture has everything to do with successful employee engagement, and learn ways to build a better workplace environment
- Learn tips for retaining existing team members
- Provide tools for shifting the way managers view the hiring process, the training process and career development

THE CURRENT STATE OF STAFF

The foodservice industry is experiencing the greatest transformation in its history. Over the past two years, we have witnessed the largest mass exodus from the workplace that we have ever seen. Part of this exodus was older Americans who decided to retire.

“More than half of the estimated 5.25 million people who left the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have retired earlier than they planned to, a new research brief indicates.”¹

Younger hourly staff are leaving due to limited hours, closures of operations, health concerns and burnout. In 2019, the World Health Organization recognized burnout as an actual mental health condition.

QD85: Burnout

Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context, and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.

Dr. Christina Maslach is a research psychology pioneer from UC Berkeley. She has been studying burnout for decades, and explains it this way:

“Job burnout is an experience or response to chronic job stressors that have not been successfully managed. And that experience of burnout consists of three interrelated components: inefficacy, cynicism and exhaustion. Your experience at work is not just getting you exhausted, it's building up that cynicism about, “Why do I have to face another day of this?” For me, the cynicism, more than the exhaustion, is the key defining piece for burnout.”

For those of us who have been in the industry for a long time and worked our way up from the bottom, this explanation helps understand what we have witnessed in many organizations, both large and small. An argument can be made that the staffing shortage we are experiencing currently has been years in the making, and the pandemic was the “straw that broke the camel's back”.

Dr. Maslach likens burnout to a pebble in your shoe.

“Oftentimes, people have very good ideas about what is not working and what their chronic stressors are. These are the everyday things – they're like pebbles in your shoe. It's an erosion of your soul. I would point to the six areas of job-person-fit: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. If people can begin to identify where these chronic pebbles in the shoe are, in any one or more of those six areas, it's saying, “Here's what's not working. What would make it better?” There's no one-size-fits-all approach to address burnout – so it's important to use these questions and take action.”

In many ways, the name of this article could have been “A Fresh Look at the Role of Management”. We must acknowledge that the situation foodservice finds itself in was created by an outdated management style that came from an earlier time. The “top-down” management style that has been in place since the 1950s has left many in the work force burnt out – and feeling that foodservice is an industry they want to get out of and avoid.

Now imagine the foodservice industry being managed from a place of caring – not only for its customers, but also its workforce. We can look to organizations that have high employee engagement and that have built cultures where team members feel respected, cared for and listened to. Many of these companies are in the tech sector, which came into being over the past 20-30 years. Companies like Google, LinkedIn, Zoom, HubSpot and Seismic have a reputation of being great places to work. And no, it's not about the free coffee and game rooms. It is about upper management recognizing that their success hinges on the success of their team members. And success comes from a place of feeling like you are valued, that you belong, you have work-life balance, and your contribution to the organization matters.²

THE REAL ROLE OF MANAGEMENT

The term "Servant Leadership" was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970. In an essay he wrote, "The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first. Then, conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead."

Servant leadership is a management style in which you focus on your team's growth and well-being to put their needs first. The theory is that instead of employees serving the leader, the leader serves the employees. This type of manager believes that when their team members feel personally and professionally fulfilled, they produce high-quality work more efficiently and productively. Employee satisfaction and collaboration are important concepts in servant leadership. You can use this leadership style in any type of business.³

The combination of foodservice and caring for patients and residents lends itself to being a servant leader. After all, isn't that what hospitality is all about? Hospitality is simply anticipating the needs of others and providing services others desire. We talk a lot about providing care and service to our patients and residents. In order to truly do so, we must take the same approach with our staff.

BUILDING BACK YOUR TEAM

Managers must evaluate the role they play in creating a culture where others will want to work and stay. Regardless of the size of the operation, team members are looking for leadership, clear expectations for the role they play, and a desire to receive the same level of loyalty and support from management as is expected of them. Employee engagement is all about professional relationship-building. And while we are reflecting on our own engagement with our team, we should look at how our leadership supports our goals. Because in order to improve the culture in the foodservice or hospitality department, we have to acknowledge that it begins at the top of the organization.

Senior leadership or owners, oftentimes referred to as "corporate," must be committed and engaged in building a culture where employees, both salaried and hourly, feel appreciated and supported. It's important to create a workplace where employee engagement is recognized as the most important aspect of leadership and management. It is critical to the success of an organization and drives what type of culture employees experience. It has everything to do with patient and resident satisfaction scores. If the team members feel respected and cared for, they will in turn provide great food and service to the people they serve.



TEN PRINCIPLES TO APPLY TODAY

1. **Learn to Listen:** effective managers know how to listen. They seek an opportunity to hear what others have to say about the workplace and services provided. Before making a change or implementing a new program, they ask for input from the team. After all, they are the ones that have the experience and will be implementing the program.
2. **Be Empathetic:** successful managers and leaders care about their team members and try to see situations not only from their own viewpoint, but from others' viewpoints as well. They make decisions based on gathering information and the viewpoints of others. Be respectful of the thoughts and ideas of others.
3. **Be a Problem Solver:** leaders know that when a problem arises, it needs to be addressed, and a permanent solution applied. An effective way to solve problems is to ask yourself these three questions; 1) Does the organization improve as a result of this action? 2) Is it supported by the team, and will it be sustainable? 3) Will it improve customer satisfaction? If the answer is "Yes" to each, then most likely it is a good idea. The key here is beginning the process by asking the team for their ideas.
4. **Be Self-Aware:** good managers know that all eyes are on their actions, and they set the example and standards for the team.
5. **Learn to Persuade:** leaders persuade instead of demanding or giving orders. True leaders provide the context and the reasons why. Team members are not robots, and they think for themselves. Sometimes a bit of information can go a long way.
6. **Provide Vision:** an effective servant leader helps the team understand their roles and responsibilities while forwarding the department's or organization's objectives.
7. **Be Thoughtful:** effective managers learn from their mistakes and think of the futures. Good managers understand that decisions made today have a ripple effect into the future. Be a long-term thinker.
8. **Have Ownership:** great leaders know their role and responsibilities. They take responsibility for aspects of their organizations and don't point fingers at others for mistakes or problems.
9. **Be Committed to Growth:** managers should provide an environment for career development and professional growth. Help team members become expert in their role and help them reach their goals.
10. **Build Community:** great managers collaborate not only in their own department, but with others in the organization. They are always looking for ways their department can shine, and they point to the efforts of their team members, not themselves.

BUILD A BETTER CULTURE

Being a successful manager is full of self-reflection and information-gathering. One must be a lifelong learner. The subject of foodservice is endless, and full of new ideas and ways of doing things. Many of us have been fortunate enough to go to school for training in our field. Others have had the ability to experience many types of operations and learn from many mentors along the way.

In order to build a better workplace culture, we have to not only continue our personal growth, but help inspire and provide opportunities for our team members. Remember, your personal goals and objectives may not be the same as that of a coworker or team member.

Here are tips and ways to improve the workplace culture:

- Meet with senior leadership to consider the company values, so you can embrace and support the organization's mission. Once you have a good understanding of your overall company values, it's time to meet with your team and discuss how these values are reflected within the context of the foodservice department
- Give your team a voice in the values they want to focus on in the department. It must align with the company mission and the customers you serve. Post the mission statement and values for the department in a prominent place, and be sure to tie all projects and new initiatives back to supporting these values
- Create monthly recognition awards for the team member who best demonstrates the values of the department by making a positive impact with fellow team members, other departments or customers. Give credit when due
- Meet with each team member to better understand their own personal and professional goals. Provide whatever support you can to back that person's goals
- Use social media to promote the efforts and work of your team. Create excitement and enjoyment at work by sharing what you and your team do to improve the culture, food and service you provide
- Get your team involved with charity work or local volunteering. There are many opportunities to support the local community. Food banks, Meals on Wheels and Toys for Tots are just a few of the organizations in your community that could use your help. Be sure to include your marketing department in these projects, as it is great PR for the company and for attracting future employees
- Provide continuous feedback to HR and accounting from the feedback your team members provide you in terms of salaries in your market, benefits, and other ways to stand out in the community as a great place to work. Remember that healthcare typically has better benefits and growth opportunities as compared to restaurants and hotels. Ask HR for regular surveys of your staff to make certain you are providing the right amount of leadership for the department
- Include the team on all new projects and ideas and get their input. Be sure to recognize great ideas and celebrate these achievements
- Treat all interactions with team members respectfully, and treat them the way you want to be treated. Always greet team members each day and be sure to thank them at the end of the shift for their efforts
- Ensure that your budget includes everything needed to do the jobs that must be done daily. For example, if you are wondering why the floors are not as clean as you would like, find out if there are enough good brooms, dust pans and mops available. And be sure to train staff to properly clean. In foodservice, there are often several ways to handle a task, but there is only one that meets the standards you set
- Create career path solutions for team members. Help your team grow their career. Apprenticeship programs in foodservice are coming back, and are a great way to build your team's skill sets
- Develop a mentorship program for your organization. Help find managers and supervisors in your community who can take your team members under their wing, and provide support and guidance

- Provide excellent onboarding training and continuing training for the staff. Knowledge is a powerful thing. There is more turnover in the first 90 days of employment than at any other time. If you provide a great 90-day experience, you will reduce turnover
- Look for what is being done right and acknowledge it. You often get what you push. By focusing on the positive and giving praise to these actions, you will see team members improving their skills and engagement

Employee engagement needs to be the number one focus for managers, in order to find new staff, reduce turnover and improve the quality of food and service for which you are responsible. Seeing your team members grow as individuals and professionals is the most rewarding aspect of being a manager and a leader. Make employee engagement your mission in life – and you'll reap the rewards.

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Resources

1. Investment News, October 25, 2021, Emile Hallez
2. Forbes, December 10, 2019, "The Best Companies for Corporate Culture"
3. Indeed Editorial Team, February 9, 2022