



Turning Restaurant Staffing Challenges Into Opportunities

Communicate Better

Restaurant management **MUST** employ the most effective tool available: effective communication. When discussing issues constructively with input from those on the team, a stronger sense of cohesion can be achieved. If workers feel they have a role to play, it is more likely the team will function better, more productively and with a greater sense of purpose.

- Manager's Log: similar to diary/journal - great way for shift managers to relay key issues, concerns and even potential solutions from one shift leader to another.

- Team Meetings: 5 min huddle at start of shift change or incorporate team meals to:
 - Discuss top issues with the team and solicit input
 - Ask for referrals for new hires: consider a referral bonus program for employees
 - Check in on morale and mental health of the team.
 - **NOTE**: Employees who are invested in solutions are less likely to leave, saving the tremendous time and expense involved in staff turnover.

- Employee Suggestion Box: don't forget this long-time, well-established business management tactic for anonymous input that can help management stay ahead of a problem before it becomes a crisis.

Managers are already busy. Taking time likely feels like one more thing to accomplish in an already hectic restaurant environment. However, ensuring employees feel heard, considered, and valued can make all the difference between retaining good workers and trying to manage a smaller, less flexible workforce.

Have 'The Talk'

The most apprehensive conversation in any workplace involves compensation. However, restaurant managers can turn this biggest of industry challenges into a potential positive.

- Make time to bring staff together either at times when they aren't scheduled for a shift or before or after restaurant hours. Invite staff to share questions or concerns.
- If the issue of wages comes up, don't try to dodge the matter. Instead, tackle it directly!
 - First and foremost, restaurateurs should explore every option to ensure they are compensating staff fairly based on market wages.
 - Without relaying specifics of any one staff member's compensation, outline the restaurant's compensation strategy.
 - Based on objective criteria, outlining salary or hourly wage ranges offers transparency about compensation and reduces chances of gossip or misunderstanding.
 - These conversations are only effective if staff are being paid a fair and competitive wage.
- If the restaurant has not provided competitive wages OR if recent wage growth has outpaced the restaurant's current compensation strategy, make every effort to remedy quickly.
- Talk about any staffing challenges the restaurant is facing and how they might impact hours for the rest of the team.
- Let them know what's happening with supply chain issues, sales and the overall health of the organization. If restaurant's margins have slimmed significantly with inflationary pressures, be honest about that reality and how management is addressing the situation.
- Importantly, ask for suggestions on issues of concern for the staff.

Get Creative

The simple fact is not every restaurant can afford premium wages for every member of their team. With inflation and wage growth driving a majority of the country's economic discussions, this reality will add to the pressures on restaurant management to find ways to recruit and retain workers.

- There is more to staff recruitment and retention than bottom line salary alone.
 - Keeping lines of communication open between management and staff can make all the difference.
 - Understanding the needs and priorities of employees is important.
- Getting creative helps! Consider adding:
 - Fees to every customer check to support staff wage increases or to avoid having to furlough.
 - Default minimum tip to customer checks. (Letting customers know it's part of a strategy to ensure workers' fair wage can also rally supporters (and therefore more customers) to the restaurant's cause).
 - Staff benefits to include transportation subsidies, expanded employee meal discounts, increased sick leave or paid time off, childcare stipends, and cash bonuses.

Promote Yourself

Whether through loyalty visits or robust tipping, many patrons have continued to step up to help their favorite establishments. This provides an opportunity to restaurateurs who are proactively working to help their workers, and themselves, to promote their efforts.

- Getting the word out about how the restaurant is supporting its staff offers a number of benefits, as well as risks...
- Positive attention can help attract needed workers to both front and back of the house and it can also help existing workers better appreciate what they have.
- Promotion can be done through social media or local journalists if what is being done on behalf of employees is genuinely outside the norm among other area restaurants.

- Use of Social Media:
 - Customers peruse a restaurant's Facebook or Instagram for a bit of food lust.
 - Savvy restauranteurs also use to highlight unique benefits, happy workers, or tell their story of trying to survive and thrive in unprecedented times.
 - Note of caution: consider potential blowback from current or former staff members unhappy with the restaurant, as well as members of the public who might make unreasonable demands or otherwise find fault with the restaurant.
 - If you decide to share your stories on social media, be sure to closely monitor your social channels. Be prepared to respond to potential negativity in a manner to deescalate and take conversation offline.

- Reach out to local news station, newspaper or food blogger. Sharing a well-told story of supporting workers in difficult times can provide a significant uptick in overall patronage.

- Don't underestimate the power of sharing your story!

The restaurant industry will continue to face many challenges in the months ahead. Restaurant owners and management **MUST** embrace a better communications strategy backed by thoughtful actions to turn things around. By following this approach, and ensuring effective communication with employees and the public, restauranteurs may find one of today's biggest challenges – staffing – can also become their greatest strength.

In chaotic times, clear and consistent communication can make all the difference.

Considering the full picture of potential benefits for restaurant employees can help creative restaurateurs find solutions.