

don't let go

finding and keeping good employees

How do you define success?

It all depends on the context, of course, but the steps that we take to come out on top in day-to-day life are generally quite similar to the ones we have to take in the world of catering if we want to remain in business.

The skill-set a capable caterer must bring to the table is incredibly complex, and often seemingly paradoxical. Planning, executing and running a wrinkle-free event requires the organizational skills of a four-star general, the amicable spirit of a camp counselor and the patience of a Middle School Sex Ed teacher. Many of the challenges that we face – delivery delays, on-site power issues, broken equipment, last-second client demands – can be classified as “acts of God” that must be dealt with a la minute.

But others, such as grooming a competent event kitchen team and wait-staff are completely within our control, despite the challenges inherent in managing what is often a sprawling menagerie of characters from all walks of life.

There are certain key qualities we look for in all of our employees: knowledge, skills

and a positive, can-do attitude. And not all of these attributes are created equal: The last quality is virtually impossible to instill; either someone has a great attitude, or they don't – and only people with open minds and positive outlooks will be open to being trained to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to help you run your business effectively.

With 25 years of catering experience under our belt at Indiana Market & Catering, we've come up with an (almost) fool-proof system to hire, train and retain a crackerjack team.

Hiring:

During the busy seasons, sometimes it's tempting to just hire warm bodies to contend with the onslaught of parties. But resist, resist, resist! While it's next to impossible to gauge the knowledge and skills in the first five minutes of meeting someone, it's often easy to ascertain what a person's attitude is.

Two factors that often make or break a person's prospects can be determined before they even open their mouths: timeliness and grooming. If a person shows up late or in unkempt clothing inappropriate for an interview, we don't hire them. Period.

Seemingly minor things can cause big problems at parties; our policy is that if the potential hire can't get it right for the interview, we shouldn't risk them getting it right when the curtain rises at the party.

Next, trust your gut: is this person someone you'd like to spend some time with? If so, chances are, you're onto something. Are they engaged in the conversation? Do they make eye contact, ask questions, answer questions with clarity and enthusiasm, carry themselves well and engage in appropriate pleasantries? These are all hallmarks of the kind of attitude necessary to be successful in the service industry.

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Train to retain:

The second step we take to decide whether a potential employee's baseline knowledge and skills are elevated enough to merit our company's investment, is by putting them on an event to “trail.” (It's also an opportunity for them to evaluate whether or not they want to work with the company). There's no better way to find out how a party cook or floor staffer will operate than by seeing them in action. If their attitude is up to par and they seem to be open to learning, but their skills are rusty, it's up to you to decide whether you have the time,

energy and resources to bring them up to your standards.

If the trail is successful, we make it a priority to immerse them in the company's “way of being” as quickly as possible. We send out a biweekly newsletter to all employees with simple tips and instructions on what to remember to bring to events, how to answer common client questions, etc. It may seem minor, but it's amazing how quickly one staffer's failure to iron his shirt or to stand up straight can spread like wildfire to the rest of the team; it's best to continually remind everyone that presentation is an essential part of every catering package. Simultaneously, we put them through our Catering Academy, our finely honed training program where they get to brush up on certain skills, learn new ones, mingle and be reminded of our core mission. Our more established staffers are also invited to attend...as well as to lead the trainings.

Retaining:

Many caterers say that retaining employees is their biggest challenge. We've found that by establishing a friendly repertoire between the company leadership and the staff while simultaneously

Top Five Reasons You Know it's Time to Let an Employee Go

- 1) **A BAD ATTITUDE** – usually, people with bad attitudes don't think they have one but they can spoil three months of work with just one glance.
- 2) **LAZY TENDENCIES** – the employee tends to offer consistently sloppy/incomplete work. This causes other employees to have to pick up the slack, which interrupts the workflow.
- 3) **“SLEEPWALKING”** – the laggard employees just serve as extras in the company. They often show lack of interest which is inconsiderate to other employees.
- 4) **GOSSIPER** – gossip is a disease and kills the workplace morale. The only way to eliminate it is to remove the host.
- 5) **CONSTANT COMPLAINER** – a critical employee tends to make a lot of excuses, and doesn't offer any input, and or listen to evaluations.



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instituting a strict chain of communication at events helps people feel like they're part of a winning, successful team. It also gives them confidence that if something appears to be amiss, they know to whom they can turn, eliminating unnecessary panic and frustration.

A couple of other tips: post a detailed menu at every event so the floor staff knows what they're serving, what's vegetarian and so they are aware of any potential allergy issues. This gives them a sense of control and confidence to go forth and speak intelligently when inevitably asked a laundry list of questions by guests.

Also, consider listing every single person's duties and responsibilities. Giving each staff member sole responsibility for the successful execution of two to three activities before, during and after the event (i.e. setting up buffets, checking the floor for debris, staff uniforms) creates ownership and motivates them to shine.

On the other hand, if a general or vague instruction is given to several people to do something as a team, the leadership within them doesn't have a chance to emerge, human nature takes over and each staff member assumes someone else will pick up the slack. Big mistake!

Indiana's chain-of-communication system prevents miscommunications, ensuring an event for 5,000 people with 50 staffers is as beautiful, smooth, enjoyable and stress-free as a small, intimate dinner in your client's home.

So, hire smart; train to retain; then retain. Following these three simple steps will bring success to your teammates ... and to you. ●

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