



‘Hell’s Kitchen’ in Your Dining Room? Hell No!

By Susan Saldibar

I have a question for you. Would you want Gordon Ramsay of TV’s Hell’s Kitchen running your dining room? Your first reaction might be “Yes!”, thinking of all the great promotion. But what headaches (F-bombs and tirades) might a guy like Ramsay create for your management team?

His name actually came up during a really great conversation I had last week with Randy Barnett, Director of Operations for [Strategic Dining Services](#) (a Senior Housing Forum partner). Randy talked about a challenge one of their clients was having finding culinary talent to head up their dining services team. (Sound familiar?)

“When we look for a director of dining in communities, we typically look at food talent first,” Randy says. “We lean towards those chefs with experience, and rightfully so,” he adds. Okay, but this is a tight labor market. What do you do when you can’t find that perfect candidate?

No chef skills? Can this work?

As their search continued, Randy happened across an interesting candidate: a former restaurant manager. He had little to no food experience, not much kitchen time and zero experience in senior living. Recipe for disaster, right? Wrong! Here’s what Randy says is making this “outside the box” leader successful:

- Strong management skills.
- Great interpersonal skills; his staff loves him.
- Happy to train and mentor.
- Well organized.
- Has an eagerness to learn.
- No “chef-titude” (a la Gordon Ramsay).

And, Randy reports, so far so good. He has been great with the residents, always eager to mingle with the diners, asking questions, getting to know them. “What he lacked in culinary talent, he made up for in management skills and great inter-personal skills,” says Randy. And, most importantly, as Randy likes to say, he has been a great “team player”.

So, does this mean we’re looking for dining leadership in all the wrong places?

Randy makes it very clear that culinary skills have never been more important than in today’s foodie era. “You have to have food talent in your kitchen,” says Randy. “But you also need to have someone at the helm who is going to manage. Not sequester themselves in the kitchen and never come out.”

The take away for communities, Randy says, is to not be afraid to look outside the box. The right person to lead and direct your dining services may not be a former chef. But, Randy is quick to note, make sure you have a couple great cooks in the kitchen as well.

Strategic Dining Services know what they’re talking about. They’ve seen their share of “been there done that” chefs in senior living. The ones who look at senior living as a coast-along experience. The ones who sit in their offices, fuss with the menus, but won’t lift a finger to train. That’s what they expect their underlings to do. “These are the Gordon Ramsays who love to bark orders,” says Randy. “And they get really upset when things don’t go their way. All it does is alienate the rest of the team,” he adds. And this is where Strategic Dining Services comes to the rescue.

In this labor market, we need to keep focused on getting the right people. Wherever they are.

It makes a lot of sense that, when labor markets are as tight as this one is, you have to get creative, both to find talent and attract that talent to your community. That’s why Randy has found that thinking outside the box can reap some real rewards.

Finding someone who has management skills means they are more apt to want to train and mentor others. Now in this case the client had the benefit of having Strategic as a partner so that Randy and his team from Strategic could focus on the food part of the operation and coach and train this new leader over time to become stronger in his food handling skills. Obviously, a desire to learn and a commitment to re-invent himself was critical in this success story. “Actually, this can be very exciting for someone burned out by late nights and rude customers in restaurant management,” says Randy. “We can say to them, hey, we’ll teach you how to make fresh bread, special sauces and amazing deserts. And, guess what? You can take those skills home with you.”

In a world of foodies, I’d say that’s a pretty cool value proposition. What do you think?



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