



Given Up on Dining Excellence? Try This!

By Susan Saldibar

Quick question for all the Executive Directors out there. When was the last time you walked into your senior living community kitchen and said something like, “What flavors are you using in the marinade today/this week?” Has it been awhile? Or maybe it hasn’t been at all. After all, do you know what even goes into a marinade? Should you know?

With all the culinary talent and foodies out there, senior living communities should be rocking their dining rooms with waitlists for a table. Why isn’t this happening?

Not in their “wheelhouse” so they outsource it. Easy solution? Yes. Good idea? No.

I know a couple people who can answer that question: David Koelling, President of [Strategic Dining Services](#) and RonnDa Peters, VP of Marketing and Sales (Strategic Dining is a Senior Housing Forum partner). I asked RonnDa and David about the ongoing disconnect between senior leadership and their dining rooms. After all, there are plenty of Executive Directors who rarely, if ever, set foot behind the kitchen door. It’s not in their “wheelhouse”, so to speak. But shouldn’t some part of dining be in everyone’s wheelhouse?

“Most senior living managers admit that they know little to nothing about dining,” RonnDa tells me. “That’s okay. But, their knee jerk reaction is to just outsource it. That’s really not okay,” she adds. On the surface that may sound like a good fix. But it doesn’t do anything to lift the level of dining within the community. “When you outsource, you lose control of one of the largest expense department and ultimately the quality of food,” RonnDa explains. “Not only do you lose control of the day to day dining expenses, but also the events and marketing opportunities that represent and define your community.”

You don’t have to become a food expert. Just a little effort can make a huge difference.

The problem, both RonnDa and David tell me, isn’t the lack of knowledge about the kitchen, it’s a) the lack of belief that they can gain control over the kitchen and, worse yet, 2) the lack of a desire to learn enough to gain control. Strategic Dining is on a mission to change all that.

“We know within the first visit or two how quickly we can turn things around,” says David. “When we see an Executive Director who wants to be part of the solution it will work well. But, when we have an Executive Director who knows little about dining and doesn’t want to engage, we have an uphill climb,” he adds.

So assuming you have a receptive Executive Director, I asked RonnDa and David how you get them moving in the right direction. Here are three keys to success:

1. **Believe you can change and commit to it.** Too many Executive Directors either give up, settle for less than they want or are reluctant to bring in support. “It’s smart to bring in expertise to help your team grow by providing resources and accountability.” RonnDa explains. “You have access to resources in other departments, but what about the dining team? How do you give them direction and support? Investing in your team is a win-win-win. Investing in your team by providing training and education is much different than hiring consultants or bringing in a third party to take control.”
2. **Involve everyone in owning the dining experience.** When Strategic Dining steps in it becomes a group effort. They suggest the Executive Director sit down with at least one other department head and dining department head, and ask collaborative questions, such as “How can we up our game?” “Get sales and marketing involved,” David advises. “Sales might suggest a giveaway from the dining room. Something warm that visitors, potential residents and referral sources can take with them that makes a statement about your community. Then collaborate, by asking something like, ‘How can we execute this to get the best result?’” Dining chimes in, ‘Well, we can pre-make them and heat up right before your appointment.’” Now, you have engagement! Now, you have a plan. And, the kitchen will begin to grow and develop.”
3. **Hold your dining team accountable.** And, do it in a positive way. Few would argue that people want to be held accountable. Everyone wants to know where they stand and if they are headed in the right or wrong direction. That way, they feel better about their jobs. “If Executive Directors can explain, here’s where we’re going, the team starts embracing the expectations,” says David. “Whereas they may have once said, ‘Last night we ran out of fish’, now they’ll be asking, ‘What did they think of the fish, did they like the preparation you used?’”

It isn’t hard to see how just a little spark of change can ignite a pretty cool dining experience for residents. But, I can also see how this has to be a full-on community effort.

David and RonnDa couldn’t agree more. “We have to engage the entire community so that they know what their dining team is capable of,” says David. “We want every department head to have a finger in dining and be a part of the pulse of community. Sales should collaborate with dining as well. You want to hear them say, ‘Just get them in for lunch/dinner and we’ll have them sold!’”



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