

INTERFACE

Alex Askew

Can recruiting and educating a culturally diverse work force solve the problem of finding qualified employees?

By Allison Perlik, Senior Editor



Alex Askew began cooking at age 14 and graduated from The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., at 22. Now a food consultant and production manager for Philadelphia-based Aramark Corp., he has made it his mission to help people of color rise through the foodservice ranks. Since establishing the BCA (formerly Black Culinarian Alliance) in 1993, Askew and

co-founder Jason Wallace have increased membership to more than 500 current and future industry leaders nationwide.

Q. BCA previously was known as the Black Culinarian Alliance. Why the name change?

A. We were founded as the Black Culinarian Alliance, and now we're evolving the organization without losing our prior identity. We were founded primarily for African Americans, but our focus moving forward needs to be on all people of color, and that's Hispanics, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans. How we do that without changing our total brand is tricky.

Q. BCA's goal is "to create exposure and provide educational and professional opportunities for culinary and hospitality professionals of color." Why should the industry get behind it?

A. If we look at the landscape of America, especially as it coincides with the landscape of the hospitality industry, within the next several years people of color are going to be a dominant work force. The purpose of the BCA, then, is to provide the road map to the next generation so they will become as successful as they can be. It's not just about chefs, it's the front of the house, it's food-and-beverage management, it's food styling, it's being the next celebrity chef.

Q. How can this goal be accomplished?

A. We have a strategy to make that happen. When you are able to mentor someone coming up who has the same raw foundation of education, skills and experience, you can pass off your personal road map to them. That's why mentoring will be one of our key objectives moving forward. That's how you polish the gem of people's potential for success.

Q. Which of the organization's other strategies are most essential near term?

A. Job coaching and employment resources. Our sponsoring companies include Compass, Sodexho, Aramark, Marriott and Denny's. That's key, because they send job opportunities through our office, key positions that don't always hit the papers and don't get posted online. We can say, "Hey, let's look at these members here. They'd be perfect. Let's do a free job screening with them." Then we can point these companies to the candidates we feel strongly about.

Q. What else does your strategy address?

A. A lot of times people of color miss opportunities because they have lacked exposure to the different elements that would make them as well rounded as their [white] counterparts. A business example is foodservice contracting. Negotiations are vital, and obviously you don't come out of school experienced in negotiating any type of contract. That you get through experience or through a mentoring-type situation where you are able to learn how to negotiate.

Q. To what other elements of business do your student members need exposure?

A. The hospitality industry is so vast. You don't ever stop learning about its different elements. I met an African American who was a cheese sommelier, and I didn't even know that function existed until last year. It's not as simple as, "What elements are needed that aren't there?" It's "What are elements that we don't even know we need?" That's the missing piece.

For example, I'm the first generation in my family who knows the difference between merlot and cabernet sauvignon. We've introduced a wine component in BCA called "the global food and wine experience" to expose students of color to wine.

We're also trying to set up a student-exchange program with South Africa. Business and culture are related. The most-successful people I have met know about different cultures. The more exposed we are to different things and different cultures, the more the well roundedness of knowing what we don't know starts to appear.



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