

Mind the Gap

By Alex Askew, Guest Author -- Foodservice Equipment & Supplies, 1/1/2007

There is a gap that's beginning to widen between the industry's need for well-trained foodservice professionals and the amount of talent available. And at the same time, the integrity of the industry's workforce is becoming depleted.

My first introduction to the foodservice industry came courtesy of my brother who was a cook for the Palace Restaurant in New York City. It was one of the most prestigious places in the world. Lots of celebrities would go there and I was able to collect some autographs during my visits there. The prestigious nature of this place piqued my interest about going to work in this industry.

When I was a junior in high school, I needed a job that would allow me to work as many hours as I could. And the fact that I could eat while I was working, didn't hurt either. So, I landed my first job in the foodservice industry working as a dishwasher. But it did not take me long to see that the line is the place to be because that's where the action is.

After that initial job, a family hired me to work as their private chef. For two hours a night, every night for a year, I would go to their house and make them dinner. This was a period of trial and error, and I certainly had my "I Love Lucy Moments" with large pots of rice cooking over. But more important than my success during this time was what I learned from my mistakes. And collectively, this experience gave me the confidence that I could be successful in this industry.

I got my start in this industry 24 years ago and, at that time, people possessing a sound self-discipline and a strong work ethic dominated all aspects of the foodservice community. These were the traits we wore on our sleeves, making us proud to be part of this dynamic industry. Somewhere, we got away from that and the newcomers in today's industry no longer share this same approach.

When I went to culinary school, I entered at the level of sous chef, based on the amount of work experience I had already collected. But I was typical of most people entering culinary schools at the time in that most everyone had more experience and mastered the fundamentals of being a cook. This allowed them to learn about the more intricate aspects of the industry, such as design, equipment selection and the like while in school. As a result, graduates entering the workforce did so as seasoned professionals because they were able to combine experience and education.



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But what sucked me into this industry was how deep our proverbial rabbit hole really goes. It's not just food. This industry features an art within an art within an art. I always knew I was an artist and knew that I had to prove it. This is a perfect industry to express yourself. And one trait that's indigenous to artists is passion and you need passion to be successful in this industry. If you don't have a passion — that burning desire to be successful — then you will not survive within this industry.

Unfortunately, the traits I mention above are not visible to the people outside of our industry. They don't realize that when it comes to opportunity, food is but the tip of the iceberg. To shed some light on the many opportunities our industry offers, we need to approach things from a grass-roots level by mentoring today's youth to instill that work ethic and sense of self-discipline that were the hallmarks of previous generations of foodservice professionals.

We need to get back to our roots, but a PowerPoint presentation or a conference call is not going to be sufficient. The only approach that will work is a hands-on one. One simple but potentially very powerful way of doing this is through apprenticeships, which at one time were pervasive in the industry. Opportunities like these still exist on some levels, but it is nowhere near what it once was.

Today's generation is more sensory-driven than the others before it. They need to see it and touch it before they believe in it. To communicate with them effectively, we need to do so on their level.

There's no getting around that this is an industry issue and all segments are affected. Unless you are not going to be here in a year or two, developing the next generation is everyone's responsibility.

We need to pass on that sense of integrity to future generations. If it is not there for them, their foundation will crack.