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Mentoring: a model for the future nurturing of Culinary Talent

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Abstract

Should time be invested in nurturing the next generation of Culinarians in order to improve the profession? Is fear and intimidation acceptable in a professional kitchen? Can we identify the reasons behind the high levels of staff turnover? What is mentoring? In this paper I hope to address these questions, and to discuss mentoring as a model for nurturing culinary talent. I draw upon both personal experiences and those of students who have experienced mentoring as part of the Professional Internship Module of the BA in Culinary Arts in the Dublin Institute of Technology to support my position. I propose the philosophy of mentoring needs to be generalised into the wider culinary arts community in order to transform the nature of the kitchen into a nurturing environment.

Introduction

Should time be invested in nurturing the next generation of Culinarians in order to improve the profession? Is fear and intimidation acceptable in a professional kitchen? Can we identify the reasons behind the high levels of staff turnover? What is mentoring? In this paper I hope to address these questions, and to discuss mentoring as a model for nurturing culinary talent. I draw upon both personal experiences and those of students who have experienced mentoring as part of the Professional Internship Module of the BA in Culinary Arts in the Dublin Institute of Technology to support my position.

This paper is written in the context of exceptional growth, labour shortages and high staff turnover within the Irish hospitality industry (Keating and McMahon, 2000, Bord-Fáilte, 2001). Labour shortages and high staff turnover within the hospitality business is not only

an Irish problem but also an international one (Hoque, 2000). A recent employment survey (CERT 2002) forecasted the need for 125,000 new employees in the Irish catering industry in the five years up to 2007. Of this number 100,000 would be due to labour turnover. The report identifies the areas of restaurant service and kitchen as areas with particularly high levels of labour turnover.

It is difficult to see the forecasted numbers being achieved unless all of the factors responsible for high staff turnover are clearly identified and addressed. CERT, the state tourism training agency, has carried out a number of ‘where are they now?’ research reports covering the period from 1966 – 1998. The main reasons given by respondents for leaving the industry were better pay elsewhere (22%) followed by irregular (17%) or long (15%) hours in the tourism industry. The majority of respondents (56%) had worked in between three and eight different establishments since graduating.

The Culinary Underbelly

The deeper issues of bullying and kitchen violence seem to have been either ignored or sanitised from official reports. My second work-placement during college was in a gourmet restaurant. This was my first experience of split shifts and the culture in this kitchen was one of fear and intimidation. The head chef was prone to violent outbursts and had a propensity to smash the odd plate off the wall for dramatic effect. I dreaded going back to work in the afternoons, repeated ridiculing had undermined my self-confidence, and this often led to my falling behind in my work. I began to come back to work an hour earlier to keep ahead, and my fortunes changed for the better. The following year I worked with a similarly volatile chef, who happened to be French. I learned a great deal about food in these two establishments but I also concluded that although they were both excellent cooks, their behaviour disqualified them from being considered professionals in the accepted use of that term. In my opinion violence or abusive behaviour have no place in a kitchen. A really good chef is well organised and instils confidence in his/her brigade. Like many a good teacher or parent, the good chef would only have to give a disapproving look to make one shape up! A.A. Gill, the critic, once generalised that chefs as a breed are socially inept and not very clever, and whilst

arrogant in their kitchens, they are hopelessly gauche outside. Galvin (2003) refutes this and states that most good chefs are amazingly bright, generous, energetic individuals whose work is fiercely demanding. He explains what Gill considers gauche as merely not suffering fools easily.

Kitchens are run on an authoritarian hierarchical model. The word chef means chief, and there can only be one chief in a kitchen. Anthony Bourdain (2000) clearly states his perceptions of what he expected when joining the hospitality industry: apprenticeship in France, evil drunk chefs, crackpot owners, low pay and terrible working conditions. Johns and Menzel (1999) acknowledge kitchens as stressful places, because of the variable demand and the tight specifications placed upon the product: workload surges at peak times leave kitchens temporarily understaffed and a high turnover of employees mean that the available staff may lack necessary skills. Another interesting source of stress identified in the research, particularly among leading restaurants, is the ‘constant scrutiny’ by Michelin inspectors, which in turn could precipitate violence. Johns and Menzel (1999) conclude that the acceptance of violence in top class kitchens is linked with the cult of the individual and artistic temperament.

‘There seems to be a deep seated cultural acceptance of violence as part of the striving of a perfectionist or the legitimised whim of iconised individuality.’

I strongly condemn such violence. I am concerned that novices in the field learn that such behaviour is unacceptable. My aim is to prevent the novices from perpetuating the myth, modelling themselves on violent chefs, thereby maintaining a vicious circle of bullying.

Chefs historically were known to drink because of the unbearable heat and a culture where wine seemed as available as water. Up until recently a leading Dublin hotel had a ‘sweat pint’ system as part of the chef’s terms and conditions of employment (Field notes 26 April 2003,p.3). This system and culture resulted in high levels of alcoholism among chefs. It has long been mooted that as long as there were hungry waiters, there would never be a thirsty chef. This inadvertently led to the invention of the Irish Coffee. The

chef received his whiskey camouflaged in coffee topped with cream. On being found out the chef said he was inventing a new dish, an explanation that the management were keen to exploit. Mars and Nicod (1984) identified an institutionalised acceptance of ‘fiddling’ or ‘the informal rewards system’ among waiters, and state that those who benefit do so with the collusion of management. Gerry Galvin, former restaurateur and consultant chef describes hotel managers as culinary voyeurs, somewhat like the literary critics Brendan Behan described as eunuchs, who knew how the job was done, but could not do it themselves. Chivers (1973) describes chefs as having declined in terms of skill and in terms of status. Mennell (1996:199) agrees with this assessment and suggests that the dominance of management, with its disdain for the craft of cooking, has contributed to this decline in ascribed status.

The genre of the ‘celebrity chef’ is a fairly recent phenomenon. Many young people are drawn to the industry by the glamour and fame of these ‘celebrity chefs’. The reality of the industry can soon cause them to change their mind. Professor David Foskett claimed in *Caterer & Hotelkeeper* magazine that ‘Jamie’s Kitchen’, a celebrity chef reality television programme, has set the public’s perception of professional cookery education back fifty years. Mennell (1996:197) suggests that although much has been written about the famous individual chefs throughout history, the vast majority of practitioners worked extremely hard, under difficult conditions for average remuneration. In hard times it was considered a good job. A colleague once recalled how his mother advised him to become a chef because he would be fed well and be in out of the rain. Conditions have vastly improved since the days of the coal fired range, where there was no controlling the heat in the kitchen. Frank Farren, a retired chef (aged 77) recalls the war years when coal was in short supply: ‘*a ladle of oil under a stockpot would coax it to a fast boil but also fill the kitchen with black smoke*’ (field notes 28 May 2003 p.4). Marie-Antoine Carême is said to have died at 48, burned out as much by the fumes of his ranges as by the flame of his genius. Technological advances have helped improve working conditions, but unfortunately some aspects of kitchen culture seem to have remained stagnant and escaped serious critique. George Orwell’s (1933) description of scurrying waiters and shouting, ill-mannered chefs still has a resonance in some of today’s kitchens.

Motivation and Nurture

So what are the factors that motivate chefs to continue working in this industry? Mullins (1999) explains the underlying concept of motivation as some driving force within individuals by which they attempt to achieve some goal in order to fulfil some need or expectation. These needs may be:

1. Extrinsic (pay, security etc.)
2. Intrinsic (job satisfaction, personal growth and development etc.) or
3. Social (friendship, relationships, desire for status or dependency).

Armstrong (1996) outlines how extrinsic motivators can have an immediate and powerful effect, but that it does not necessarily last long. Intrinsic motivators, which are concerned with the ‘quality of working life’, are likely to have a deeper and longer-term effect because they are inherent in individuals and not imposed from outside.

A certain minority of culinary students however, working in temperamental, stressful up-market gourmet restaurant kitchens would appear to disprove Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory, since they are willing to trade both physiological and safety needs for the perceived social need of being accepted among their peers. But only a minority are willing to make this trade off. In my research, I asked head chefs involved in mentoring the BA Culinary Arts students the question ‘what motivates your staff?’ The response was as follows:

Training / Learning	54%	Teamwork and Co-operation	42%
Good atmosphere	54%	Good Communication	36%
Social aspect (parties, socializing, sport club, football etc.)			48%
Good Wages	36%	Leadership from top down	30%
Respect	18%	A good Appraisal System	18%
Good Hours	12%		

The hospitality industry is a low paid industry but social aspects and teamwork can motivate. Eleanor Walsh from Eden Restaurant explains

'We bring the staff out three times a year (social), have staff meetings once a month, run competitions. When you are buzzing the staff buzz off you'.

Paul Keogh from Brasserie na Mara believes his staff are motivated by their ability to learn, and influence what goes on the menu.

'We help build a career for good staff and when they eventually decide to move on we help them in choosing their next job. We develop career chefs not industry fodder'.

A chef is responsible not just for the selection, preparation, cooking and presentation of food, but must also for managing manpower, machinery and materials within a tight budget. Chefs today are measured as much by their profit margins as they are by satisfied customers. The following three factors, in my opinion, contribute to making it an even more stressful occupation:

1. Most chefs have received little or no management training. In 1996 I was executive head chef for a catering company, with 26 staff under my command and a turnover of £11 million. What had prepared me for this? What training had I received in managing people? Although I had attended advanced cookery courses since graduating from the professional cookery course it was clear that I would have benefited from more knowledge of organisational behaviour, and management studies.
2. Communication skills are essential in a kitchen but again formal communication training is very often ineffective. I illustrate this point to my students each year by recalling the tale (which I'm sure is universal) of the chef who asked a new kitchen porter to drain a pot of beef stock. When he returns to see a pot of bones waiting for him he explodes with anger on finding that the porter had poured the liquid (8 hours of gentle alchemy) down the drain. Had he clearly communicated that he wanted the stock kept and the bones discarded this situation would not have occurred.
3. One of the chefs' greatest challenges is the deep-rooted culture in catering that the show must go on regardless. This can lead to brigades trying to operate at

peak performance whilst understaffed or with broken equipment. Frank Farren recalls the extreme dedication of a Miss Mullins, the manageress of the Central Hotel in Dublin in 1944, who on the day she died had to be restrained from getting out of bed to attend to the Board of Directors meeting that morning (Field notes 28 May 2003, p.2).

Erraught (1998) identified the gap in the training and education provision for head chefs. Head chefs have not been equipped in their college training with the management skills necessary to function as effective managers. The most popular chefs' course in Ireland taken either full time or by part-time 'day release', culminating in a Certificate in Professional Cookery, has been a second level training programme run by CERT and offered in various colleges throughout the country. Research in the mid 1990's culminated in the development of an honours degree in Culinary Arts in the Dublin Institute of Technology. This research engaged with the concepts of both mentoring and work-based learning. The literature shows overwhelming agreement on the importance of internships in hospitality education but also highlights the fact that little research has attempted to identify the elements that contribute to a satisfactory internship by collecting first hand reports from hospitality interns (Nelson, 1997). It was decided that with the development of this new degree course, a new model for professional internship also needed to be developed. It was proposed that the students would be assigned mentors with established positive reputations within the industry.

'The internship is one of the key integrating elements of the degree in culinary arts. It is a work based learning programme in a culinary arts professional environment and is a major contributor to the student's personal and professional development.' (Course-Document, 1998)

Mentoring and Nurture

But what are the origins of mentoring? The term 'mentor' is over three thousand years old and has its origins in Greek Mythology. When Odysseus went off to fight the Trojans, he left his trusted friend Mentor in charge of his household and his son's education. Mentor's name has been attached to the process of education and care by an older,

experienced person. Mentors have been defined as high ranking, influential senior organisation members with advance experience and knowledge, who are committed to providing upward mobility and support to a protégé's professional career (Roche, 1979, Kram, 1995, Collins, 1983). Murray (1991) defines mentoring as

'a deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the agreed-upon goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies.'

This mentoring relationship can be defined as an intense, lasting and professionally beneficial relationship between two individuals. In this relationship the more experienced and powerful individual, the mentor, guides, advises, and contributes in any number of ways the career of the less experienced, often younger, upwardly mobile protégé. Given this definition, it is not surprising that mentoring is not a common experience. The relationship requires a long-term reciprocal commitment of energy and time. It requires two people who come together in a mutually opportune time and who respect and enjoy one another enough to spend significant amounts of time together. It requires nurturing.

The BA Culinary Arts, initiated in the 1999/2000 academic year in the School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology, differed drastically from the second level certificate program previously in place. The guiding philosophy of the BA in Culinary Arts is to move beyond the utilitarian and traditional craft-based apprenticeship training in professional cookery towards an academic and scholarly form, which reflects high status knowledge thereby improving culinary arts education (Interim-Report, 1998). Hegarty (2001) explains that this new degree is

'aimed to develop the intellectual capacity of the individual rather than the wrist-to-fingertip drills of the traditional apprenticeship and to maximise the potential of each individual student. Such philosophy has considerable potential advantages for it would enable culinary arts to stake a place for itself in higher education, where culinary arts teachers, for the first time would be taught and trained.'

The programme has a strong student focus based on active student participation and exposure to a variety of teaching and learning opportunities. The aim is to move from the concept of teachers thinking of themselves as ‘subject teachers’ to becoming facilitators of student learning pursued through the medium of culinary arts (Hegarty, 2001). A programme in culinary arts needs to be a holistic educational experience for the student and not merely focused on the staffing needs of industry (Fuller, 1983). The following quote from Cleminson and Bradshaw (1996) mirrors the professional internship program’s philosophy:

‘In the first place, learning in the workplace must engage the interest and curiosity of the aspiring professional who must bring to the workplace a body of knowledge which can be challenged and reinterpreted in the workplace through practice and observation of practice.’

The participating establishments are chosen carefully for the quality of the mentoring available rather than the size or status of the establishment. The goal of the programme is to facilitate accelerated learning (McKee, 1999), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984, Boud et al., 1993) and reflective practice (Schon, 1983).

Students on the first two years of the course spend six weeks annually on internship in Ireland. Some second year students choose to spend their internship in food related non-kitchen placements. Third year students spend eight weeks on an international internship. Students are required to keep a reflective/learning journal whilst on placement, and have regular meetings with their mentor to discuss progress. At a workshop for new mentors for the second cohort of the Internship programme the Head of School, Mr Joseph Hegarty, explained that the professional internship differed drastically from previous industry placement:

‘We have changed the notion of industrial placement entirely... what happened is that students were taken and put into industry, nobody gave a care about them, then they came back, wrote a report that was usually a collection of brochures about the place, there was no critical assessment,

there was no contribution and really and truly there has been no genuine contribution from this industry for the last seventy years.’ (JH 23/10/00)

In the early meetings with industry representatives (potential mentors) it took a while to convince some of them to move away from the short term ‘what’s in it for me now?’ attitude to a more long-term strategic vision of increasing the pool of highly educated talented individuals that could help raise standards within the whole industry. Students were placed on a six week unpaid placement in many of the top establishments around the country. The mentors were asked to pay them not in monetary terms but by investing time in the students’ learning. Research (Mac Con Iomaire 2001a) from the first two iterations highlighted the importance of students meeting their mentors, building a rapport prior to commencing the internship, and also the importance of receiving a proper induction. Induction involves the introduction of a new member of staff to the culture and environment, its policies, practices and to other members of staff. Mullins (1996 p.691) writes:

‘A warm welcome, initial introductions, and a properly planned and designed induction programme will do much to reassure members, and aid their motivation and attitudes to their work performance’.

The Ritz-Carlton group place great importance on the period of induction viewing the first few days as critical, as newly hired workers -‘are like sponges’- will absorb good and bad practice.

Similar research (Mac Con Iomaire, 2001b) suggests that this internship programme causes industry participants to re-think how they treat existing staff and how their organisations might benefit from engaging with mentoring programmes. Also, this research showed that even in a climate of labour shortages, nearly all establishments involved in mentoring our students had good loyal staff and remarkably low levels of staff turnover. Zey (1984) confirms these findings concerning mentoring programmes and states that the result of the mentoring relationship can benefit the protégé, the mentor

and the organisation. The protégé receives knowledge and skills, support, protection and promotion. The mentor may realise assistance on the job, prestige and loyalty. The organisation achieves development of employees, managerial success, reduces staff turnover, and increased productivity. Dr. Linda Phillips-Jones highlights some of the benefits of mentoring as follows;

- ‘ *Organisations that want to attract high performers are offering (along with high salaries) other perks including formal mentoring opportunities. High potential candidates want to know they’ll be developed by their new employers.*
- *Formalised mentoring shortens mentees learning curves. Mentees become more productive sooner because they gain knowledge, skills, and core values more quickly from mentor-guided experiences than from longer-term, traditional methods.’*
(Phillips-Jones, 2000)

Student Feedback

During my research I asked students to describe what the highlight of their internship was in order to identify the benefit of the internship from the students’ perspective. The main themes emerging from this question were:

1. Gaining confidence and a sense of achievement particularly when given feedback or thanked for the job done.
2. The excitement of doing something for the first time.
3. Being challenged and rising to the challenge.

There were many comparisons between the highlights of the first and second iteration particularly learning new things and new ways of learning. The students really enjoyed the sense of teamwork in professional practice and the experience of working in a real live professional environment.

Students were also asked to comment on the lowlight of the internship. The main themes emerging from this question were:

1. The lack of pay.
2. The lack of time for learning.
3. Monotony of the work or insufficient work.

4. Feeling lonely, finding the work and environment tough, extremely tiring sometimes leading to tears.

Since fine-tuning certain aspects of the internship based on feedback from the first two iterations, our programme at the DIT is running extremely well. Mentors have become more comfortable in their roles and we are continuously attracting new mentors to the programme as it develops. Students have benefited also as the following excerpts from student's reflective diary illustrates how the learning progressed:

Day 1

'Today is my first day. I was nervous but not as bad as last year. One of the most crucial aspects that I want to receive from work experience is to increase my confidence. The head chef approached me at the end of my shift and asked me what exactly I would like to learn...he is very nice in that he doesn't want me doing too much as he doesn't want to exploit me, which I thought was very thoughtful.'

Day 2

'I am slowly beginning to learn the lunch menu by observing. The layout of the kitchen is a bit annoying; but I am going to try staying positive at all times. I like working here but cannot see myself staying for the summer, that is if I was asked.'

Day 3

'I feel a lot more easy now; I'm getting familiar with the lunch menu. Hopefully next week I will feel a lot more settled.'

Week 3

'This week has been going very fast. I am given more responsibility. I am getting to do the vegetarian and potatoes on my own. I am happy I am fitting in well. I believe I am learning a lot, I can see an improvement in my knife skills.'

Week 4

'I feel really good when I am given the responsibility to do so many tasks, it makes me feel part of the team and that they depend on me. I am getting more confident in myself and in the work I do.'

Week 5

'I got to do two new tasks today. I find everything takes twice as long when you don't know what you are doing. I had to even ask them to show me examples, but it has to be done, I would rather ask them than do the job wrong. Tomorrow we have a busy lunch. I feel part of the team'

Week 6

' Today was a good day for me. I got the responsibility of doing pasta to make noodle cakes. I am feeling more confident and I am enjoying myself as well. It was a slow process starting off but looking back I believe that I have gained a great deal and learned not just about my ability but also what it is like in a new environment. It has been a valuable lesson in my course'

This student was asked to stay on for the summer at the end of the professional internship period and accepted the offer.

During the first year of the programme 80% of students enjoyed their internship and 90% of industry found their role as mentor fulfilling. One industry respondent didn't find the role fulfilling because he wasn't sure that he was making any headway with the student. The number of students who enjoyed the internship had risen to 90% in the second iteration and this number has risen to 96% among the fourth and most recent cohort. The general mood is summed up by the following comments:

'It was a blast, I love the place, the people, the work everything.'

'I learned an extreme amount and got on well with everyone.'

'The weeks have flown by. The staff were very friendly and encouraging.'

'There was one night that was very busy and the buzz from the kitchen and service was brilliant.'

Of the few who didn't enjoy their internship the reasons are explained in their comments:

'Kind of in-between: I got to see an actual kitchen at work but I sometimes felt like I didn't have a clue. I like to know what I am doing'

'Low standard of food, I did the same thing every day.'

'I felt he didn't want me to learn his tricks of the trade as I wasn't going to be there long term.'

This last comment shows there are still some of the old style chefs around who feel that to have knowledge is to have power. I would suggest that sharing knowledge is much more empowering.

Conclusion

In conclusion time invested in nurturing culinary talent, in my opinion, is time well spent. The philosophy of mentoring needs to be generalised into the wider culinary arts community in order to transform the nature of the kitchen into a nurturing environment. This is not going to be completed overnight. Let me make it clear, there is no place for violence or bullying in any kitchen. Through my research I have identified that establishments that provide good learning and working environments have little difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. The experience gained from mentoring students from the BA Culinary Arts has caused employers to reflect on how they treat existing staff. Successful mentoring does take time and depends on matching the right mentor with the right mentee. We have begun to encourage industry away from the short term 'what's in it for me?' mindset to a more long-term vision of making the industry more professional. This year's graduates are the mentors of the future. Lets hope nurture will continue to influence nature for the better.

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