

Deli Leader: Quest for the Best

BY ALLEN SEIDNER

In your quest to hire a prepared foods team leader, how would you choose among the following?

A. An existing staff member who knows how the department works, has a passion for systems, and brings substantial cooking or service credentials but shoddy leadership skills;

B. An accomplished chef with a passion for learning new things but no experience in working with merchandising, customers, and service staff;

C. An outside candidate with little knowledge of natural foods but proven leadership abilities and a passion for learning and teaching.

Different people will be right for different situations just as some managers are better suited for a store opening project and others for maintaining an existing operation. Your near-term requirement in a deli leader may be very different from your long-term need. But if you met the perfect candidate for supervising a large staff in the one department that creates products from scratch ingredients, what would this person look like?

The familiar face in the field of candidates (A.) might look most appealing, especially in the short term, because of the continuity they might bring to the position. But even if your expectation of such a candidate is merely to maintain the status quo, you'll want to know whether this leader will have the incentive and ability to make continuous incremental improvements.

The accomplished chef (B.) might appeal to your sense of freshness. New blood at the top might enable the department to shake off tired menu plans and



perhaps some stale culture, to stake out new culinary ground. But you'll want to know whether this person will have the time and will to focus on the unfamiliar parts of your operation – customers, service staff, and marketing.

Two common mistakes

I see two common mistakes in the hiring of deli managers: the promotion of an existing staff member primarily because they are the "most senior" or "deserving" person on the crew; and the hiring of a highly skilled chef who is not interested or capable of developing the skills required to be a successful team leader. The stereotypical arrogance often attributed to executive chefs is much less about their displaying a superior temperament than it is about a common mistaken belief that kitchen experience alone qualifies one to oversee the service, merchandising, and other aspects of a foodservice operation. Chefs often arrive with passion and a culinary arts education that has afforded them many of the tools for success – except leadership skills.

Considering that most prepared foods departments have strong opportunities for growth, your long-term needs are likely to call for someone who looks forward to teaching, facilitating, inspiring, and challenging staff and holding them accountable. Assuming each of several candidates is equally appealing in their approach, personality, sense of judgment and humor, I'll usually favor the proven leader (C.), even if that person knows little about natural foods cooking. A seasoned leader with high expectations who knows how to focus the team's collective energy is a leader who can produce results whether leading the front end or the deli team.

Every one of finest food team leaders I've worked with has had teaching as a core element of their prior experience and current leadership philosophy. Skilled teachers know that their opportunity to share knowledge depends on their developing social skills that help motivate and inspire others to participate.

Like teachers, successful leaders have an ability to balance fellowship with responsibility. Paul Clarke, after experience as an instructor at a culinary arts school, recently became the leader of Spoons, the deli at North Coast Cooperative in Arcata, California. "You learn how to manage people by doing it," Clarke says. "And you need experience with diverse groups of people to manage them effectively."

Jamie Eisenberg learned a lot about providing students with meaningful challenges during nine years as an instructor at the New England Culinary Institute, teaching new groups of seven students every two weeks. "What makes a difference for me is that I know what's possible," she says. These days, as the manager of 45 prepared foods staff at City Market in Burlington, Vermont, Eisenberg says she doesn't hesitate to "put people in situations where I know that they might fail at first, but they're going to win in the long run. And that long

run is going to be within hours, probably, three days max."

A question of balance

Successful leaders are invariably skillful in balancing priorities and managing their time. Look for a candidate who sees both the forest and the trees – balancing the here and now with plans for evolving and growing the department.

"I'm definitely trying to focus on gentle guidance rather than being a task master," Eisenberg says. "I've pretty much let go of the details of production and shut my mouth when it comes down to arguments about whether we should sauté or steam something, because I know there are lots of other experts and I don't have to be right about that stuff all the time. I look at my job more as making sure other people engage in [the process] and have the ability to do that."

As your co-op embarks on a quest for the best leader, remember that you do indeed have much to offer. Working steady and reasonable hours in an appealing environment can be an attractive choice for experienced leaders, even if the job comes with a modest salary. Executive chefs often face 60-80 hour workweeks and massive responsibilities.

If you can't find or afford top-level deli talent, what essential managerial skills can you settle for and which ones can you expect to cultivate in other department staff? Great teams are made up of many important players with different skills, experiences, and passions. If your team leader knows little about natural foods, you'll certainly want the department's number two person to have expertise and play a role in menu planning and training. Key department staff can also take on other important responsibilities, including merchandising, purchasing, recordkeeping, and systems analysis. The learning curve will be shortest for a deli leader who has had a range of food service experiences. But someone without that experience can work if you are able to hire the kind of leader who fits well with your store culture and who has a passion for learning your deli's opportunities and teaching others how to grow and take responsibilities.

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