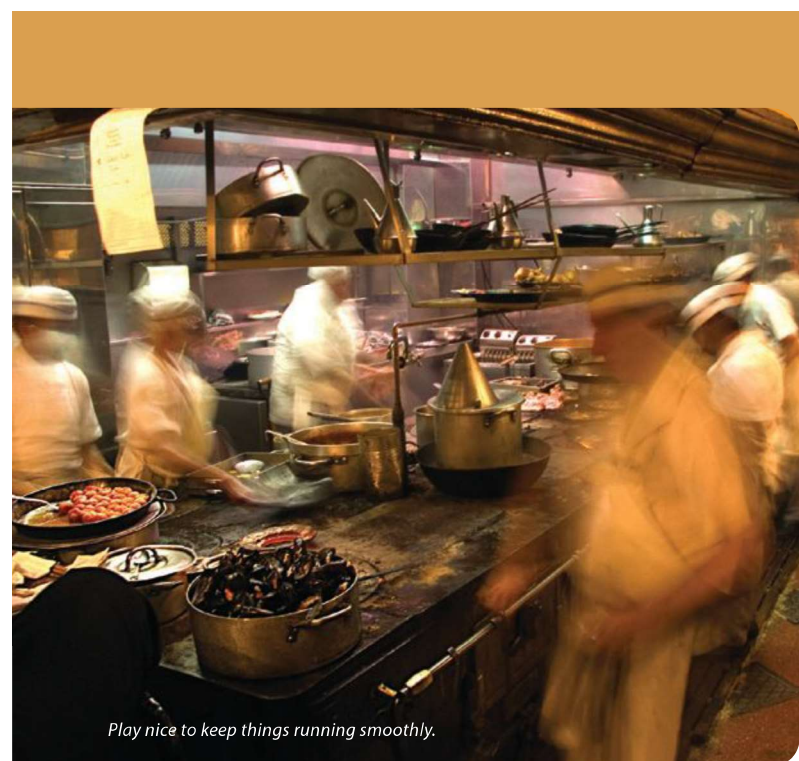


Building a Better FOH-BOH Relationship

By Jennifer Vishnevsky



Play nice to keep things running smoothly.

To build a successful operation, you need cohesion. While the front of house and back of house have long been viewed as opposing teams, many restaurateurs today recognize that it's important to unite these teams with a single goal.

The blame game

According to Donald Burns, founder and CEO at Performance 7 Restaurant Consulting & Coaching, the challenges that could arise in this relationship are conflicts between servers and chefs, based on a lack of communication and a misunderstanding of what the other side does. "If you have internal conflict, it's very hard to get together and perform at a world-class level," he says. "The main thing is blame. Everyone wants to blame someone else. The food took long, so the service team wants to blame the kitchen. But maybe the service team held onto the ticket longer than they should have. In reality, 99% of all problems in restaurants are due to communication."

Creating a unified front between FOH and BOH is critical for a restaurant's operations to run smoothly. "A major challenge of developing smooth operations in a restaurant is getting employees to understand the team concept of a successful restaurant," says David Bakke, editor at Money Crashers Personal Finance. Bakke spent more than 10 years as a general manager in the restaurant industry. "Far too often, employees from either camp take an "us vs. them" attitude, and this can significantly damage the profitability of a restaurant," he says.

To rectify this challenge, Bakke believes that BOH employees need to understand that an effective FOH will drive sales and profits, which will ultimately free up more

capital and could, in turn, bring about raises in salaries. "Conversely, the FOH staff needs to realize that getting high-quality food to their guests in a timely manner will generally result in more generous tips and faster table turns," he says.

Cross-training

While the end goal is to achieve positive cash flow, both FOH and BOH employees need to do their part to help the restaurant achieve its financial potential. To do so, Bakke recommends proper training. "Managers should hold regular training sessions to ensure that each member of the staff understands the basics of their job, has the tools that they need in order to succeed, and understands the overall goals of the restaurant," he says.

Bakke says the staff must be able to execute their jobs efficiently on a daily basis. A restaurant can truly succeed if it is able to produce 30 great lunch shifts and 30 great dinner shifts per month. This is the goal that each team member should strive for.

He also recommends thorough involvement of the management in order to create smooth operations between FOH and BOH. "Any manager who doesn't take a hands-on approach to their job is destined to fail," he says. "Obviously, you can't do your staff's job, but what you can do is jump in the trenches with them to assist with the work and find ways for to improve the processes. You also want to be involved since it will raise the respect your employees have for you. You will be leading by example and exhibiting a true passion for the restaurant."

Burns recommends that managers cross-train as many people as they can in the restaurant. "Any time I've operated as a consultant, owner, or manager, the first thing

“It shouldn’t be FOH vs. BOH. It’s everyone pulling together for the customer. So break down those walls by working in different areas in order to understand what each side goes through.”

I try to do is break down the barrier. It shouldn’t be FOH vs. BOH. It’s everyone pulling together for the customer. So break down those walls by working in different areas in order to understand what each side goes through,” he says.

Burns says both teams should focus on having clear, concise and honest communication with each other. “The biggest thing I try to do is get them to refocus their questions. Take personal responsibility and ask the right questions. I try to build a better foundation, so stop using blaming questions and ask empowering questions,” he says.

Ask the right questions — and the right people

“Servers and cooks can often provide better insight than management as to how the two teams can better work together,” he says. Bakke has seen instances where management has scheduled all-employee meetings in which the sole goal was to find ways that BOH can make the FOH function more efficiently, and vice versa. “Management needs to be heavily involved in moderating the meeting so it doesn’t deteriorate into a complaint session. If done correctly, BOH, FOH, and management can use constructive criticism to come away with specific ways to improve,” he says.

Bakke was once hired on as a kitchen manager at an independent restaurant where the FOH-BOH relationship was particularly divisive. In short, they hated each other and it was really bogging down operations. Bakke asked the general manager about it, and he seemed

to think that it wasn’t that big a deal, and also that nothing could be done to change it.

So, Bakke proposed an idea. “I asked if we could schedule FOH and BOH meetings on the same day at the same time. Everyone would gather in their own separate areas, but the meetings would ultimately be merged. When the two teams entered the same dining room, some of them had nervous and even scared looks on their faces,” he says.

Bakke began the meeting by announcing what a detrimental effect the divisiveness was having on the operation and that the goal of the meeting was to get it all ironed out. Initially, people were reluctant to voice their concerns in an open forum. “The FOH came up with a list of their main grievances as well as the BOH. The lists were posted at the front of the room so all could see. Then, with the help of management, we went down each list one by one to find solutions for all the complaints,” he says.

With many of the complaints, neither side knew that it was a point of contention from the other side. The overall execution of the restaurant improved tremendously from that day forward.

Whether a FOH-BOH crossfire is evident in your restaurant or not, it’s never a bad idea to open the lines of communication. Don’t be surprised if you notice smoother operations, happier workers, and over time, stronger profits.



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