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Incorporating a Mentorship Program into Applebee's Server Training Program

Introduction

I have been employed as a restaurant server with Applebee's in Castle Rock since 2009. In that time I have become an "Expert" which is, someone who trains new front of the house hires. Our current corporate training system is a blend of corporate videos, assessments and 4 to 5 days of live training with an expert server trainer.

Challenge

As with any restaurant, there is an inherently high rate of employee turnover. Ours is unusually high, running at 215%. We are in an affluent community. In more financially challenged areas of metro Denver the numbers are much lower, around 40%. Our new hires range in age from 18 to my age, 50+. Millennials, also known as gen y (ages 18-34) represent the majority of our new hires and tend to be very fickle employees. They jump jobs at a moment's notice and rarely provide two weeks notice. They can typically find another similar job in little to no time.

In this industry article discussing gen Y (millennial) retention, it is noted:

"In terms of what gen Y employees look for in an organization, a top value is the opportunity for career progression. To some millennials, a career advancement opportunity is important because it means growth, stability and more money. Although this came in first, compensation is ranked as a close second, as well as flexible working environments, training and development programs, great leadership, diversity, being able to do interesting work and knowing that they add value to the company."
Johnson (2014).

This is somewhat difficult to translate into the restaurant industry. Most servers are not “career servers”. And very few actually progress from server to the management team. The one element that is realistic in terms of focus is the piece around training and development programs.

In speaking with new hires about our training practices I found that most feel our training materials are dated and cookie cutter in approach. I will frequently see trainees on their smartphones while “watching” a video, indicating their disconnect with the training materials. One manager observed that the training materials seem to treat all the trainees as if they were the same person. A trainee I was working with recently commented on how boring the videos are. Most of our new hires are millennials, yet our training approaches are geared to an older audience. Our training materials are not going to be revamped anytime soon and our new hires need to experience something relevant to them, which connect them to the company and coworkers. With that in mind I approached management with the concept of building a mentorship program.

Mentorship programs are nothing new. They have proven to be a very effective tool in employee retention. Some [facts](#) to support this:

- 77% of companies report mentoring programs were effective in increasing retention
- 35% of employees who do not receive regular mentoring look for another job within 12 months
- 75% of executives indicate mentoring played a key role in the careers
- 44% of CEOs list mentoring as one of the three most effective strategies to enhance women’s advancement to senior management
- CEOs state that one of the top three factors affecting career growth is mentoring
- Management productivity increased by 88% when mentoring was involved vs. 24% increase with training alone
- 71% of Fortune 500 companies use mentoring to ensure learning occurs in their organizations
- 95% of mentoring participants said the experience motivated them to do their very best
- Over 80% of college and graduate students list mentoring as a criterion for selecting an employer after Graduation

Moreover, according to this [white paper](#), mentorship programs are effective for:

- Attracting and retaining staff
- Developing leaders
- Focusing development on mission-critical goals and behaviors/competencies
- Increasing knowledge sharing, transfer and management
- Cultivating new talent; reducing the costs/time horizon of on-boarding/assimilation
- Building linkages across the organization
- Facilitating organizational change and communication

- Improving employee productivity and empowerment
 - Reinforcing cultural values and organizations for new roles and leadership challenges
 - Preparing individuals and organizations for new roles and leadership challenges
- Rochas et al,(2009)

According to the human resource consulting firm, [Robert Half](#):

“Mentorship programs have become a popular way for small businesses to assist new employees during the initial months on the job. However, a mentorship program goes beyond merely being "shown the ropes" by others more experienced in a role.

Mentors act as a new hire's guide to your workplace and allow newcomers to gain valuable, real-world experience and skills that are difficult to transmit in classroom settings or workshops. Mentors are also different from supervisors. They don't typically oversee the new employee's day-to-day work performance. The true function of a mentor within mentorship programs is to act as an additional source of support during an employee's early period with your company. These pairings augment other elements of onboarding, helping fill in the gaps that even the best programs contain.” (2015)

Intervention

This would be a bottom-up, worker’s innovation. During the training process, the new hire should be exposed to as many expert trainers as possible. Inevitably there will be a pairing where an expert and trainee “click”. This is particularly important with diverse trainees. Identify the expert mentor by asking the trainee whom they would like to serve as their mentor. Make sure the expert is agreeable to the pairing and is willing to provide ongoing monitoring and support.

Proposed Implementation

The first few weeks are critical with new hires. The work pace is fast and potentially stressful. It can be comforting to know they have an ally in the restaurant, someone they can turn to for help and advice without risking the embarrassment of asking a total stranger for help. The mentor should act as a liaison to management and provide regular feedback regarding the new hire’s struggles and accomplishments.

I will serve as the point person for the program, working closely with management and the other experts to implement as well as monitor the efficacy of the program.

Change Theory Alignment

The change theory, which most closely aligns with this proposed implementation, is [Lippitt's Phases of Change Theory](#). Following the seven steps of the theory and the proposed response:

1. *The problem has been diagnosed*, high turnover due in part to inadequately trained and supported staff
2. *Assess the motivation and capacity for change*. Training staff is willing to try new approach. Management is willing to support.
3. *Assess the resources and motivation of the change agent*. That would be me. I am motivated and can acquire the resources I will need to implement this change.
4. *Choose progressive change objects*. Pairing trainees with a compatible mentor.
5. *The role of the change agents are selected and clearly understood*. My primary role is that of expert, but also facilitator and cheerleader. The other trainers would function in those capacities as well.
6. *Maintain the change*. Continue to check in with new employees to ensure they have the support they need to be successful in their position.
7. *Gradually terminate from the helping relationship*. At this point the mentorship program has been comfortably integrated into the training process. Periodic monitoring can assure that the program continues to be practiced and the employee retention rate has risen as a result.

Higher retention would be a hallmark of success of the program. Increased retention means less money spent on training, fewer food comps (having to buy customer's food because the order was taken incorrectly), fewer order entering errors, etc. New hires are simply prone to making more errors than an experienced staff is.

Actual Implementation

Informal Trial and Proposal of the Program

I began to serve as a mentor in an informal fashion prior to the actual implementation of the program. I would make a point of checking in with new hires, making sure they felt comfortable in their positions and asking if they needed any additional help. I also would stop whatever I was doing to answer a question when they are on the POS (Point Of Sale device) entering an order. I remember how stressful it was when I was a new server and couldn't find what I needed in the computer. The time lost there puts one behind in the dining room and adds stress and anxiety to what is already, time sensitive work.

I presented the idea for this program to my GM and to the person who serves as our human resource representative. They proposed I spearhead the program and present it to our expert servers at our next staff meeting. Our HR rep indicated that the first 90 days is the critical time frame for employee retention. At our staff meeting we discussed what the mentoring program would look like and how it would be implemented, administered and assessed. We elected to use our regular staff meetings to assess the progress of the new hires and the mentoring program in general.

Check-ins at Staff Meetings

We hold regular meetings with the experts and the General Manager (GM). During these meetings new hires are discussed informally. We also collect anecdotal information about the progress of new hires.

Typical questions for discussion:

- Are there any areas that seem to be giving the new hire difficulty?
- How can we support them with that difficulty?
- Is the mentor/mentee pairing a good fit? Change?
- Any positive observations?

- Any negative observations?
- How can we constructively address any negative behaviors?
- How are their interactions with other members of staff? Guests?
- Do they show promise to advance (become an expert, move into different positions, e.g. bartender, bar server, carside, Expert?)
- Have they expressed an interest in doing so?
- Recommendations for pins (awards for various types of achievements-morale booster).

Tracking Success/ Recommendations

Follow up “check-ins” are implemented in intervals after the trainee has completed their training. Reassessment dates are at 4, 8 and 12 weeks, which aligns with staff meetings and focuses on the critical 90-day window. During this time we determine if the new hire is happy and performing well in his/her job. Feedback is recorded to further refine the training process in addition to the feedback provided by the mentor. Conversations with the mentor are a critical part of the assessment. After a period of 6 months to a year data should be checked to see that the employee retention rate has risen. Exit interviews should be held with those who elect to quit or are terminated. Documentation of reasons for staff loss is recorded to help determine the effectiveness of the mentorship program. Many times staff leave for reasons beyond the scope of any retention program (going away to school, a move, another job with a considerably higher income). Successful employee retention relies on hiring high quality candidates. The GM now is the deciding vote on new hires and is involved in the interview process. Including an expert in the interview process would further aid in determining the potential viability of a new hire.

Lessons Learned

So far there seems to be enthusiastic acceptance of the program by new hires, experts and members of management. The employees we have lost have been due to circumstances beyond the reach of the mentorship program (employees leaving for school, family reasons or securing a higher paying job elsewhere). We have been hiring more solid, high quality employees who are assimilating well into the company and culture. The mentor pairings have been successful, providing support for the new hires as well as empowering the mentors to act as leaders and an extension of management. Further tracking will be required to truly evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Dealing with the expectations of the gen y worker is just a part of the challenge in retention. Starting with high quality candidates further ensures the longevity of our staff.

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