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## The Proletarian Gourmet

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## **Abstract**

Many managers are concerned about the loss of the American work ethic. The author shows that, in spite of alienating work conditions and poor management practice, the work ethic is very strong in the garde manager department of a major five diamond resort hotel.

# The proletarian gourmet

by David Walczak

*Many managers are concerned about the loss of the American work ethic. The author shows that, in spite of alienating work conditions and poor management practice, the work ethic is very strong in the garde manger department of a major five diamond resort hotel.*

In an article about restaurant workers, James Sheehy describes a frightening new work ethic in America.<sup>1</sup> He says workers have contempt for customers and negative work attitudes, possess few, if any, ethical standards, are indifferent to the needs of business and the concerns of management, and try to get away with whatever they can. Contrary to the conclusion of Sheehy and others,<sup>2</sup> a participant/observer study in 1995-96 showed that among cooks the American work ethic is very strong.

This descriptive case study provides insight into the working life of garde manger cooks in a large hotel.<sup>3</sup> Management interns usually do not work close enough to the kitchen to understand the impact management practice has on kitchen personnel nor how the behavior of cooks influences corporate performance and goal attainment.<sup>4</sup>

## **Pantry provides setting**

The research setting is a five-diamond hotel in Florida which, during the peak season, employs over 1,000 workers, including approximately 100 cooks. In addition to its banquet and off-premise catering facilities, the property operates four restaurants: two dining rooms, a beach club, and a golf-course cafe. The main lounge serves a light menu, and room service operates around the clock. Employees eat at a separate cafe.

The garde manger department, also known as the pantry, is responsible for the preparation of cold food items. The pantry is a fully-enclosed, air-conditioned kitchen adjacent to, but separate from, the main kitchen and is divided into six production areas: room service, banquets, layout, plateup, canapes, and lettuce. There are two

meat slicers and two food processors in the pantry. While a portable, propane single burner might occasionally be used to poach pears or prepare gelatine, all cooking needed to prepare the food which is ultimately served cold is done in the main kitchen. A burr mixer and electric knife are also available. The prep and finishing work is done on metal tables that run along the perimeter of the L-shaped room.

Fifteen full-time cooks with a median age of 30 work in the pantry. Of the 10 women, five are African-American, three Caucasian, one Hispanic, and one Asian. Of the men, one is African-American, two Caucasian, and two Hispanic. Four cooks graduated from culinary school.

### **Activity is repetitious**

The work day for each station cook is typically divided into prep and finishing work, both of which are tedious and routine.<sup>5</sup> Take, for example, the work involved in making a simple citrus salad with hearts of palm for 800 guests. Each plate consists of the following: two pieces of lolla rosa baby lettuce, one piece of Belgium endive, three orange sections, three half slices of grapefruit, four ounces of hearts of palm sliced on the bias, and fine brunoise of red pepper and chive garnish.

Two cases of endive must be opened, cut, and separated, and three cases of lolla rosa opened, cut, separated, and washed. Two hundred oranges need to be washed, skinned, and sectioned, and 100 grapefruit washed, skinned, halved, and sliced. Five dozen cans of hearts of palm need to be opened, drained, and cut on the bias, and one dozen red peppers cut, cleaned, washed, cut brunoise, and combined with about ten bunches of chives, also cut brunoise.

Finishing the plate is as routine as the preparation. To present the citrus salad, 200 sheet pans, each holding four plates, are laid out in four rows on the tables. Each row consists of 10 sheet pans stacked five high. Four plates are placed on the top sheet pan in each row.

Lolla rosa is the first item to be put on the plate. The lettuce is taken out of the walk-in and placed on a makeshift, moveable tray, usually a plastic garbage can with a sheet tray placed on top, in front of the plates being prepared. Two pieces of lolla rosa are picked up and placed in the proper place on the plate. This is repeated and the tray is moved to the next column of four plates and also repeated. This same basic motion is repeated for each of the remaining items on the plate. Once each plate is identical to the next, the top sheet pans are removed, placed on speed racks, covered with a "body bag," i.e., a large plastic bag, labeled, and wheeled into a walk-in cooler located outside the pantry. Plates are placed on the next 40 sheet pans, assembled, put on speed racks, labeled, and stored. This procedure is repeated three more times until the 800 are completed.

The daily repetition specific to prep work and presentation is characteristic of each station in the pantry. So, too, is the speed at which the work is to be accomplished: fast, fast, fast.

One is reminded of the Pepsi Cola commercial which shows a man sitting in a chair in his mansion. In a loud, protracted, questioning, voice, the man calls his butler: "Willlllllburrrrr, where are you?" The scene changes to an elderly butler walking very slowly down a long hallway carrying a Pepsi Cola. It seems to take forever for the butler to deliver the soft drink.

A standing joke in the pantry is to call out someone's name mimicking the voice in the commercial: "Shirrrrrrrleeeeeeeey." The implication is clear. The person whose name is called is producing at Wilbur's pace. The cook is working too slow, and everyone knows it. "Get it done—yesterday" is the way one cook describes the pace.

This is repetitive, fast-paced work from which there is almost no break. Gourmet pantry cooks seldom sit down for lunch or dinner. While cooks are given a 30-minute break to eat, an informal norm exists which restricts them from taking this break before the prep and presentation work is completed. By that time the shift is almost over, so most cooks finish their shift before they sit down to eat.

### **Cooks have little control**

The hotel is bureaucratic and the management team practices a Theory X leadership style.<sup>6</sup> Power and control are in the hands of the pantry chef. All decisions flow through her. The night supervisor is coached in decision-making prior to each shift and debriefed before the next one. Cooks control their tools and have little influence over anything else.

Negativity is paramount. The executive chef fines cooks \$1 and the pantry chef \$5 for dress code violations. One seldom hears compliments from the executive chef, rarely from the sous chef, and almost never from the pantry chef. The stick is the rule, it seems, because the carrots must be used for stocks and salads.

Several cooks in the pantry wonder how much longer they will work at the hotel, given the large number of times they feel they have been manipulated by management. They complain about too much work, not enough advance notice or help to get it done, too little pay, few compliments, criticism for minor mistakes, short notice of infrequent, irregular days off, and poor and inconsistent messages.

The latter can be illustrated by an incident involving Fred<sup>7</sup> and feta cheese. One day 350 Mediterranean salads topped with feta cheese were being plated. Feta cheese has a sharp, pungent, some say, moldy odor. One of the older female cooks in the pantry refers to it as "funky-butt" cheese. The pantry chef told Fred to put a little feta cheese on top of the salads. After finishing about 50 salads, the pantry chef

walked by and said Fred needed to put more cheese on the salads. Fifteen minutes later, the chef returned to the pantry, saw Fred did not have enough cheese to finish the remaining salads, and told him he put too much cheese on them. The cooks heard these different orders, rolled their eyes, shook their heads, and shrugged their shoulders. The problem stemmed from a vaguely defined amount specified at different times by a hard-working chef-manager with many responsibilities.

### **Talk is common**

Isolation from others is another major component of alienation from work.<sup>8</sup> This is not the case in the pantry.

In this small kitchen a cook is seldom alone. There are no machines, walls, or other barriers keeping cooks from interacting freely with each other. Conversations at one end of the pantry are easily heard at the other end.

Several cooks in the pantry talk endlessly about personal lives, other friends, cole slaws, crab claws, the boss, colleagues, supervisors, managers, problems on the job, politics, economics, religion, and philosophy. They talk to anyone in the pantry or near it. They talk on the phone, about the phone, and sometimes to the phone. They talk because they are nervous, insecure, bored, alienated, or just plain talkative. They love to gossip.

### **Cooks cope in various ways**

"It doesn't get any better than this" is a popular phrase cooks exchange when their frustration gets the better of them. They know it does, but there is little they can do to change things. They cope with alienation in two ways, withdrawal from work and playing games.<sup>9</sup>

Beating the clock at work is a common strategy. Cooks employ this technique by punching the time clock seven minutes after the shift starts, but one minute before the computer registers the punch as late, thereby avoiding being docked 15 minutes. This same strategy is used at the end of the shift as well.

The cook comes to the pantry wearing black and white checkered pants, black shoes, and a white, double-breasted chef's coat. After punching the time clock seven minutes late, the cook walks slowly to the pantry, stopping along the way to exchange pleasantries with the other cooks in the main kitchen. Upon arriving at her station she finishes getting dressed properly for work. A nametag is attached above the coat pocket and a small, white neckerchief is folded and rolled and then tied around the neck. The cook slips on and ties a white bib apron. Two side towels are secured in the apron string, one on each side of the waist. An adjustable toque is stapled to fit properly. When the stapler is either not found or out of staples, the cook leaves the

pantry in search of another stapler. Often, the cook returns to the pantry to pick up a styrofoam cup and goes to the main kitchen in search of coffee.

Another way cooks beat the clock is by "taking a vacation," i.e., leaving the station for an extended period of time. This happens frequently during the shift, but the best time is in the morning when the pantry chef attends a daily chef's meeting.

Games range from untying a cook's apron string to throwing a core of baby lettuce into the opening on top of the cook's toque.

A common game involves startling unsuspecting cooks with a sudden loud noise. One version involves slamming a three by two foot metal sheet pan on the cement floor immediately behind the cook. The startled cook usually jumps in place, drops what he is doing, and turns to "cuss out" the perpetrator in a joking manner. Everyone laughs and gets back to work.

### **Work ethic is strong**

Vacations notwithstanding, pantry cooks work very hard. They possess the characteristics of the classical American work ethic.

Work in the pantry is physically demanding. Cooks stand eight hours a day, often without a lunch break. Routinely, heavy bags or boxes of vegetables are picked up or dragged to one's station for preparation. Several hours are spent grilling meat, seafood, or vegetables. Large wooden display trays weighing about 40 pounds when fully loaded are put onto a "Queen Mary" and pushed through the main kitchen and up a ramp to a walk-in refrigerator used for holding foods. Speed racks carrying 20 sheet pans each holding four plates and weighing close to 100 pounds are also pushed up the ramp.

Pantry cooks work long hours. During the season, six-day work weeks are common, as are nine and 10-hour days. Yet for many cooks, this is not enough. Several volunteer to go to other departments or off-premise catering events to help out. One cook takes pride in working all such events offered to him. Three days into the work week, he proudly proclaims he has already put in 40 hours. On pay day he cheerfully walks through the pantry boasting about the long hours worked and the large amount of his paycheck. A kind of competition follows to see if these numbers can be beat. Several cooks have part-time jobs.

Three work full-time jobs outside the pantry. One usually breaks for lunch at the end of the shift, although it is not unusual for him to work a few extra minutes to finish the day's work before punching out at 2:30, perhaps 2:23. Another cook works "eight straight" and punches out immediately to make it to the next job on time. Because the time clock automatically deducts for lunch, this cook is docked 30 minutes' pay. A third cook works full-time at a day job before reporting to the pantry for the second shift.

In addition to working tired, pantry cooks work through injury and illness. Routine cuts are bandaged while bumps and bruises are ignored. On one occasion a cook cut off one quarter of his thumbnail. It took a while to stop the bleeding, but the cook refused to go to the emergency room for stitches and returned to work immediately. It seems that someone is always coughing, sniffing, or sneezing. One cook says you need three things in your toolbox to make it through the season: "burn cream, bandages, and aspirin." Antihistamine, Pepto-Bismol, and cough medicine should be added to this list. Another cook says, "They have Advil in the candy machine; this should tell you something about working here."

Absenteeism is not a major problem. Workers are entitled to six sick days with pay each year, yet only one cook has used up her allotment. The low absentee rate exists even though workers are not notified of their work schedule until two to four hours before the end of the current work week. Such short notification and irregular days off leave little time for planning.

Pantry cooks take pride in the work they do. Many keep photo albums of their more artful presentations. Another cook always has a camera and takes pictures of the creative work of the others.

#### **New management practice needed**

James Sheehy suggests the best way to restore the old work ethic is through education.<sup>10</sup> Students must learn the positive work values necessary for organizational success through having management representatives in the schools, through "reality shock" orientation programs, or through mentorships.

Garde manger cooks do not need to learn the positive values associated with the American work ethic. These workers are industrious, disciplined, hard working, and proud members of the workforce. The problem lies in an alienating, poorly-managed workplace that drains the positive values from these workers and replaces it with the negative values associated with low motivation, withdrawal, indifference, and failure.

After two years on the job, one of the young pantry cooks is looking for work with another organization. For more than a year and a half, this cook exemplified the values associated with hard work and success. He worked all the overtime he could and went where the chefs needed him. Now he feels used, ignored, and unappreciated. He had to threaten to quit to get the raise he felt he deserved. His creative input is usually ignored. He is beginning to avoid work, and when he does work it is at a much slower pace than before. He calculates his overtime to be that in which he has to do the least amount of work. The positive work values he brought with him to the hotel are still present, but they have been sublimated and supplanted by the nega-



tive. This cook is now looking for a culinary position with more authority and responsibility in another hotel because he feels he is not going to be promoted within this organization.

While Sheehy may be right that some workers need to learn new work values, it is also true that some management teams need to learn new management practices. Modern management techniques are not practiced at the hotel or in the department. While the hotel and restaurant management literature describes the bottom-line advantages of work redesign, worker ownership, participative decision-making, and empowerment,<sup>11</sup> this management group churns along, oblivious to changes that would help nurture rather than undermine, five-diamond work effort. A team approach is emphasized, but the definition is classic, not contemporary. An annual employee picnic, new employee luncheon, name recognition for perfect annual attendance, or election to the quality service team are examples.

Garde manger cooks are not perfect employees. Like Wilbur who forgot the straw, pantry cooks make mistakes and must retrace their steps, costing the company time and money. Garde manger cooks call in sick under dubious circumstances, intentionally work slow, "take vacations" while on the job, and get in arguments with other employees. On one occasion, a young female pantry cook picked up a knife and ran down the stairs after an uncooperative baker. She was fired immediately. Two middle-aged females swear excessively. Male chauvinism is rampant. However, these cooks come to work ready, willing, and able to do a job that management makes very difficult to accomplish.

These research findings are not generalizable. A future study might involve survey research of cooks, chefs, and managers at randomly-selected five-diamond hotels. In addition to testing the findings to emerge from this study, data could be collected on such issues as the interplay between cohesive group dynamics and individualized work routines, cross training versus specialization, and the dichotomy of routinized work processes which produce highly specialized art/craft creations.<sup>12</sup>

## References

<sup>1</sup>James Sheehy, "New Work Ethic is Frightening," *Personnel Journal* (June 1990).

<sup>2</sup>Robert Eisenberger, *Blue Monday* (New York: Paragon, 1989).

<sup>3</sup>For a detailed and insightful ethnographic study of the working life of hot-line cooks, see Gary Fine, *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup>For additional information about how management practices and cook's behavior impact sanitation objectives, see David Walczak, "The Sanitation Imperative: Keep People from Getting Sick in Your Restaurant," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* (April 1997).

<sup>5</sup>This section and the next two are based on the following: Melvin Seeman, "On the Meanings of Alienation," *American Sociological Review* 24 (1959).

<sup>6</sup>Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960).

<sup>7</sup>Fred is a pseudonym.

<sup>8</sup>Seeman.

<sup>9</sup>George Ritzer and David Walczak, *Working: Conflict and Change*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: 1986).

<sup>10</sup>Sheehy.

<sup>11</sup>Two recent examples are Andrew N. Vladimir, "Seabourn Cruise Line: A Case Study in Achieving Quality," *FIU Hospitality Review* (Spring 1995), and Raymond T. Sparrowe, "Empowerment in the Hospitality Industry: An Exploration of Antecedents and Outcomes," *Hospitality Research Journal* 17, no. 3 (1994).

<sup>12</sup>These suggestions for future research are from an anonymous reviewer's comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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