



Chapter 1

What Makes You Tick?

What makes this book realistic about “team building” but useful and still fun is that most of what is required is raw material—hard work, sweat, trial-and-error—that comes from the heart. I’m not going to tell you hypothetical stories about two mice or moving mountains. What most motivates me about food is what I still have to learn. What most inspires me is working with young professionals and building great teams. From day one, building great teams has been something I have thrived on; I love building a culinary team in the same way that a pro football coach builds a team. I work hard to find the perfect fit for each position—the perfect chef, journeyman, or student—for the perfect position. I have sometimes moved chefs to different positions to maximize their strengths or to maximize the team’s depth, just as a football coach would. It is really that simple. Do you ever review your team and then move the chefs around so they don’t get stagnant? Do you ever wonder if your team would be stronger if you made some of these moves?

Sometimes the Best Solution Is Right in Front of You

“What most inspires me is working with young professionals and building great teams.”

I remember I needed a garde-manger chef and could not find the right person for the job. It was a difficult position that needed someone who could think on his or her feet, who was able to make decisions, and who could supervise a staff of ten, not to mention possessing the garde-manger skills required for the position. In the midst of my frustration, an apprentice came to me and asked, “Why don’t you promote your wife to the position?” Now,

first off, working with your wife in the same building, let alone the same kitchen, isn't always a good idea; but in this case it was a great idea. My wife is a no-nonsense Norwegian chef who trained with a two-star Michelin chef. On my best day I have a trace of nonsense in me, so why she married me is still a mystery. Anyway, the apprentice was right. I had the best person for the job already in my kitchen; but because I did not look outside the box, I could not see it. This is really important in your operation. You need to take a good look around, often, to see if there is a move that would benefit both the chef and the company. Some of the best moves may not be the obvious ones.

1. Consider those around you for key roles in your team.
2. Be willing to take risks.
3. Just because it isn't obvious does not mean it is not a good idea.
4. Step outside the situation and look at the challenge as a whole.

Early Influences

It all started for me at Rabbit Hill Inn in Waterford, Vermont. My mother, Ruth, and father, John, bought the Inn in 1972 when I was eight years old. Even so young, I had to work my tail off several days a week. Those of you who have grown up in a family business or who are familiar with owning your own business know it is an eight-day-a-week job. I had regular chores that included stocking bars, running for ice, showing guests to their rooms, setting up fireplaces—you name it, I had to do it. I actually worked the breakfast station when I was ten years old. What I did not realize until later in life, however, was that growing up in this environment was very special, and my experience later benefited my career tremendously. Not only did I grow up in an incredibly disciplined environment, my home constantly had guests. Brothers Greg and Tom, sister Celinda, and I were constantly on stage, as it were. We could not throw fits, fight over toys, toss food at the table (okay, there was this one time...never mind), or fight over the remote (well, there was no remote, and we only had two channels). My point is that we were always busy taking care of guests; when we were not taking care of them, the guests could see us. I think this made us grow up faster.

“One of the marks of true greatness is the ability to develop greatness in others.”

—J. C. McCauley

Most important of all, I learned: how to behave in front of people, not to be afraid to talk to people, and proper manners. I did not realize how important this was until I saw other chefs afraid to walk into the dining room to talk with their guests. Some chefs are so nervous about giving a demonstration that it would prevent them from sleeping the night before or cause them to throw up just before the presentation. I did not realize what an effect this early prep had on me. Growing up in this environment was special, a lot of work, but special. My early first-hand experiences unknowingly paved the way for my professional career.

My Early Profession

My next position was at the Balsams Grand Resort, a 15,000-acre, four-star, four-diamond resort in the northern tip of New Hampshire. I apprenticed there, went to the Culinary Institute of America, graduated, and returned to the resort, supposedly long enough to get some money in my pocket and to research my first big job. Little did I know that that *was* my first big job. Working there for two years prior to beginning my formal culinary education and making my way through every department, made it easy to go back. I was able to rise very quickly from sous chef to apprenticeship coordinator to executive sous chef and finally to executive chef by age 24.

“The beauty about my passion is that to this day, I have not stopped working to improve my qualifications.”

I had sixty employees working for me in the kitchen, more than half of whom were older than me. It was a pretty challenging task, although at the time I didn't think so. I would have chewed off the end of a wooden table if that is what it took to be successful. In many ways, working with the resort's apprenticeship program made me realize early on the significance and mechanics of building a great team. The apprentices believed in me, which in turn put a lot of pressure on me. It made me want to be better and to have

all the answers. I remember someone telling my boss at the Balsams that I was not old enough or qualified enough for the executive chef job at the age of 24. Think about that statement for a moment. Talk about providing motivation and inspiration!

“People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

—John C. Maxwell

What better motivation could you have than someone telling your boss that you are not ready for the job or that you are not qualified! I might have agreed with him to a point, but the beauty about my passion is that to this day I have not stopped working to improve my qualifications. All my life I have had “young” kitchens and a refreshingly hungry kitchen atmosphere. What the team lacked in experience, we usually made up in effort and will—and a “chewing off the end of the table” mentality. I love that!

1. Turn challenges into motivations.
2. Always work twice as hard as those around you to enhance and improve your qualifications.
3. Don’t be afraid of what you do know, and don’t be afraid of what you don’t know.
4. Realize that you never have all the answers, rely on the talent that surrounds you.
5. Ask the opinions of those around you.
6. Agree as a team once the team has come to a conclusion.
7. If you show your staff that you are genuinely interested in their opinion, they will respect you.

Wearing the Right Shoes

A friend of mine once told me that you have to pretend to be something before you can actually become it. Think about it. You cannot just flip a

switch and be an executive chef one day. I practiced every day until I was confident that I knew every department just as well as the department head. You have to practice and put yourself in the shoes of the chef every day. Don't put blinders on and worry only about the task at hand. Learn about everything that goes on around you. It kills me when I have a cook who thinks he or she is ready for a sous chef position and don't even know what time the dinner function is going out that night or even what the menu is, for that matter. As a new professional you should be eager, and you should want to excel and take the next step. But don't lose track of the concept that you need to *LEARN* first. You can't get so wrapped up in getting your name on your chef's jacket and the department head black pants. In fact, I tell my superstars to be patient, and chances are they will fly by many of the chefs who have mentored them. But patience is the key. The most important thing in your career as a new professional is to train well and work hard, work harder than anybody around you. If you do that, trust me, you will be great.

"Focus on your work, not the titles. If you produce beyond expectations, the titles will come."

Let me tell you a secret for new professionals. Show up! What I mean by show up is just that: Show up ready! Do you know how many average-to-below-average employees we see day after day, week after week, year after year? Do you have any idea how wearing that is? More employees are concerned with when they get out rather than what they can get out of the experience, more concerned with how tired they are than how much more energy they have. Some employees are worried that someone else in the kitchen is actually doing less work than they are.

Show Up!

This is the secret. If you show up to work focused and prepared for the day and work harder than anybody around you, the executive chef will notice. The chef will give you more responsibilities; you will move to the top of the promotion list because you have made a choice to do the job and to do it to the best of your abilities.

Do not give the chef any other option but to recognize you. Just do it! Believe it or not, it takes as much energy to do a great job as it does to do a poor job. So why not be great, do great? Trust me, you will feel better doing a great day of work as opposed to cheating yourself through the day.



Arriving in the kitchen ready to work sets the tone for the rest of the chefs.

1. Train well.
2. Work hard.
3. Work harder.

Mentoring

“YOU have the power to make a difference in the lives of everyone you touch. That is pretty special.”

Chef John Folse is a dear friend of mine and a great inspiration to me. At last count, he has thirteen companies, all built by him. I have known John for fifteen years, and he is a true genius. He is one of the busiest chefs I know, a make-it-happen kind of guy, in case you haven't been able to figure that out. One thing that is very special about John is that he always has time for me. As busy as he is, with all his companies, TV shows, radio shows, and culinary classes, he always takes my calls. I've been bugging him for years with half-cooked ideas, and he always finds ways to put me on the right path. This is very special to me and a good lesson for all of us. Don't start getting wrapped up in your own press such that you forget to stop and help those just beginning their culinary careers. That has to be one of the best benefits of our job, helping young people. YOU have the power to make a difference in the lives of everyone you touch. That is pretty special.

When John first started his cheese company, he told me he was going to find the best cheese maker he could find, hire him, and then learn more about cheese making than the cheese maker himself. And that is what he did! You can't be afraid to surround yourself with talented people, especially those more talented than you. John has a weekly meeting with all his managers from all his properties. They *all* give their reports; John gives them *all* direction and lets them run their departments. He empowers them to do the right thing.

Seek out challenges and work toward learning from them and ultimately conquering them. Do the research needed to be great. Have you ever heard the saying, “Sometimes I think it is good to put the cart in front of the horse; this will make you work harder.” Sometimes I book several deadlines in a short time period just to keep myself motivated and focused and to keep the pressure on.

Has anybody ever asked something of you, to run a demonstration, to give a lecture, to assist in a competition or a special event? It would be fun once you got there, but the road getting there was going to be a boatload of work? Great opportunities don't usually come to those people who choose to sit on their hands. Great opportunities come to those who work hard. What I mean by booking several events or deadlines to keep focused is that

if you tell somebody you're going to do something, if you agree to an assignment, put an event in writing, it's now up to you to do it! You own it. Therefore, you have to be careful about what you agree to do. I choose the events that I know I will benefit from in the long run as a professional or those that I know will make a huge influence on someone's career.

Question Yourself, Question Your Team

There is a simple exercise I learned from Chef Ferdinand Metz, CMC. If you are not satisfied with something, ask yourself some questions. Sounds easy, but do you do it? Or do you just let it slide, because it is good enough?

Consider this. Let us say you are plating a banquet, the first plate comes off the line and you don't like it for some reason. The food is fine—servable but not stellar. What is not right about it? Ask yourself some questions. *What don't you like about it? Is the color okay? How about the textures, doneness, portions?* You can start a whole series of questions until you find the answers you need to be great. Imagine this menu: pan-seared Chilean sea bass with mashed potatoes and broccoli. There is a lot of room for improvement here, but where do you start?



Asking questions is a first step in making sure the quality you want is achieved.

"If you are not a team, you're just a crowd of people standing in an empty room."

Some of the questions I would ask include the following:

- Do I like the way the plate looks?
No.
- What don't I like about the look of the plate?
Very plain looking, white fish, white potatoes, green vegetable. The plate is too elementary looking.
- Do I like the components and the composition of the plate?
I like Chilean sea bass, but I don't like how the potato and the broccoli go with it.
- What kind of vegetable and starch would I like to see on the plate?
How can I make the plate look better while adding components that are compatible with the sea bass?
I would like to see better color, maybe a broiled, marinated tomato, maybe some spinach and arugula sautéed with prosciutto.
- What do I want to see for sauce and starch? Is this for lunch or dinner?
I think for lunch I would keep it lighter, maybe some lightly saffron-poached pearl couscous tossed in with the spinach. Yellow pepper coulis would taste great with all of the ingredients and look great with the tomato and spinach.
- How does it all come together?
Coriander-dusted Chilean sea bass atop wilted arugula, spinach, and prosciutto, broiled vine-ripened tomato, and yellow pepper coulis.

You can use this concept with any subject. You just have to be smart enough, or brave enough, to ask the questions until you get to the bottom of the problem. This really is a great tool, and it works not just with the food you prepare but with the people who work for you.

How Is Your Team?

Always question how things are going and what can be improved. Here are eight great questions to ask yourself to make sure your team is on the right path:

1. Do you have a great team?
2. Is your team inspired?

3. Is your team motivated?
4. Are you motivated and if not, why not?
5. How do you rate the atmosphere in your kitchen? Is it a fun and productive kitchen?
6. Do your employees enjoy working for you?
7. Do your employees follow your lead?
8. How often do you lose your temper or raise your voice in your kitchen?

“To do a common thing, uncommonly well, brings success.”

—Henry Heinz

Motivate Your Team Members

Meet Jack, who works in the early morning. Jack has been late several times and has received verbal and written warnings. He has been given extra chances by the banquet sous chef to perform his duties on time. Finally, the executive sous chef came to me and said that Jack needed to be fired. He can't seem to get through to Jack that he needs to be on time. Jack claims he has three alarm clocks but sleeps right through them. He just hates working in the morning and hates getting up early. Now, I always thought Jack was a pretty good guy. I even sent him to another property to train during our slow time. He had really set himself up to be fired, but I wanted to get into his head a little, so I decided to bring him in my office to have a “sit-down.” This is basically how it went:

“Jack, you’re having a difficult time getting to work on time.”

“Yes sir.”

“What seems to be the problem?”

“I don’t know Chef, it’s not like I’m partying or staying out late, you can ask the guys. I just can’t get up on time. Can’t you move me? I asked to be moved to another P.M. station a month ago, but my request was ignored.”

“First, Jack, normally we move our staff during the off seasons. And, second, we like to reward great performances. It appears that yours has been less than stellar.”

“I just hate the breakfast and lunch banquets.”

“The first rule of holes: When you’re in one, stop digging.”

—Molly Ivins, columnist

It kills me when I have a young and sometimes cocky student, journeyman, or cook in my office, and they tell me how they don’t want to work pantry, breakfast station, or banquets. I try to keep my cool as I talk to them. It is my job to help point out the importance of our industry and all the elements that go with it. This is key. As a new professional, you don’t see all the potential a property has that can possibly help catapult you into culinary success. Think back to when you were just beginning in this field, and imagine the impact an advisor or mentor had on you. If you didn’t have anyone to help shepherd your career, think about how awesome it would have been to receive advice from someone experienced. Regardless of your own experience, it is now your job—you are the coach, the advisor—you can make a difference in a person’s life. They may not always recognize it, but someday they will understand that you helped them tremendously. This is very special. Okay, let’s get back to Jack.

“Let me ask you something, do you anticipate staying in the culinary field?” A bold question; but sometimes such questions bring surprising answers. You need to find out what your employee is thinking.

Jack, looking astonished that I even asked such a question, answered: “Of course, Chef, this is my life!”

“Where do you see your first executive chef position being?”

Jack’s eyes started to open wider. “Well, I’m not sure yet, but I want to see the country and find out. Maybe a club or a resort or restaurant.”

You could see the excitement in his expression.

“Well that’s a good start, Jack. Do you foresee not serving breakfast or lunch at any of these properties?”

Jack’s face went blank, as he started to turn red.

“I suppose they will serve lunch and breakfast but...”

I then ask, getting in his face a little, “What is the recipe for the beautiful, fresh ginger pancake batter you picked up from the bakeshop this morning? Or what about the raisin bread for the French toast? What about the club’s signature sticky buns? I just love them, don’t you? Do you have those recipes?”

Jack is starting not to feel so well. “Well, no, Chef, no, I don’t,” he said.

“Seems to me they would be good recipes to have as you’re touring the country looking for the first executive chef position, would you agree? What about your station, do you know how many cases of eggs it takes to feed 100 people? Bacon? Potatoes? Do you have all our soup recipes? Or, better yet,

do you know what soups we are serving at the club today? Are you going to buy all your salad dressings at your fancy restaurant?”

**“Success seems to be connected with action.
Successful people keep moving. They make
mistakes, but they don’t quit.”**

—Conrad Hilton, hotel executive

In my opinion, breakfast, in many properties, is not done very well. There is an art to breakfast preparation and something special about a breakfast done well and with passion. The bottom line is that we have to point these things out to many new professionals. Tutor them; make sure they are building their resources. Your A players will already be doing this, but you need to be sure you are pushing your B players as well.

What Makes Them Tick?

You know what makes your blood start to pump. It’s just as important to know what makes your team members tick.

- Show an interest in your team members, and they will be motivated to learn from you.
- Let them know the importance of the tasks they do and how it will benefit them.
- Encourage questions and ask questions in return.

So Jack finally started to get the point. I suggested to him that he should be building an incredible resource book for every department he is in. And if I were a new chef, just getting started, I would be getting into the bakeshop as well, to get all the experience possible, so when I’m running the kitchen, I would be able to explain to my crew exactly what I needed. Everything Jack needs to be a successful executive chef is right in front of him. As leaders we have to help point out all of the opportunities to our staff. Help them *see*, give them guidance. Long story short, Jack did finish his season on the

morning banquets, and we moved him to P.M. à la cart, and he is doing great! He is a lot happier and has not been late yet. His whole attitude has changed. Maybe we made a difference in this young man's life. It would be great if we did!

What many young people don't understand is that moving them from department to department does not necessarily benefit the company, at least, not early on. It takes a lot of hard work, preparation, and planning by everyone involved, just to make this chef a better culinarian. Sure it would be much easier to leave the chefs in the departments in which they are most talented—less stress and no transitional errors or slowdowns. But what does that do to your staff? Do they get stagnant, bored? Do they feel they need to go to another property in order to grow? Sure, it is more difficult to move young staff from department to department, but in the end your staff will be strong and versatile, and they will understand each other's jobs—it becomes a stronger team. As executive chef, this is our investment and, trust me, your return will be well worth it.