

This memo reports the findings for the Story Behind the Story interviews with 10 food services staff members. We began this first step in the intercultural problem-solving process that invites all levels of the staff and management into a collaborative effort to improve performance. This report documents the first step in this process, focused on identifying problems and getting stories behind the story. This first report forms a basis for the next step, where everyone is engaged in a problem-solving search for options.

Food service workers were asked to respond to a scenario which represented typical problems in the food service industry (scenario is attached). Staff members were asked to give their opinion about the following issues:

1. What is the problem in this scenario?
2. Whose problem is it?
3. Why did the problem happen?
4. How do Jill and James see the problem?
5. Do you have personal experience with these issues?

Many of the food service workers agreed about what problems existed in the scenario, and why they were happening. These "problem types" were grouped into "decision points": decision points represent spaces where the manager, waiter, or customer made important behavioral or cognitive choices that affected the outcome of the scenario as a whole. These decision points fell into three general categories: **Respect, Teamwork and Delegation, and Improving Performance**:

Decision Point #1: Respect

This decision point focuses on how employees, management, and customers treat each other as "human beings" rather than as "objects," even in the face of difficult situations. Respect on the job can show up in many different settings, including the following three areas:

1a. Job-Related Stress. Stress resulting from everyday problems or unusual circumstances can negatively affect interpersonal communication and job performance -- especially when employees don't have strategies in place for dealing with normal, day-to-day job-related problems. Stress is often taken out on those lower in the hierarchy by giving short, unexplained, or unreasonable tasks or by losing one's temper.

A Stress Story Behind the Story: One time I was working in the back, mopping up a mess from a spilled vat of vegetables. Well, the managers had been having a bad day, and one of them came in and slipped on the wet area, even though there was a sign. This manager yelled at me as if I had done it on purpose. I felt terrible, but the truth is I didn't do anything wrong -- the manager was just having a bad day.

1b. Top-Down Communication. Managers and workers can benefit from ideas and problem-solutions which originate from lower-hierarchy workers. Moreover, management may avoid some problems by listening to the cues given by new, inexperienced employees.

A Top-Down Communication Story Behind the Story: Many times I have ideas for helping out with the problems we have at Highlander. But whenever I have an idea it is ignored or brushed off. I've had some very good ideas

about how to make the salad bar better -- but now I don't even try to suggest new things."

A Top-Down Communication Story Behind the Story: I think that the students should have a say in how food services is run. For example, we used to have all -you-can-eat, and the students really miss that. I know they would come here more often if we had it again. Or students complain that our salad bar is too expensive, or we don't have enough ethnic food. If we listened to the students, I think we would make lots more money.

1c. Lack of Intercultural Understandings. Managers and staff may not have a good idea about the realities and stresses of their WorkPlaces and WorkLives. Management might not understand how transportation impacts a staff member's work performance, and staff members might not understand the budgetary requirements of management. This lack of communication about cultural differences can lead to problems.

An Intercultural Understanding Story Behind the Story: Sometimes I'm not let off work until after my bus leaves, and I don't think that the managers realize its another half hour until the next bus comes. You have to ride the buses to know that. It's not so bad in the spring, but in the winter its real cold out there.

Decision Point #2: Teamwork and Delegation

This decision point revolves around shared definitions of teamwork and successful strategies for delegation. If management and staff are working from different assumptions about what it means to be a "team player," problems are inevitable. And if delegation is performed in a way which leaves employees guessing as to what they are actually meant to do, time and resources may be wasted.

2a. Unspoken Expectations. Management and employees are often unclear about what they expect from each other. Managers may expect employees to understand the knowledge behind certain "typical" types of work activities -- but inexperienced employees may not have access to this knowledge. And employees may expect management to offer help or explicit directions -- but busy managers may not understand the need to be more clear with new employees.

An Unspoken Expectation Story Behind the Story: I remember I had a manager ask me to "stay until the job was done." Well, I did what I *thought* was needed, and then left without checking with the manager. The next day, I found out that she had expected me to do a bunch more things -- but she never told me and I never asked.

2b. Differing Visions of Teamwork. Widely different definitions of teamwork exist in the workplace. Some people believe that teamwork means "everyone does their own job;" other people believe teamwork means "everyone pitches in." Employees and managers often have very good reasons behind their definitions of teamwork, but if these reasons remain unspoken problems may result.

A Teamwork Story Behind the Story: The one thing that bothers me the most is when I get in trouble for enforcing rules that the management told me to follow. For example, there may be a special at the pasta bar tonight. The manager will tell me no substitutions are allowed. But if a student gets angry with me and demands to see the manager, that student will get the substitution.

I end up looking stupid and the line is usually piling up as the problem gets fixed. If I were allowed to make substitution decisions on my own, this problem could be avoided.

A Teamwork Story Behind the Story: There is really no teamwork here between the part-timers and the full-timers; it's like there is a clique going on. And so what usually happens is the full-timers pick up the slack, and after awhile the part-timers quit or are fired. I think if we worked together more, we all might be happier on the job.

Decision Point #3: Improving Performance

When thinking about how to improve performance on the job, a main focus is improving work ethic and accounting for inexperienced employees (and management).

- 3a. Work Ethic.** One of the main causes of poor job performance is lack of a work ethic. This lack may be caused by inexperience or poor training, or may be impacted by things like low wage, lack of benefits, respect in the workplace, and lack of upward mobility.

Work Ethic Story Behind the Story: The part-time employees in the food services seem to have very little work ethic. They call off sick all the time and don't seem to work as hard as the full-timers. Maybe it is because they don't make much money or aren't in the union -- I know I wouldn't like it if I couldn't pay my bills. But at the same time, their laziness affects how much work I end up doing. Since my work ethic is higher, I end up doing their job just so it gets done.

- 3b. Inexperience.** Inexperience on the job can affect both employees and management. If new employees aren't trained well enough, their inexperience can cause job performance problems for other employees, impact profitability, and drive away customers. Inexperience in management can also be a problem, especially if new management is not sensitive to the expertise of long-term employees.

Inexperience Story Behind the Story: It seems that here at our food services, they bring in new managers every two or three years. But I've been here 13 years! And when I try to give a suggestion to the new management, they either ignore me or say they'll think about it but don't. It seems like a waste of resources not to listen to the long-term employees here: we've seen it all.