



What would Emeril do?

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Tim and I were on our own for dinner. We walked into the MGM Grand in Las Vegas and strolled by the shops and the restaurants. So many good restaurants. What did we want to eat? Hmmm. Then we spotted Emeril's, checked out their menu and decided to get bammed.

They showed us to table for two, in a row of tables for two. There were couples sitting to each side of us. They seemed pleasant enough so I asked what they had ordered and how they liked it. I was excited when one fellow from Louisiana said the gumbo, which I had already decided to order as an appetizer, was the only gumbo he had ever tasted that was better than his own private recipe.

When it came to entrees, two of the four were having what I was already eyeing on the menu. Tim said he was eyeing it too. They raved about it and we placed our orders. And it turned out to be even more delicious than they said.

As the meal progressed I thought about the challenge to the chef, preparing one dish after another, night after night, always with the same degree of excellence. Then I thought about Emeril and how the challenge was even greater when you were not personally present. After all, with everything else he has going on how frequently could he ever be there, one or two weeks a year?

I figured in addition to similar facilities and ingredients, and well trained managers he must insist on faithful adherence to his recipes. How else could he get a slew of different cooks to produce identical dishes over and over, day after day in city after city?

During the long plane ride home I started to feel hungry. My mouth watered as I thought about the meal the night before. I was very grateful for his staff's faithful adherence to Emeril's wonderful and delicious recipes. As I sat there day dreaming about that scrumptious meal for some reason my mind jumped to a conversation I have had hundreds of times and most recently, twice within the last two weeks.

The conversation, involves employee development issues. I have had this conversation with hundreds, probably more like thousands of people over the years. Some times I have posed the question, some times they did. But always the conversation included questions like:

How do we best follow through to properly train and supervise our staff?

How long should it take someone to learn a given procedure or process?

How do we best support each individual staff member?

How do you get a staff member with great skills to recognize they are not always executing those skills with precision?

How do you reinforce precision in one area while having reservations about other areas of performance?

What about a staff member who demonstrates precise skill when being observed but at other times falls back on bad habits? Does this indicate the person isn't as committed as they initially appeared to be?

What about the person with new ideas? Is there ever room for anything new or different?

How do you commit to improving a specific model, while still being open to new thinking?

What about the person who does eight of the ten things they are responsible for precisely well but struggles with or avoids the other items? What about the person who does 2 or 3 better than anyone else but ignores the rest?

Pausing, I asked myself, how did thinking about Emeril's Restaurant bring me to this work conversation? A few minutes later it registered. It was the "precision" thing.

So many of the questions I have been discussing for 30 years relate specifically to precision. Helping staff precisely master and internalize a sophisticated set of behavior technology skills as well as an additional set of inter personal and work skills is an on-going challenge. Precision here is important. Precision breeds the next generation of skillful practitioners.

How many restaurants does Emeril own, manage or consult to? How many chefs / cooks work for him? In what other ventures besides his daily TV show, cook ware, cook books, spice production and marketing is he engaged? How much time does this leave him to devote to any one restaurant or any one cook? A few days a year? Yet, four of six people I know ate the exact same meal, with the exact same result. Amazing!

I wondered how he trains his new cooks. Does he train everyone the same? How many precisely identical dishes does any of his chefs produce during a year? If someone varied from the recipe and gave a bigger bam of this or a lesser bam of that, how would it be dealt with? What would one of Emeril's managers do with the cook who follows five of the six steps in the recipe but not all of them? There is a high turnover environment. How does he assure faithful adherence to his recipes when there is high turn over?

As the plane sailed 30,000 feet above the heartland of America an idea formed. Could we develop a brief employee development exercise based on the experience at Emeril's? Would it be helpful to our organization? To our staff? In a bit, one took shape.

What if at some point in the first week of employment each new employee and their supervisor met for 15 minutes to discuss a memo like this. What if during this meeting the supervisor asked the staff person to imagine themselves as working as a new chef in one of Emeril's most successful and most famous restaurants. In this restaurant the menu of delicious entrees was, of course, extensive.

Their success would, in large part, would depend on their ability to master the menu; to prepare every dish precisely identically at all times. Similarly, we have a variety of

skills, techniques and processes our employees must master. The supervisor would ask the employee to think of them as their recipes. Learn them. Master them. And be prepared to utilize any given one at any given time with precision. It is up to the organization to teach you the recipes. It is up to you to master them and use them appropriately. And to continue to use them year in and year out with precision.

When it comes to existing staff the metaphor can also be used for self-assessment and performance assessment purposes. Existing staff would be encouraged to think of themselves as the chef and ask themselves the following:

Would Emeril be proud of me?

Do I produce each dish precisely according to the recipe?

Do the head chef and I agree on which dishes I have mastered and which I haven't?

Do I see myself as here to help the restaurant keep on track or am I here to do my own thing?

When it comes to new ideas the metaphor continues to hold true. The message to the new staff person is please master this menu. For now, nothing is more important. In time when you have mastered our menu, when you can produce each and every dish with precision then I will be eager to talk to you about new ideas or improvements. But for the time being it is essential to learn what is taught.

When it comes to certain areas of disagreement the metaphor also works. Honest differences of opinion can arise in any situation and at any given time. At those times the employee can be respectfully asked to remember the metaphor. It is Emeril's restaurant and they are the new chef. This restaurant is one of Emeril's most successful with many long time patrons. So when you come up with a different twist on a recipe, what kind of a response do you think you will receive? The fact is, his manager is hiring you because they need another chef to prepare their meals for their customer, not because they are unsatisfied with their recipes, menu or level of success.

Emeril is a good guy to work for. He and his managers care for you and respect you but their success depends on every chef preparing every meal identically. So when you want to talk change or variation, Emeril wants to talk precision and consistency. At these times it is important to examine the basic working relationship. What was the hiring process about? Were your work objectives clear from the start? Has anything changed since then?

The Emeril metaphor is intended to be used to help encourage employee development. It may not relate to every employee development issue but it may be helpful in several situations. It can be used with new employees, veterans, to help resolve disagreements and to sort through suggestions and new ideas. I hope you will read it more than once and that you will discuss it with your supervisor, mentor or chief.

It may be our restaurant. And the restaurant may also be very successful. But the key to its continued success is its ability to recruit top quality chef's to produce the meals its customers expect day in and day out. The clearer we can be about this expectation the greater the likelihood of success for everyone.