Improving the Work Quality in the Kitchen Using a Cook Checklist

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My capstone project was based on the fact that I work in a kitchen where things need to be done completely and thoroughly in order to ensure that the next shift to come on will have the proper work environment in order to be successful and as low stress as a kitchen environment can be. I’m not sure if you’ve ever worked in a kitchen before, but it is as high stress as you can think of, and anything that can be done to remove some of the stress is extremely helpful.

What I had noticed was that there were things not being done on each shift which would lead to extra stress as the next shift on would then have to make sure everything was done before they could start their work. This could be anything from not having enough product because prep work wasn’t done, to having to clean things before getting to work due to a mess being left behind. These things and everything in between would lead to a more stress-filled workplace where it was easy to get upset and take out that frustration and anger on the other people at work, most often the servers.

When I spoke to my manager about my idea, he thought it was a good idea and I then worked with the other cooks to come up with a list that would cover everything and ensure that things were done completely and correctly throughout the day. We actually had a kind of
checklist available to us already, but what I did with this process was to streamline it and make sure that everything was clear and concise with a checklist that needed to be filled out by each shift, checked off by the shift supervisor, and then the next shift cook can verify everything was done.

In theory this would be a good way for everyone to hold each other accountable and make sure that everyone knew exactly what was expected of them. It would also give the managers a way to hold people more accountable for doing the full scope of their jobs and not just cooking. In essence it would give them the tools in order to write up and possibly terminate people for not doing their jobs.

I began this process on October 29th and pulled all the paperwork together to collate and compare before I began this paper. Along the way I spoke to the people involved to ensure there were no changes that needed to be made. I also took time with all the stakeholders to ensure they knew how to check everything and make sure that the work was all completed along the way. I rapidly found out that some of the supervisors didn’t know what some of the things were on the checklist and therefore couldn’t actually check to make sure that it was done. This took some time to work with everyone that acted as a supervisor, not just the general manager and assistant manager, in order to make sure they knew what needed to be done and how to make sure that it was done.

Another thing that I did was talk to the cooks to make sure that they were double checking things to ensure we were holding each other accountable to doing the checklist correctly also. This helped to gain buy-in from the other cooks as they got to see that they had more control over ensuring that they had a good work environment and could rely on the people before them to set them up for success. I needed everyone to understand that this is a team, and
we need to make sure we are all doing our part, we don’t expect perfection, but we do expect improvement from where we started.

Out of the 29 days of paperwork I collected from this project, there were 21 days where the paperwork wasn’t filled out completely. What this means is that someone didn’t fill out their section of the checklist. This could have been one of the cooks not filling out their portion to show they did their work, or one of the supervisors not filling out their portion to check that it was all done. This issue was addressed throughout the month I was running this process, and I would see things get better and then someone would forget once again.

The biggest problem I ran into though was not from people not filling out the checklist but filling it out when they didn’t actually do the items. There were 9 out of the 29 days where the checklist was filled out, but some things were found to not have actually been done. Now when this started it was actually less, but again I spoke to the other cooks and told them that this is an opportunity for them to hold each other accountable also and that I needed them to be checking things over and marking things that weren’t actually done so that it can be addressed. This ended up bumping the number up because at least one of the other cooks began to keep track of the things that weren’t actually being done.

Again, this helped so that we could show the general manager where there were gaps so that they could talk to those people and explain they needed to be corrected before other actions needed to take place. We were even able to point to the fact that one of the supervisors wasn’t doing his part in actually checking that things were being done and that was able to be addressed as well. In fact, there were items on the checklist that he wasn’t sure how to check and by having this discussion I was able to help educate him on how to check these things.
I spoke to the General Manager, Danielle Christianson, about how she felt this process worked out. She felt like everything went well and that she wished we had implemented this process earlier. She felt like she was able to have some of the hard conversations with people with some good evidence to back up what she would be talking to them about, and she was grateful to my project for that.

I also spoke to the assistant manager, Taylor Conley, about the project and what he thought about it. He agreed that he was a little late to the party and was just phoning it in at the beginning, but now he actually makes a game of checking the list when someone is done and making sure that they didn’t miss anything by giving them “strikes” when they do miss something. He felt like it has helped him know more about what needs to be done and has seen how much frustration it causes when things aren’t done and the difference when it is done.

The last person I spoke to about this process was what we all consider the lead cook, Conan Dixon. He felt like this process is something we should have started sooner, as in making sure that all new hires know what is expected of them with the checklist so that it becomes ingrained in the learning process. He also felt like it has helped quite a bit with making sure there is progress in getting things done. He felt like from the time I started this process to present, the cook’s line has looked better and there have been less issues when he came in to work that he had to deal with.

Overall, this process has helped everyone to get a better handle on what is expected of them. There has been some pushback and noncompliance, but as Conan said, there has also been progress. My personal example from this week actually was very positive. Normally when I would go to work on Tuesday for my opening shift, I would have to set things up correctly or clean some things before I can actually start my own work, which would put me about 30
minutes behind. This week when I came in, I was able to go right into my job duties and not have to fix or clean things left over from the night before. With this in mind it definitely shows that this project has been a success and is something that we intend to keep as everyone is able to see value in it.
References

Interview. Danielle Christianson, General Manager, Shari’s Café and Pies

Interview. Taylor Conley, Assistant Manager, Shari’s Café and Pies

Interview. Conan Dixon, Lead Cook, Shari’s Café and Pies

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