

BARTENDER ADVISORY GROUP

TRAINING TIPS

Untrained staff members can become your worst assets. They will mess up orders, will never be fast enough during your busiest rushes, and will have issues with the mission and culture of your establishment. While these staff members are bad at their job, in many cases, that doesn't mean they're unqualified. They may just be inexperienced, under-trained and prepared, and unsure of how to do the job. They may have the potential to succeed; but it's not fair to these people if they haven't been properly trained. Take the time to really examine your staff and their qualifications; and your training processes to make sure you're giving ample time and opportunities for your staff to learn the ins and outs of your bar and/or restaurant.

Here are a few restaurant/bar staff training ideas to get your Back-of-House (BOH) and Front-of-House (FOH) employees up to speed:

Develop and implement a training plan. This will include reviewing the job descriptions and requirements for each position before a candidate is hired. Utilize checklists for what every bartender, server, busboy, sous chef, or hostess needs to know by the end of the training process. These checklists can also be distributed for staff to fill out after they've finished training, giving them the opportunity to deliver feedback about how the training process was helpful, or not, and allow recommendations for how it could have run smoother. Their input may improve the systems you currently have in place and can better train future employees while keeping everyone on the same page.

All pre-shift meetings should be mandatory and include short lessons during the pre-shift meetings. They are an opportunity to revisit lessons learned in training, as well as interacting with all of the shift personnel. Talk about the menu specials and prep the team. A great way to foster the team concept is to not limit these meetings and let the chef or bar manager get involved. Everyone can learn from each other.

For each new hire, assign a mentor. The experience level of each new hire will dictate how long the mentor will be involved. A mentor program at your restaurant can soften some of the bumps every new hire experiences during the onboarding process. With a mentor, new employees always have someone to turn to when they have questions. For the front of the house, the mentor can show new hires certain processes they will face on a day-to-day basis, such as rude or inconsiderate patrons, food safety, carrying plates or food, and satisfying customers with great customer service should always be at the top of the list. If in the back of house, mentors can discuss cooking hacks or answer any questions the new hire has about preparing food on the plate.

Have new staff shadow old staff, then submit a paragraph about what they learned. Shadowing is not an uncommon restaurant staff training idea and is one of the most effective ways to learn in the hospitality industry. Your team can take it to the next level and in addition to pairing off employees, make sure new hires can explain takeaways learned from their shadowing sessions. Ask them to write a short summary about their experience or as their manager, fill out a short questionnaire after receiving input from the old staff member. This way new employees can reflect on what they learned, and you can gather feedback about the performance of current bar/restaurant employees.

Managers should keep in touch with staff members on anything that can affect the business. New menu items, best and/or worst selling items, and the ever expanding... or reduction... of your biggest customers. Your POS system should be able to track your best-selling items in one of their reports. Those are the items that customers will be asking for and asking about most often. During pre-shift meetings, test your staff members, and you may be able to include these questions as notifications on your POS system. This can also be used to show advice and direction from staff members, so staff can learn from several people every day, and your top employees can have their own spotlight on the POS system.

A company's initial new hire orientation should be both entertaining and informative. This will be the time to discuss the company's culture and mission statement, the company's policies, and procedures, including how Human Resources is handled, as well as any general questions your new employees may have. There are three types of learning experiences: auditory (back-of-house & front-of-house; this can be from management, human resources, and/or chef), visual (slides and videos), and hands-on (teaming up a new employee with an existing one).

When a new employee is finally ramped up, it's time to role-play. Have veteran staff from both front-of-house and back-of-house role-play certain situations that every new staff member may face. These group problem-solving exercises only need to last 5 to 10 minutes at most, and can be a great tradition for your pre-shift meetings as well as building that often overlooked "team spirit".

A few examples: What's the best response to, "What do you recommend?" How do servers handle rude or drunk customers? How does kitchen staff react when they accidentally send out a wrong order, and what are the steps to fix this issue? Is management intervention required?

POS training can sometimes be tough, especially if your POS doesn't have a designated training platform. To get new employees up to speed on your POS system, have them start by filling in sample orders... then someone else's orders on the POS, with that person watching behind. Having a written checklist next to the system for what to do when checking in and checking out, as well as procedures like handling voids and gift cards can be very helpful to building efficient procedures. Before allowing the new employee to be released from training, a verbal test should be given. You know someone's capable when they're able to explain what they've learned to someone else. During all of this... try to make the POS training fun.

Offer hands-on experience with supervision. When the new employee is ready, give them reign over the floor, whether it be back-of-house or front-of-house... but don't leave them alone. The supervisors should offer tips and advice as needed. This supervision will give new employees a chance to prove themselves, and the supervisors are available to catch mistakes before they occur. When there are no mistakes, they are ready.

All employees should be familiar with all positions; this will allow the staff to stay flexible, while understanding what the rest of their team actually does. Switch out the back-of-house and front-of-house staff before you open and watch the results. After being ramped up on their own job, have employees see what it's like to work on the food line, behind the bar (if possible), as a dishwasher, a server, or a host or hostess. This way, they can appreciate the unique challenges with each position, and they can help out others when needed. This will allow you to maintain the customer service levels you are looking for.

Consistent and productive training will give your employees the tools necessary to grow and the establishment will prosper. Some of your staff will be natural overachievers, others may need a gentle push. When reinforcing training, encourage your employees to go above and beyond when serving customers or preparing food. The training may also give your staff the knowledge to get creative. A bartender creating a new cocktail using new ingredients, the chef creating a new menu item, or both working as a team to pair them both.

Sharing your vision, your experience, and your excitement for the future can create a great team morale. Reward good behavior with bonuses and contests. Teach employees to spoil their best customers with extra sides or a free glass of wine. Per the IRS, comps are an approved marketing tax deduction when recorded properly... use them wisely.

As a restaurant owner or manager, you should be reviewing your employees' performance often. Peer review programs are another great way to collect feedback. Even your veteran members need feedback, and after all, employees are interacting with each other during their entire shift, observing behavior and working together to solve problems. A review program includes feedback from all areas of the organization; and a survey of employees who work closely with each other can be beneficial when evaluating quarterly performance. You should also consider requiring self-reviews from your staff, asking them to reflect on their own work. A self-review can be the beginning of the review process, allowing supervisors to have a starting point as to what may need to be corrected.

In addition to the pre-shift meetings, hold regular staff meetings to communicate and reinforce training. Reinforce training with focus groups about the hand-off process between bartenders and cocktail servers, food servers and chefs, the high points and lows about that week or month, and share any new tips learned since the last meeting. Weekly service meetings, and staff focus (department) groups are a great way to reinforce restaurant and bar training. These few ideas and training tips will allow the "team" concept to flourish while having the side benefits of exceeding the expectations of both the customers and your employees.