



Transcript for the WLEI Podcast:

Handling the Heat of the Kitchen: A WLEI Podcast

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Organizing a restaurant kitchen is a daunting task to think about. Find and establish the problems at hand, implement an improved process to adhere to those problems. It all lends itself towards increased profitability, more respect for the workers with emphasis on value-creating work, increased tact-time; but it's also much easier said than done. A flagship restaurant worked with LEI coaches and learned to increase their profitability through the lens of storytelling, where each piece is an innate – and respected – part of the whole. Listen in to hear how this all came together.

Anthony Bourdain:

How do you build a team? How do you keep a team? How do you deal with hundreds of crisis a day? Chances are you can't. There are two kinds of people in this world. There are people who like the relentless futility, heat, pressure, the insanity of restaurant kitchens, and then there's everybody else, normal people.

John Cotter:

Everyone knows and trusts Anthony Bourdain's word, as the legendary chef's nuance and expertise chronicles decades of published works and public speaking events. As he states, the industry is a fast-paced environment that definitely develops a certain stigma. But what happens when a chef breaks things down a bit? Where is the value created? How can we deliver consistent quality? What problems impact the customer? And most importantly, how do we give respect to the workers that make the kitchen functional in the first place?

John Cotter:

Well, according to former executive chef Rich Vellante, you look at the restaurant and kitchen as a value stream and begin to come to terms with these questions that have plagued the restaurant industry for decades. In this extra episode of the WLEI podcast, we look at a better way to approach the restaurant industry, the lean way, and how LEI's Josh Howell worked with

rich to establish a more supportive, mindful, and profitable way to run a kitchen that doesn't dismiss its essential employees.

Hi, my name is John Cotter, a multimedia journalist for LEI, and I'll be the podcast editor and narrator for this episode. Kicking us off as LEI's executive director, Rich Vellante.

Rich Vellante:

When you're manufacturing a car, you're building something, and when you're in a kitchen, your recipe is something that is being built. You build the flavors, you build the components.

John Cotter:

Operating a restaurant probably seems easier than building a car at first glance. You'd rather build a hamburger than build a Tesla. But a restaurant has the same problems to solve. Cut the lead time from order to delivery, cook great quality food, provide great service as just one piece in disarray can disrupt the whole process. Just ask LEI's president, Josh Howell.

Josh Howell:

Sort of the work that they're doing to provide great experiences, great service, great food for the guests, they're finding purpose through the study of that work and the improvement of that work or both.

Well, I think there's different levels. I mean, from the management side, they're getting closer to the work to understand it so that they can manage better. From the cook level, they are beginning to know what they should be doing and shouldn't be doing, where before it would be catch-as-catch-can. It would be, "I'm going to do it this way because I just want to make sure that I don't get overwhelmed."

John Cotter:

A kitchen is hectic because you have a full dining room. You've got a grill cook who has 12 pieces of salmon, three steaks and shrimp skewers with varying temperatures. You have an expeditor who's coordinating these several stations. You have allergy risks to look out for, quality control around the revolving food orders. There's an almost overwhelming amount to keep track of.

Rich Vellante:

In the kitchen, it's kind of an aggressive, difficult arena. It's a lot of stress. It's a little bravado. If you can last the night and deal with all the pressure and live to show up again tomorrow, you're in the club and that's always been kind of the mentality. As we started to look at some of the stations and some of the areas where we made the food, when you're in a restaurant and

someone places an order, we measure the, we call them, ticket times. It's really the lead time. Someone places an order; how long does it take to get it to the table? You coordinate that with all the other stations and it goes out to the customer,

John Cotter:

But does the ticket time tell the whole story? Is a cook unable to keep up because they can't handle the heat or is it because they've been given an impossible job? Rich explains a shift in the mindset within the kitchen.

Rich Vellante:

Well, we realized in our situation that the oven station was one of those stations that was always dragging and behind all the others and really slowing down the rest of the operation. It was creating a longer lead time for everybody else and we just thought it was because the guy on the station or the gal on the station, they just weren't good at what they did and they're not good enough, we have to find somebody else. What a naive, immature way of looking at the work. So what LEI helped us do is really build a work story.

John Cotter:

By beginning to solve issues around the oven station, they realized that it was the process, not the person, that might be slowing them down.

Rich Vellante:

In the case of the seafood casserole, what we had someone do offline was build that seafood casserole because there were about nine ingredients that had to be put together and if you can imagine the hand time for a cook who's doing other things, putting the seafood casserole together, it's inevitable that they're going to make mistakes, they're under a lot of pressure, they might forget something. What we understood was how many seafood casserole get ordered at a certain time, and we'd have someone off lining. One of their jobs was to build the seafood casserole already built so that the cook, all they really needed to do was put it in the oven and take it out of the oven, where previously they had to build this whole thing and it just took too much time.

Now it's just put it in the oven, machine time, I can work on something else, don't have to worry about it. So it really helped with lead time in the whole kitchen, it helped with that actual individual and their work and really making it more purposeful and a little bit easier for them to not get so stressed. So to me, that seafood casserole was something that started the whole journey for us.

John Cotter:

The work story centered around having pre-made batches of the seafood casserole at the prep station. So a cook then just needed to put a prepared dish in the oven rather than assembling all the components. The results? Well, they went from a 95 second job to a 60 second job. They eliminated delays for the workers, which allowed for higher quality and a more consistent product.

Rich Vellante:

It sounds so silly at the time when you're seasoned chefs and people that have been in the restaurant world and what do you mean you want us to build a story? Meaning every time the individual touches something, how long does that take and how do they build this, in our case, it was the seafood casserole. So let's begin to understand the work and our coach, Josh Howell, helped us to really ... and almost forcing us to say, "Look, this is where I want you to stay. I want you to understand the work being done on the seafood casserole." So we really literally had to measure the hand time. Watch the hands, where do they go, what do they do, how does it work? Understand the machine time, understand the hand time. As we began to watch and begin to build our story, meaning at each time the hand moves from one spot to the next, how long does that take? You build a story tells you that this is how long it takes to build it.

John Cotter:

The multitude of different items that need to be prepared at different times and cadences can make for a disorganized workflow, but it all starts with observation and analysis as Rich explains the fruit that was needed for the bar area.

Rich Vellante:

There were hundreds of stories in learnings that we went through in different parts of the organization. Cutting of fruit in the bar, for example. We would cut the fruit in a different area than where the bartenders would serve the fruit. So you're a bartender and it's a long night and you're tired and you've got all this fruit and the fruit ends up in the garbage. Okay? So the next morning the person comes in and says, "Oh, there's no fruit. I'll just cut the fruit." The restaurant was so large and busy that it would take six hours to cut all the fruit for this bar. Okay? So you can imagine how much fruit that was. We have a problem, right? We're throwing away cases of limes and lemons and over a year that's extremely expensive. So how do we solve that problem?

We have to do a number of different experiments. The first thing that we want to do is let's figure out how many drinks we sell that need a lime, how many drinks we sell that need an orange. We were cutting a half a case of oranges, for example, and we only needed one orange. So we began to realize, let's figure out what we sell, how many we sell and what does that equate to one lime, one orange, going through that journey and also using some elements of

communication by posting, following up communication so that the two could speak to each other. We just saved like \$40,000 worth of fruit in a year because we just closed the gap of demand and production. We just got closer to the customer instead of being so far away and making decisions from a distance.

John Cotter:

Just making decisions from afar creates a disconnect, as the best ideas tend to come from those who are closest to the work and in the kitchen, it's the cooks whose work should encompass their passion, making quality food with minimal distractions, as their kitchen manager explains this when talking to LEI's editorial manager, Pat Panchak.

Kitchen Manager:

If you're a cook and you really love to cook, that's what you want to do. You don't want to spend time gathering and doing kind of tasks like that. We kept tying all the conversations down to we're trying to make your job more purposeful and more meaningful, and it's going to get easier if we embrace some of these changes. So I think that's ultimately what hit home for a lot of them.

Pat Panchak:

Did any of them start saying, "Hey, why don't we do this?" and having their own ideas?

Kitchen Manager:

Yeah. I don't know if Matt shared with you, but we had a little Jose story and little Jose was our prep guy, and he immediately embraced exactly what we were trying to do when we went to this on demand prep and having the prep person in a prep team ultimately drive the setting up of the stations. We came in one morning and we had been there late the night before working on a lot of projects and observations and getting things labeled, organized, whatever the task was, and there's little Jose with his coffee in the morning time. Matt and I are standing there and he came over with a piece of paper. So I was like, "What's up Jose?" and he said, he's like, "I came up with something last night and I want to share with you."

So we were like, "Yeah, of course," and he's like, "Every day when I make jasmine rice, I need to go up and down the elevator every time you guys ask me for jasmine rice." So I said, "All right, well, what's your plan?" and he says, "We have this space right here and I would really love to have the ingredient bin full with rice on my station so it saves me the amount of time going up and down the elevator and I have it right here on my station so it makes that whole process quicker." That was such a cool moment because it's one thing for myself to influence the managers and the managers trying to help implement the change, but then we knew that we were getting somewhere when some of the cooks, Jose ultimately being the first one, come to

us with something that was so obvious that we hadn't even thought of at that point, and then it kind of like snowballed from there.

It was just awesome that somebody came up with their own idea and just wanted to do something to impact the change of the restaurant. We knew that once we had one or two of them thinking that way, that it would move a lot quicker. So that was a really cool moment.

John Cotter:

More importantly, this is a moment that wouldn't be possible without mindful observation, putting blame on the process instead of the person and the customer centric approach that came from collaboration with LEI.