

A Little Change Could



Do You Some Good

By: Jim Wixson, CFSP,
Cooking Products Manager – Georgia Power
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It has been said that a kitchen is functionally similar to a manufacturing plant, in that raw product comes in the back door, is fashioned, shaped, heated, and sent out the front door in a bag or belly. In any manufacturing process there are several ways to produce the same product. Simply making product, however, isn't the primary goal of a manufacturer. The primary goal of any manufacturer is to make money through the incorporation of automation, mechanization, total quality management (TQM), product cost mitigation, just-in-time inventory control (JIT), process optimization, labor efficiency, and brand reliability. Manufacturers, just like foodservice operations, measure their profitability with a simple formula of gross finished goods sold or shipped, minus the manufacturing costs to include raw goods, labor, capital costs, fixed overheads, and other plant-related costs. Holding product cost down without reducing product quality is the manufacturer's ultimate goal. They also work diligently to identify and eliminate waste in the areas of storage, transportation, over production, processing, motion, defects, and waiting. This is the principal of "Lean Manufacturing," which requires all involved in the manufacturing of a product to examine their workplace from an entirely different perspective.

Manufacturing operations employ a system they call "Kaizen," which means continuous process improvement. They are always looking for ways of reducing cost without sacrificing quality. Process change in foodservice operations can be greatly beneficial, especially where change has not been addressed for many years. However, there may be some things in a foodservice operation that probably shouldn't be changed because the flavor of the operation depends on the ambiance, theme, or flair of the tradition. But, when it comes to process, many foodservice operators are often stuck in the routine of doing things the same old way and don't explore new methods, technologies, or process enhancements. The old adage of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" should not apply here. By embracing old habits and clinging to decades-old methods, the foodservice operation is subject to many unseen profit robbers: labor-stealing inefficiency, energy-wasting appliances, productivity quagmire, hot/humid labor-sapping work environment, and throughput-clogging preparation methods. What worked great in kitchens several decades ago will eat a hole out of your bottom line today. The good news is that there are many solutions in today's technology-rich environment.

If the manufacturing world has learned to become more profitable through Kaizen, Lean Manufacturing, and other process enhancements, how can this information help the foodservice operator? Have you ever wondered why some fast food restaurants seem to have lines of patrons backed up all the way to the front door during rush period, while others seem to run smoothly without backing up? It is extremely important for them to discover solutions, because it has been said that up to 80 percent of their net income is made in less than one operating hour per day. The foodservice operator is typically not cognizant of how to overhaul or revamp their manufacturing processes. A kitchen operation is usually mired in tradition with things being habitually done in a certain prescribed way, because that is the way they were taught to do them. If the stated goal of a foodservice operator is the same as that of the manufacturer, then it should stand to reason that the employment of manufacturing best practices, the elimination of slow, inefficient processes, added flexibility, and improved functionality will help a kitchen become a money-making machine. After all, making money or reducing the cost of product is the primary goal of almost any foodservice operation.

There are several things you can do to maximize your process and supercharge your bottom line: **Invest in New Technologies.** Just as the computer has replaced the typewriter and adding machine, there are appliances that increase efficiency and productivity in the kitchen. For example, are you aware that there is a piece of equipment that will cook two full-size 4 inch deep hotel pans of fresh or canned vegetables in little more than six minutes? Or, four packages of dry spaghetti noodles in an elapsed time of 14 minutes, not the 40-plus minutes it takes in the traditional stock pot method? Or, how about 21 pounds of baked potatoes in 23 minutes?

The old days of stock pot cooking should become a memory. There are better ways of cooking the same foods today without the labor intensity of lugging, stirring, and banging pots in the kitchen. Range-top cooking is traditional and is perceived as inexpensive. Stock pot cooking is a method that has been employed for over 100 years and has always been a labor-intensive way of producing food items. Anything cooked in a pan or a pot on the range needs to be stirred, shaken, or tended in some

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way throughout the cooking process. It usually involves lids, tongs, spoons, colanders, etc. Plus, the food item is then panned for serving. So, now the operator not only has the pot to clean, but also the serving pan.

Until the 70s, labor wasn't controllable like it is today. The range and bake oven were taking care of the majority of cooking in the old kitchens; similarly, a handsaw and a hammer used to be the only tools builders had to build homes. Now builders must use circular saws and air nail guns if they hope to be able to make a profit.

Create New Production Methods. It is human nature to do things the same old way. We are shown a particular method for cooking food items and then pass those methods along for generations. In the classic kitchen it was necessary to make stocks and reductions. Today, with bases, production sauces, and soup stock, it is easier than ever to make these items with little reduction in quality. The other thing that is human nature is ingenuity. Change begins to occur as soon as we recognize there is a problem. Enlightened employees through experimentation or knowledge-seeking are capable of providing solutions.

There are times when inexperienced people in an organization, such as a church committee, are asked to develop the design of a kitchen. Without the knowledge of experience, or the understanding of new technologies, they tend to design with the familiarity of the past. Typically, these committees all want to begin the cooking line with a big 10 burner range. Their thought process is that they can fill the top of the range with pots of vegetables, soups, and cook things like spaghetti, rice, and grits in stock pots or sauce pans. The urge to stay with the tried and true is powerful. This same reasoning would cause one to buy a push type lawn mower rather than a self-propelled model. The value benefit has to be substantial enough to encourage change. In the evolution of design for the church kitchen after looking at many options, it would be better to begin the cooking line with a convection oven. It is such a flexible appliance and is perfect for cooking and reheating many different kinds of foods, from vegetables to starches. Church committees will always say, "How are we going to cook our grits, corn, green beans, etc. without the range?" They are always amazed at the simplicity of cooking all of these items and more in stainless hotel serving pans, because it is fast, easy, and the food can be served out of the same pan in which it is cooked. This greatly minimizes the need for pot and pan washing.

Some very simple tricks of the trade can save hours of labor in preparing everyday food items such as making chopped hard-boiled eggs for salads. The usual process is to boil them in a

pot, cool them in cold water, then crack and peel them, finally chopping them for the salad. A simple trick is to line a hotel pan with saran wrap, crack eggs into pan, then steam in a steamer or combination-oven, turn out on a cutting board, and chop. Another simple process is removing the outer layer of an onion. Simply steam the onions for a couple of minutes, grab them with a towel, squeeze and they simply pop out of their skins. Removing the skin from tomatoes is almost as easy. Cut a cross in bottom of the tomato, steam for about two minutes and the skin will easily peel away from the tomato meat.

Improve Functionality. Because kitchens are getting smaller and dining rooms are not shrinking, it is now more important than ever to have equipment that can perform multiple functionality. With the advent of the combination oven, a chef now has an oven and a steamer in the same footprint. More importantly, the combination oven trims cooking times by more than 50 percent, which improves productivity.

Other ways to increase productivity within the same cooking space is to include use of technologically advanced appliances that improve both quality and speed. An example of this is an appliance that combines microwaves with convection ovens—speeding cooking to times previously thought to be unobtainable: par-baked pizzas in around 90 seconds and a 5-pound frozen apple pie in 20 minutes. Another new idea is a combination braising pan and steamer. In the same 9 square feet you have a kettle, braising pan, griddle, multi-pan steamer, and a fryer.

Although not a recent technology, the clamshell or two-sided griddle has improved productivity, quality, and reduced cooking times for burger operations. The clamshell has given the burger operation a decided advantage, making them more competitive. More burgers per hour translates to greater profitability. These types of operations at some point figured out how to become more productive using technology and departing from tradition. They embraced a more optimal method for producing a high volume of uniformly cooked hamburgers.

The foodservice business is very demanding on all involved in the preparation, serving, and cleaning up after the dining public. The kitchen does not have to be a hostile, hot, humid, or chaotic place to work. It can be made more friendly, environmentally comfortable, organized, and more profitable through the utilization of new technology, process improvements, improved functionality, and the employment of tricks of the trade. A little change could do you some good.