



# A Nasty Equation You Need to Solve

By Susan Saldibar

What does the road to failure look like for a new food services person at a senior living community? Let’s see. First, he/she is probably hired to fill an emergency gap because the last person left without notice. Then they are given the “magic apron” (more about that later) and expected to deliver the last remaining pleasure many residents can still experience: a delicious, nutritious dining experience.

You probably know what happens next. Sadly, the meals are not delicious or nutritious because the new hire has little to no training, something their fellow food service guys and gals lack as well. So, they settle down to the lowest common denominator, using pre-packaged ingredients, bland recipes with absolutely no idea how to put a decent meal together, let alone a delicious dining experience. After a couple months this newbie will leave, having lost their appetite for a job they were under-qualified for but were practically begged to take (“Oh the things you’ll learn!”)

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Now before you cry “foul!”, let me say how heartened I am after speaking with Merijane McTalley, owner of [Nutricopia](#) (a Senior Housing Forum partner). Things are changing. And one of the big reasons is that communities are investing more in their dining teams through better training and management.

**Not training staff = turnover. Turnover = \$\$\$.**

I asked Merijane how training manifests itself in a stronger team and better dining services for residents:

1. **Training gives the employee a fighting chance of success.** Too often supervisors have little experience, themselves. So, they conduct a quick tour of the kitchen, give the employee the “magic apron” and hope the employee will learn by osmosis. The “magic apron” is a term Merijane uses to explain the practice of handing over an apron and saying “get to work”. But, as Merijane points out, there’s nothing magic about it.
2. **Training makes people feel important.** Consequently, a lack of training makes them feel dispensable. It is basically a statement that they don’t matter enough to be trained.
3. **Training leads to higher productivity.** A better grasp of the processes and the best way to conduct them will lead to higher levels of efficiency. So more gets done.
4. **Training leads to innovative thinking.** It creates better awareness of nutrition as well as how the dining experience works and why certain things are more important than other. Employees begin to look for ways to improve which can lead to some great ideas.
5. **Training reduces potentially serious errors.** “If a person has six or seven food items they are working with and they have staphylococcus, that presents a huge problem,” Merijane says. “People don’t know how important the person who washes the dishes is. Errors can occur that increase the risk of food-borne illness,” she adds.
6. **Training helps lead to the “delicious, nutritious dining experience” for residents.**

Training also leads to higher retention rates, Merijane tells me. “Not training your staff leads to turnover,” she says. “And the cost to acquire and train new talent costs about 40% of their first year’s salary,” she adds. Wow. Do the math.

### Change the equation with training. Slow down the revolving door.

So, if training is one of the keys to a better employee, what does Nutricopia recommend to change the old equation and slow down the revolving door? Here’s what Merijane suggests:

- **First, add training into the equation.** Nutricopia leads here by example. “One of my VPs is a former senior living administrator,” says Merijane. “Most of our employees have master’s degrees and have won awards,” she adds.
- **Have employees participate in a CDM program.** “For skilled nursing, CMS now requires this,” Merijane says. “Wouldn’t it be great if assisted living kitchen staff had certification like that?” A CDM program can be completed in as little as four months, Merijane tells me. “What’s great is that the employee can now put ‘CDM’ after his or her name. That’s important,” she says.
- **Find training programs that offer online courses.** Nutricopia provides four online programs for registered dietitians, certified dietary managers, cooks and food service managers.
- **Have rules and procedures clearly communicated.** Nutricopia has policy and procedure manuals, diet manuals; the list goes on.

Few would argue that training raises the quality of the entire senior living community experience. “The benefits are pretty obvious,” says Merijane. She puts them in her favorite format: an equation. “Training = longevity on the job = better continuity of care for residents = better customer satisfaction.”

And here’s one of my own. A well trained team = survival.



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