



FOOD FOR THOUGHT #3

FlexBulletin 106: Collaboration Bakes the Cake, Flex Ices It

By Paul Rupert

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When there's collaboration in the kitchen, superior dishes emerge

According to Merriam-Webster, a foodie is “a person having an avid interest in the latest food fads.” There is no term or definition for a “flexie” – no doubt someone one who is focused on the latest trends and leaps not in inventive restaurants but in innovative workplaces. The **FlexBulletin** chronicles that beat. Happily in this 3rd part of a 4-issue set we're calling “Food for Thought,” we're using various food metaphors to highlight what we think is a new approach to flexibility – a nouvelle cuisine of flex.

In Food for Thought #1 ([Flex Needs Many More 'Top Chefs'](#)) we contrasted the stale and mundane cook-by-numbers march to unimaginative flex arrangements with the energy, innovation and risk-taking of competitive TV chefs. Food for Thought #2 ([Flex Menu Makeovers: On to Food Trucks?](#)) visited the somewhat dated and constrained menu of Flexible Work Arrangements and the rapidly changing tastes of our emerging workforce, suggesting that diverse and innovative food trucks are giving yesterday's restaurants a run for their money.

More assertive chef/managers drawing from a broader menu can yield more satisfied users. But by themselves their impact can only be limited. The crucial ingredient in transformational change is *true collaboration*. Like yeast and baking powder in baking, collaboration is not another way of saying communication – it is the distinct and essential ingredient determining whether the outcomes have risen or fallen. And as a strong but subtle additive, collaboration can be under- or overdone.

Collaborative Scheduling defines the new cuisine

Many current Flexible Work Arrangements are not that flexible. Most often they are programmatic, static and limited – but alternative – ways of working. They are frequently described as benefits, “perks” or rewards. With a limited menu and an unimaginative chef, the propose-and-decide process lacks:

- Significant attention to imagining a better way of working
- The realization that people's time is a vital asset and can be managed for unique gain
- The recognition that flexibility can = fluidity and be an ongoing negotiation
- An understanding that managers and teams or groups can create superior outcomes

If one looks at these deficits and thinks about the TV Chef contests, some of the collaboration elements are evident. The stated goal and emphasis are on imagining a both better use of cooking tools and dishes spurred on by competition. Time is used as a spur to productivity and innovation. As ingredients, conditions and requirements change rapidly, flexibility is a baseline and fluidity is often essential. Leadership within and among teams can add great value.

The Collaborative Scheduling – or Co Scheduling – approach to flexibility applies these principles to a range of situations from one-on-one to whole organizations. Properly done it can be a recipe for success, the ingredients for which are:

- Assume that the process is not informal or one-way; it is interactive and iterative
- Seek the maximum gain for *both* the person and the business
- Try to stay open and say “yes” to the risky and the truly innovative
- Take the position, and reinforce the view, that change and turning on a dime are good
- Celebrate menu additions and successful new dishes

The country's leading ice cream cones are perfected by collaborative baking

Co Scheduling can work with individuals, groups – and whole organizations. One of my earliest previews of collaborative scheduling, a visit that offered enormous food for thought, came not in a restaurant or food truck or white collar HQ – but in a distinct domain of the food industry. I will close out this piece with the inspiring story of the Joy Cone Company. (If you would like to see a fuller case study, email me with your request.)

Baking is a low-wage industry, and quality ice cream cones are a tough product to make. They are delicate to bake, have a shelf life of six weeks, are fragile to ship and face jagged peaks and valleys of demand. A manufacturer, CEO Joe George must demand high productivity, superior quality and efficient processes from a modern American workforce. And he must try to retain that quality workforce through the major spring/summer expansion and the fall/winter melting of demand. His guiding maxim: *“You can't do things the same as everyone else if you want to do it better than they do.”*

Joe thrives on innovation. To him the source of innovation is not management alone, but management and employees working together. An example of this approach occurred very early in his transformation of Joy Cone from a traditional family-owned bakery into a very different kind of workplace. . As the busy season began to wind down and the traditional layoffs loomed, two married women who had been working full-time approached Joe. They said “Look, instead of laying one of us off, why don't we split a shift between us?” They didn't know about or call it “job sharing.”

According to Joe, he said “Fine.” Then when business picked up again, they said, “We don't want to go back to full-time. We'd like to continue splitting the shift. With this [part-time] schedule, we can take care of our kids and our houses and still get out and earn an extra paycheck.” Again, Joe said “Yes,” and took a major step toward becoming a pioneering flexible workplace.

Early on he had mastered a crucial habit: saying “yes” rather than “no” when one's initial reaction to an unusual proposal is to reject it. This willingness to follow employee leads in the face of doubt is the key to encouraging and realizing true innovation. It is the expression on the interpersonal level of the principle that *“You can't do things the same as everyone else if you want to do it better than they do.”*

Working together to customize the fluid schedule needs of hundreds of bakers

The Joy Cone scheduling collaboration started with the split shift and expanded to the development of new ways of working across the organization. Eventually, production staff made numerous requests for a range of schedule changes. In the early days, Joe balanced the requests in his head. Next came the weekly schedule “request sheet.” It is a set of computer printouts of each employee's current schedule with a space to request a modification for the next week. The sheets are posted right off the production floor in a space where people can study and make notes on them. By the end of the day on Wednesday, when the sheet comes down, most lines have some sort of note.

There are requests based on doctors' appointments, weddings, graduations and hunting season. A couple may request opposite shifts so that one can always be home with the children. And any week's sheets will reflect very specific needs: “Would like to be on same shift as my son,” “Prefer 7-11 p.m., but if 7-11 a.m., need Monday and Friday off because am still in college and have exams those days” and “Need Sundays off, or 3-11 p.m. shift, due to archery shoot every Sunday morning.”

Over the long term, this collaborative flexibility has built unusual engagement and retention – a great outcome in a highly skilled and delicate production operation. Says one working mother: “The scheduling, the way they listen to my needs, those are big factors keeping me here.” But they also create a set of inventive operational outcomes that would be hard to achieve otherwise: extraordinary quality, invention and fabrication of world class equipment and highly cost-effective staffing.

According to Joe:

“I think our operation will beat a plant that's run without consideration for the employees. In the long run, I think ours is more efficient. We could get these workers without flexible policies, but we wouldn't get their loyalty. We wouldn't be able to run like we do, with thirty people and not a single person walking around checking on others. Every person in our plant is working.

I think this is the efficient, cost-effective way to run the business. In each of the last four years we've raised our wages, yet unit production costs went down. We're getting more efficient. Something is working when we can pay our workers more and it costs us less.”

Best regards,
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