

Manage with Leadership from Plate to Pasture

Chef shares culinary leadership with cattlemen.

Story & photos by
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Good help is hard to find. Whether it's the hired men on your team or your own flesh and blood who seem to fall short sometimes, ranch managers and owners often think they are the only ones who can get it done right.

That's not a problem unique to cattle country.

Chef John Doherty, the youngest to be named executive chef of New York City's esteemed Waldorf=Astoria, has cooked for more presidents and dignitaries than any other chef in the United States. Don't confuse "executive chef" with "head cook." The hotel's empire includes 42 stories of nearly 1,500 guest rooms, three restaurants, 24-hour-a-day room service, a soup kitchen, butcher shop, pantry, garden, pastry shop, banquet halls and about 150 culinarians, all of whom reported to Doherty throughout his 23 years as executive chef.

He certainly didn't start at the top, but applied commitment to excellence and basic leadership skills to become an icon in the culinary world. Doherty spoke at Cattlemen's College® in San Antonio, Texas, in January, addressing issues common to chef and cattleman — finding good help, building a team and creating success in your business by being the best. As it turns out, the management issues faced by the chefs who serve beef are spot on with the folks who raise it.

"The reality that we are faced with is a very poor economy, our expenses are up, we have to cut back on payroll, we have to expect more from people, and we get

frustrated that we're not getting more from people," Doherty said.

Sound familiar?

Doherty broke his leadership tips for cattlemen down to a three-course meal, featuring foodservice experiences that relate to the ranch.

First course: Create a vision

"The No. 1, most important part of leading people is to create a vision," Doherty said. "You have to create a vision for your company, for who you are and for what you want to be recognized at."

He didn't mean creating a vision of what that east corral could look like if only you had the time to rebuild. It's bigger than that. His vision was of "a kitchen that put out absolutely delicious food every single time, a kitchen that was pristine and all its members were part of an inspired team." It was a mission of change, and it took nearly a quarter century to accomplish.

It shouldn't take long to state it, however. "In 30 seconds, you should be able to say it. It should be crystal clear in your head, and you should be able to articulate where it is you want to go and what it is you want to be so people can understand it," he said. "The vision is what gives you purpose for everything you are doing."

It's one thing to get by and keep your head above water, but that's not an inspiring task. Nor will it yield inspiring results on the ranch. It will only meet its simple goal of keeping your head above water.

"Working without purpose is meaningless," Doherty said. "People get excited about what they're doing when

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there is purpose behind what they do, and you only have purpose when you know what the vision is."

Second course: Don't do it alone

"We have to build a knowledge-based team," he said. "It's about knowledge, training and feeding people so they can work passionately."

For years, Doherty interviewed chefs, inquiring about their cooking skills and training. "Then I said, no, that's not really important. I can teach people how to cook — I want to know how people make decisions. I want to hire people that can make a good decision and are not afraid of change."

They also have to fully buy in to the organization's vision. Sharing and exemplifying that vision with your employees is key to having a driven workforce, he said.

Doherty worked his way up from the start as a 19-year-old cook to leading the Waldorf=Astoria culinary team a few years later. The passion that carried him to the top also created a few tense moments, and he was even a victim of physical attacks. On the eve of Doherty's top promotion, there were still dissenters on the team he must lead, but luck intervened.

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His first day as Waldorf executive chef happened to coincide with the start of a five-week, citywide union walkout. During the time he was without a staff, he “re-wrote the rule book” to embody his vision. He was ready to welcome his team back like family, but under new terms.

“I told them what my vision was and that I wanted them to be a part of it,” Doherty said. “I promised them I would help them grow in their careers and make this a happy place to work, but I needed them to participate and play the game.”

Even if you don’t have a chance to start with a clean slate like Doherty, it’s all about sharing your vision by exemplifying it. “I see really good leadership in somebody who can get people to see and feel their vision and recognize, appreciate and care for the people they’re dealing with,” Doherty said.

Doherty did that by “inspecting what I expected. Whatever I would focus my attention on, everyone else would begin to focus on that, too, and they knew it was a high priority.”

Third course: Tap into expertise

At the age of 23, Doherty was unwillingly promoted to sous chef, an assistant to the chef de cuisine, next in line to executive chef. He explained he didn’t feel ready for the position and declined.

“The chef said, ‘OK. Tomorrow you will be sous chef,’” Doherty recalled. “I lost that battle, and now I had to go out and tell these people who were my father’s age that what they were doing wasn’t good enough.”

That would go over about as well as a son telling his dad how to sort cattle on his first day back from college, and Doherty knew it. The young chef had to take a different route.

“I had to take the approach of, ‘Frank, I know we’ve done it like this for a hundred years, and that’s fine, but it’s time for a change. Do you think it would work if we did this? If we try this, how would you do it? What’s the best way to go about it?’ That way, I was tapping in to his expertise and knowledge, and I got him to be a part of the process. When workers are part of the process, they have a stake in the game. They aren’t going to let it fail.”

After 11 years as executive chef, Doherty realized his team was still falling short of greatness.

“I had always been busy focusing on the things that were wrong so I could fix them before the customers saw it,” he said. “I ended up being a really negative guy.”

It took a couple weeks with his family dog in behavioral training to realize that wasn’t the right approach.

“I went back to work and started recognizing great work and appreciating the effort that went behind that great work. That day, faces changed, attitudes changed, and the

next day people were coming back looking to do more.”

While praise is good, Doherty’s final pieces of advice are don’t overdo it and develop a “listening” form of communication.

“We can’t assume that because we express ourselves clearly and people

acknowledge and write down what we’re saying that they really understand,” Doherty said. “You have to ask questions. Say, ‘Here’s what I want; here’s my vision. Tell me how you are going to get there.’”

“Now you have a person who is so proud they were able to tell the boss everything they know and how they’re

going to do it. On my team, I no longer had to manage them; I inspired them to be their own manager.”

Good help may be hard to find, but that doesn’t mean it should be tough to manage.

