Hospitality for Boomers
How to attract residents, retain staff, and maximize profitability

Cindy Heilman MS, RD, FAND
Creator of Kind Dining®: Bringing Warmth to the Table
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By Cindy Heilman, MS, NDTR, FAND
Creator of Kind Dining®: Bringing Warmth to the Table
HIGHER STANDARDS, LLC
http://www.higherstandards.org

"Hello & Welcome!"

Cindy Heilman MS, NDTR, FAND
Dedication

In memory of my parents, Bill and Evelyn Sullivan. And a special thank you to Mike, my husband of 43 years, who is my rock and foundation.
Praise for Kind Dining Training

“Kind Dining® training truly transformed our operation and resulted in a significant improvement in our guest meal revenue and resident satisfaction.”
– Sarah McEvoy, Administrator: Villa Crest, the national 2011 Optima Award Winner
  Retirement and Nursing Center, Manchester, NH

“I really like how this training is formatted toward the servers. We often forget they are the ones who can make a difference simply by their approach, skills, and knowledge.”
– Lisa Maynard, Executive Director: The Springs at Clackamas Woods
  Milwaukie, OR

“Your workbook is clever, entertaining, thought-provoking, soul-searching, and full of common sense.”
– Brigitte Burke RD, AVP Dietary Services: National HealthCare Corporation
  Murfreesboro, TN

About Higher Standards, LLC

Higher Standards, LLC is a training and consulting company, founded in 2006, to create affordable training tools to optimize mealtime experiences and relationships in senior living communities, and operations serving seniors.

Kind Dining® is a one-of-a-kind cost-effective training series, proven to change behavior, building personal and professional skills of staff empowering them to shift dining culture. Villa Crest, a New Hampshire client of Higher Standards, received the national 2011 Optima Award from Long-Term Living Magazine for innovative, outcome-oriented staff teamwork while achieving higher resident and staff satisfaction scores.

This curriculum is the outcome of Cindy’s graduate research and food service hospitality background; rooted in proven customer service and hospitality principles and standards.
Acknowledgements

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I would like to acknowledge my parents for their unending love and influence. Even as a working mom and accomplished artist, my mom was most happy encouraging others to be their best and relished the times spent serving friends and family meals. My dad taught me to believe in God and planted the seed that a strong home foundation is built on love, faith, trust and respect, often expressed around mealtimes.

I thank God for the blessings, insights, support and strong sense of purpose I have felt to change careers and dedicate my work to restoring dignity and respect around the dining experience in senior living communities.

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Why you should read this book

Judy is the food service director in a senior living community where her father is a resident. One day, he suggests to Judy that she should hire her brother, Michael, to replace a departing worker in the dining room. Michael is autistic and Judy explains that hiring him would be inappropriate.

“He isn’t able to connect with people and he doesn’t have any serving skills,” she says.

“But honey,” her dad replies, “you hire people like him already.”

Do you ever wonder what your residents are thinking as they watch your servers? I believe that every community can improve its livability, workability, marketability and profitability by teaching hospitality skills to its employees.

*Hospitality for Boomers* organizes best practices and will appeal to providers to commit to service training for all staff.

Leaders in senior care are actively exploring the potential for growth and success that stems from better mealtime service. It is my belief that in order to attain a competitive edge in the marketplace companies must make a priority of raising service standards.

Too often the realities of the dining experience do not meet residents’ expectations. Regardless of the type of community, level of care, or style of service, many providers are not paying enough attention to how much seniors want pleasant and friendly social interaction at mealtimes. My hope is that this book addresses this need.

My experience working as a dietary manager in a skilled nursing home showed me that residents’ expectations were not being met. Food was dispensed rather than served. Residents had little or no say about what they were offered to eat or when they ate it. The dining room ambiance was institutional rather than homey or inviting. The dining room staff was efficient but mechanical. What’s more, servers often conversed among themselves while doling out meals, as if the residents weren’t even there.

Becoming the foodservice director in an assisted living community, I thought things might be different. Here the dining room furnishings were beautiful and the menus upscale, but the lunch servers dressed like housekeepers – because they were housekeepers. The evening servers were teenagers trying their best but they had no training and little service sense. Staff turnover was rampant. Mealtimes were not an enjoyable dining experience; they weren’t warm or satisfying experiences for either residents or staff.

In my way of thinking residents are dining customers, who should be treated with the level of courtesy and service that paying customers in other dining venues expect and receive. I began to ask myself two questions: *Why was the service component in senior dining absent? Why wasn’t it seen as valuable or necessary?*

The truth was that this basic need for excellent service had been overshadowed by a single-minded adherence to numerous state and federal regulations, medical regimens, and cost
pressures even though service and an environment conducive to healthy living were a stated objective. Somehow, these companies were not paying attention to their own core values.

In 2003, a study of best practices for meal service in long-term care found that residents and staff alike believed service at mealtimes had a significant influence on resident satisfaction. The residents saw three things as important: server courtesy and attitude during service, the social skills of their servers, and the service techniques they used. On their side, staff described the pressure they felt to complete the service tasks with little or no regard for attitude or courtesy; in fact, most did not realize that residents anticipate being served.

It stands to reason then that a blend of higher standards of service infused with genuine hospitality could make all the difference in their experience.

A cultural shift is in progress.

Today, forward-thinking organizations are making profound changes in their dining rooms. Providers recognize that customer service should be on the menu at every meal, along with nutritious food. They are realizing that in order to exceed residents’ service expectations, they will need to instill a new set of skills for staff. However, this is just the first step. The customer service component is critical for three additional reasons.

First, mealtime offers an important opportunity not just to serve, but to connect. Servers affect the relationships and emotional health within the community daily. When a server takes the time and knows how to skillfully communicate, genuine personal connections are made. Residents gain a feeling of respect and appreciation, and a sense of belonging. As an added bonus, so do servers.

Second, customer service isn’t just about putting the plate down politely. Instead, it is one of the most important tools available to meet the health and quality-of-life goals that communities hold dear. Restoring dignity, honor, and respect to elders at mealtime enhances health and well-being. For that reason, providing it is a moral issue. As the long-term care profession moves increasingly toward person-centered hospitality, the time is right for providers to take the lead and advocate for best practices in serving meals that enhance the experience of residents and servers alike.

Third, increases in resident and staff satisfaction lead directly to improved community reputation, marketability, and profitability. Satisfaction with the dining experience, has a great influence on how strongly a community is recommended to potential new customers. Industry expert Vivian Tellis-Nayak, PhD, who has conducted extensive customer and staff research, says it best, “Higher satisfaction with the dining experience wins over residents and family members. They in turn are more likely to recommend a community.”

The goal for each senior living community should be genuine hospitality.
Chapter 1: Respecting your diner’s experience

Consider for a moment what life is like for a resident in a senior living community. It can be a solitary existence. This is especially true for those who have lost a spouse and live alone. While sometimes there are hobbies, day excursions and responsibilities around the building, much time is spent alone, even with regular visits from family and old friends. It’s no wonder that the three meals in the dining room become the highlight of the day.

Most residents spend time getting ready to go to the dining room: combing hair, applying make-up, getting neatly dressed. For some, especially the less mobile, it takes considerable time to make their way to the dining room. There is time spent waiting to be seated. There is time spent anticipating the pleasure of eating, the pleasure of socializing.

Multiply this by three meals a day. It’s no wonder that with so much of their former lives removed, many residents focus considerable energy on one thing: the next meal. Residents can spend as much as 60% of their day focused on meal times.

The new family table

Although our culture seems to have abandoned the home dining room for eating on the fly or in front of the TV, we still see meal times as social. In fact, we spend considerable portions of our discretionary income eating out with friends. In care communities, the social aspects of the dining experience may well be as important as the nutritional component. Meals should be a time for enjoyment, for suspending the ticking clock, and for making new memories.

For many residents, mealtimes are the most likely opportunity to interact with neighbors, friends, and the community staff. Residents want to know who has come to dinner and who hasn’t. It’s a way to maintain a sense of community. It is also the most likely time and place to make a connection with someone new.

It is no accident that what was once termed a meal is now called dining to reflect this experience.

When prospective residents are considering their housing options, dining usually shows up in the top ten most important items on the list. A 2009 survey by the Dietary Managers Association and Olson Communications found that dining and food service ranked seventh in a list of the 13 concerns most important to consumers in choosing a senior living facility. More importantly, after they’ve moved in, residents rate it as the second or third most important factor in their overall satisfaction.

Shifting population demands a different kind of attention

Now, as the Boomer generation hits retirement age en masse, the focus on dining quality is being magnified. In 2000, there were 34 million Americans over the age of 65. By 2030, that
number will rise to 71 million. And the culture shift will continue as these new seniors move into senior living communities.

During the past decade, senior communities have been home to the last of the people who remember childhood in the 1920s and 1930s, people who lived through the hardships of the Great Depression. These people had a different perspective: they had learned to be thankful during a time when there often wasn’t much to be had. Many of them entered their 20s as World War II came, and again, made significant sacrifices. They fought, they rationed, they collectively won the war through the sheer force of their industry. The so-called “Greatest Generation” earned its reputation by the depth of its collective sacrifice. As retirement and nursing home residents, their relatively minimal demands for service and their relatively easy satisfaction with what they received reflected that upbringing.

In contrast, consider the residents born after the war. They grew up with rock and roll, Beatlemania, Civil Rights, Women’s Rights, Woodstock, and Vietnam. They remodeled society as they became adults, becoming wealthier and healthier and more demanding than any generation in history. This group demands service because it grew up with it. They have eaten in far more restaurants than their parents did. They have spent far more of their money on entertainment, travel, recreation, cars, homes, and services.

This burgeoning generation of seniors has also been marketed to relentlessly since their youth and as a result, they are history’s shrewdest shoppers. As retirees, they are unlikely to be content with black coffee and an assortment of sweetener packets. They are going to demand espressos and lattes and caramel macchiatos. Not only are they going to expect a greater array of choices, they are going to require far higher standards of service. And if they don’t get what they want, they have been trained to keep looking until they do.

Thus, communities that offer a high-quality dining experience will differentiate themselves from the competition. Maintaining high levels of resident satisfaction, through hospitality, is more than a quality-of-life issue. It’s going to be a major selling point.

The value of training the servers

Senior living community providers are learning what restaurant owners already know: server interactions with customers influence the customers’ perception of the establishment. It is the server who creates the ambiance of the meal and is a central figure in dining quality. It is the proper training of the server that will endear the community to your customers.

Servers themselves must understand their role in creating opportunities for residents to have enriching conversations and connections with each other. It is not unusual for residents to interact with servers more often than their own families. When servers make a genuine effort to spark conversation and show caring interest, that energy promotes a more fulfilling experience for everyone.

Servers are not born with this knowledge. They must be nurtured. Therefore, staff training is crucial to transforming your communities’ dining experience with the goal of enhancing social connections while providing high-quality meal service.
This applies to everyone on staff who serves meals. Nurse aides, housekeepers – anyone serving a meal – needs to know the menu, needs to show caring behaviors and needs to build positive teamwork around the dining experience. These skills have never been more important. Respect for service must be seamless across all dining experiences provided by the organization. Communities that lavish service quality in the independent dining room but don’t monitor it in their health center are not meeting the needs of their population.

In addition, the new Quality Indicator Surveys (QIS), which are being rolled out across the country by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, are changing the focus of federal regulation compliance. A point of emphasis is actually listening to what residents have to say. Surveyors now track how residents perceive the quality of their care. These surveys have the potential to have a big impact on the industry. The bar is rising for service standards.

**An enhanced approach to dining**

Every senior housing organization, whether retirement or skilled healthcare, must strive to provide the best dining experience it can offer. And in order to reach that goal, a new mindset and skill set may be required. Rather than believing that the residents are guests of the organization, the opposite is true. Servers and administrators alike must realize that they are guests in the resident’s home. And how do we behave when we are in someone else’s home, especially in the home of an elderly person, as when we are with our own grandparents? Courteous. Respectful. Warm. Kind. Friendly. Smart. These are the traits that servers – the faces of the organization – must aspire to.

Numerous leaders of culture change are in agreement that the place to start is in the dining room. In *In Pursuit of the Sunbeam*, LaVrene Norton and Steve Shields observed, “We often start (system change) in dietary because it allows for incremental shifts in resident service that often lead to highly visible and positive results and creates those ‘a-ha’ moments that energize teams and the process of change.”

Thus, superficial remodeling projects, which are often a first choice for budgetary spending, should be viewed as a secondary priority. Those investments may be good for an initial impression, but they do not address what is typically the most pressing need: warm, friendly service. Instruction in service basics, geared at strengthening knowledge, confidence, and communication skills, can impact the collective psyche of the entire community much more quickly and fundamentally.

**Situation:** Lunchtime arrives at a busy CCRC dining room, where restaurant-style service is offered to 200 residents. However, the dining room manager, chef, and dining room director all attend mandatory executive meetings from noon to 1:00pm because it is the most convenient time of day to gather executives. Meanwhile, the person left in charge of the dining room is a veteran server who refuses to show his younger co-workers any respect. Communication breakdowns lead to a lack of attention to serving details. Feelings are hurt. The servers become preoccupied with their own problems and lose focus on the residents. The level of service falls off. **What would you do?**
In moments like these, it is important to remember that service excellence and continuous improvement start at the top. Executive leaders who value and promote high-quality service make sure that mealtimes are the greatest opportunity each day to impress their residents. Keeping key leadership in the service arena during mealtimes increases the value of the operation in the eyes of staff. By quickly addressing disrespectful behaviors, department leaders gain the trust of employees. Confusion dissipates. Valuable energy and resources are well used.
Chapter 1: Summary Points

♥ Consider the amount of time residents spend preoccupied with mealtimes and you’ll begin to understand the value that the dining experience offers for residents and servers alike.

♥ Be prepared for a new generation of residents who are putting increasing demands on staff service skills.

♥ Adjust attitudes toward meal service and prioritize it. Recognize the dining room interaction as an opportunity to develop a sense of community.

Hospitality Tips: What to do next

1. Shift the service focus to put the residents’ needs first.
2. Teach your staff the importance that dining has for the overall health and well-being of the community.
3. Consider the amount of time residents spend engaged in meal times and how important it is to their day.
4. Make sure all employees understand their role in making a vibrant community.
5. Embrace the term “culture change” and how it applies to your community.

“Effective leaders regularly visit the front lines so they can stay in touch with the issues that affect the staff.”
Chapter 2: Training your staff to excel

Raising service standards in a senior living community begins with a careful assessment. Which systems need adjusting? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the community on its own and relative to the competitors nearby and in the region? The quality of service will not change if leadership is not prepared to act. Take an honest look at current procedures and then implement changes that will facilitate the improvements you’re seeking.

The way to start is easy. Stop. Look. Listen. Monitor the three meals served in the dining rooms, plus any snack times, daily. And while observing, answer a few pertinent questions:

- What does good service feel like to you?
- What do your residents value in mealtime service?
- How smoothly do your servers interact with residents? With one another?

Using the answers to these questions is the next step. At the very least, this practice should illuminate areas where staff are falling short. It should also give leadership some idea what the issues are and where training ought to begin. Progress comes from creating frequent dialogue between department managers and staff. Both sides need to be 100% committed to improving dining service and know the reasons why it is so important.

It may be helpful to form a committee of leaders – current staff in the community who are in a position to direct positive change and are passionate about improving service. Participants should represent each department’s frontline servers. The group can evaluate current practices and ask residents directly what they value most in service. The information that comes out of that effort can then be shared with all of the company’s servers, along with an emphasis to make changes for the better every day.

This sounds easy, but of course it is not. Grumbling may well ensue.

- “We will never get 100-percent server commitment.”
- “We don’t have the resources to get staff together to talk about this.”
- “My young servers are only here for a couple of hours a day any way, why should I waste time and money training them?”

The director of nursing may take offense: “I wouldn’t be caught dead serving coffee.”

These responses, and other sentiments like them, don’t serve any honest approach to integrating higher standards of service and must be dealt with promptly and completely in order to proceed. Everyone must understand what is at stake here. Better service means that the business is stronger and more competitive. What’s more, understanding better service practices can help employees seeking career advancement. Better service is the compassionate and healthful direction that communities must aspire to for the sake of healthier and happier residents. In order to meet residents’ expectations, and to exceed them, leadership must maintain a constant focus on building a stronger community. This concept of community extends to servers and all others who work in the building. Every employee must understand that they are part of the community. They function within the larger group and are not separate from it.
Changing perceptions

So why does providing high-quality service seem to be so difficult? In a nutshell, it has become an unnatural part of the current healthcare culture. Food delivery systems in senior living communities have not traditionally cultivated service relationships as a priority and, as mentioned before, they were serving a clientele who didn’t seem to mind. Then a major antenna was raised when the Ombudsman Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA, 1987) was enacted. (To read more on OBRA, go to www.cms.hhs.gov/home/regsguidance.asp)

Even after OBRA, food quality and service has been slow to improve across the industry. Critics have compared food service in care communities with that of schools, prisons, and the military. In these settings, service is of minimal concern. The focus is on preserving the system and providing nutrition for minimal cost. Satisfying the emotional needs of the person eating the food has not been a priority.

It is no secret that most consumers have the perception that eating in nursing homes is awful. Assisted living and continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs) are not exempt either. Even seniors who live in luxurious CCRCs share that they, too, have the same unfavorable perceptions. In the age of the Boomer seniors, providers who do not address these concerns will be left behind.

The best place to start is education and training for servers. By teaching servers the skills they need, a service makeover is not only possible but inevitable. When servers are smarter about the dining aspect of your business, they begin to understand the importance of their roles and take pride in them. Most of them don’t come into this job – often at minimum wage – knowing service basics, yet they are in many ways the face of the company. Residents’ satisfaction with their home and community can be improved, or damaged, by the treatment they receive from the people bringing their food to the table.

Every meal is thus an opportunity to reaffirm a senior’s choice of where to live or stay during a short-term rehab.

Three service themes to improve dining culture

On-going research and surveys concur that more senior living residents are making their expectations known. Three of these expectations stand out.

- Residents expect servers to show courtesy and a positive attitude at mealtime.
- They expect servers to have adequate social skills.
- They expect servers to use proper serving techniques.

These are basic expectations. The standard of service in any senior community should rise to this level, at a minimum, and then aspire to go much farther.
In order to meet basic standards and protocols for the dining environment, these standards and protocols must be established and carried out. And department leaders should get into the habit of reinforcing their importance.

It’s important to ensure that the tools for success are available to all employees. The how-to of a simple personal introduction may be explained to full-time staff, but part-time servers might not ever be asked to learn it. Typically, the part-time dining staff is expected to learn company values by osmosis – from watching and observing co-workers. Consequently, they frequently feel undervalued and become disconnected from their work easily.

Educated servers make an enormous difference. When they are properly trained, servers use residents’ names more often, introduce tablemates to one another, start conversations, and make eye contact. And they smile while carrying out these skills. When service skills are performed well and positive attitudes are consistently projected, company values are communicated loud and clear. Servers gain confidence because they feel valued by the company and see that their actions have an impact. Residents feel that they are receiving respect, attention, and care. Ultimately, this can transfer into more satisfied customers, servers, and higher revenues.

The protocols, policies, or standards set forth by the company indicate what it values most. Servers should be well versed in those values so that they know them by heart. This includes all staff who serve meals, such as CNAs, who sometimes fail to see the connection between their role and the value of serving a meal and who may feel it is beneath them to function as a “waitress.” As a result, some CNAs show an attitude of indifference to serving meals. And while this may not be done with the intention of harming residents, the negative message is communicated and received. It is counterproductive to building a better, stronger community.

**Situation:** Lisa, the executive director of an assisted living community, hired a trainer to help her young servers improve their dining service skills. Her goal was to have them feel more valued in their role, to improve relationships with their residents and co-workers. In a follow-up meeting, Lisa and the newly trained servers brainstormed ideas to make their system work better. They decided that it would be beneficial to share more of their own personalities with the residents. They decided to personalize their nametags with something descriptive to identify the server and start a conversation. Gabe, for instance, was a sports fan who followed Oregon State and the Portland Trail Blazers. So his new tagline became “Go Beavers, Go Blazers!”

As in the example above, servers who have been trained will take initiative to improve relationships and service, such as this simple yet effective idea. Residents find more opportunities to engage in conversations and build trust in the people serving them. And leaders like Lisa, who involved their staff in related decision-making, have an easier time solving problems and addressing concerns because the staff trusts them to give input.

In *Speed of Trust*, Stephen Covey wrote, “Trust is a function of two things: Character and competencies. Character includes your integrity, your motive, your intent with people. Competence includes your capabilities, your skills, your results, and your track record.” Covey argued that both are vital to a trustful relationship and building a high trust environment is the quickest way to build successful caring relationships and for a company to reach its full potential.
Chapter 2: Summary Points

♥ Break down the process of dining service and analyze what works and what doesn’t. Then, act to address the problems.
♥ Know what residents expect from service staff and mobilize resources to not only meet but exceed those standards.
♥ Change perceptions about the dining experience in your community through daily diligence toward improvement.

Hospitality Tips: What to do next

1. Identify where there are weaknesses in the dining process and determine the cause.
2. Work with staff to troubleshoot problem areas in order to improve how the dining process functions.
3. Ensure service quality is consistent in every dining area, including in-room service.
4. Teach servers to understand the importance of their interactions with residents.
5. Notice and address performance that does not meet the standards in private and praise the performance that does!