

Name: **Café Spice Namaste**

Size: 34

Sector: Food Retail

Location: London

The organisation

Café Spice Namaste is an award winning restaurant group specialising in Indian and Pan-Asian cuisine of the highest standard. Established in November 1995, it is recognised as one of the top 50 restaurants in the UK ethnic food sector and features in all the quality guides. It achieved Investors in People (IiP) status in 1999 and IiP Champion status in 2005. It currently employs 34 members of staff, all but three of whom are male. Café Spice Namaste has signed up to the Skills Pledge.

The history of workplace dialogue

The history of workplace dialogue has evolved as part of the organisation's strategic and continuous approach to the development of its staff, and an underpinning commitment to high quality standards and customer service. Meeting such high quality expectations posed a number of initial challenges for Café Spice Namaste. Their staff base had only limited English language skills and their standards of customer care and service were poor. Staff turnover in the early days was high. The training processes started internally as soon as they started to hire staff.

The first issue they sought to address was English Language skills. At the time staff would have been intimidated with the thought of attending an external college, so internal classes and customer 'mock-ups' were established. Training was also sourced from their suppliers. The costs were initially covered by the organisation, and then supported by the East London Training and Enterprise Council. Over time they became increasingly committed to training and skills development. The staff base may have come from poorly educated backgrounds, but has been trained to high standards and customer service skills are high.

Workplace dialogue is pervasive. The organisation is a family run business, and there is an open and informal sense of internal communication. More formally, and collectively, there are daily briefing meetings for service staff and weekly team meetings for all staff. The former focuses predominantly on preparing for the day's service and is held at 11.45 each day. The latter is held at 5pm every Saturday and focuses more intensively on one or two key issues, including aspects of training and skills. At an individual level, an annual Personal Development Review has been introduced for all staff. It is a sophisticated system for such a small organisation.

How are training and skills discussed?

Training and skills needs are discussed on an informal and formal basis. Informally, all staff are encouraged to ask for training, as and when they want it. This is stated explicitly on the staff notice board. The training manager also checks with junior staff on a regular basis if they require further training.

The formal means for discussing training and skills is via the Personal Development Review. This is conducted once a year and involves a meeting between the member of staff, their line manager and the training manager. Staff are encouraged to be open and to ask what training they want. The manager then gives feedback on performance and they discuss together any necessary skills needs. The meeting is documented in a formal performance and development review form. Staff performance is discussed in relation to appearance, time management, attention to detail, attitude, team work and customer service. A formal 'training and development plan to support personal goals' is then agreed. All staff are appraised, including managers and the owners, who are now appraised by their staff.

The general policy of Café Spice Namaste is to support their staff in whatever training and skills development they wish to pursue. Where training cannot be supported through external forms of subsidy, the company pays. The organisation also offers a 'time incentive' - that is, time-off during work for staff to pursue training. Given the limited staff base, this system relies heavily on colleagues' supporting and covering for each other. This system works well and is an indicator of the good staff relations that exist. The organisation is also prepared to support training that is more related to personal rather than work-related development. Thus, in the past, a chef requested training in computer systems and three staff have recently requested support to study for an NVQ Level Three in management. It is recognised that once qualified such staff may leave the organisation, but the training is supported anyway, as it felt that if staff leave with such skills it can only enhance the reputation of Café Spice Namaste further.

Following training, staff feedback what they have learnt, either through a short written report (for managers) or orally to the weekly team meetings. In this way the benefits of learning are shared across the organisation.

What have been the benefits from dialogue on training and skills?

- Recognition of the importance of training to the maintenance of quality standards and high levels of customer service.
- The majority of staff are formally educated to a basic level only, but over 90 per cent are now qualified to NVQ Level two.
- Staff turnover has reduced to virtually zero.
- Staff confidence has increased and so has their flexibility and openness to new ways of working.
- Staff are fiercely loyal to the organisation. After 7/7, Café Spice Namaste lost a lot of business due to its location in London. During this period cash

- flow was tight, but staff volunteered to have their salaries deferred until business improved – which it did within five months.
- The reputation of the business is high, evidenced in awards not only for cuisine, but its commitment to staff training and development. It is the only ‘stand alone’ restaurant in the UK with liP Champion Status.

Challenges and ‘top tips’

The main challenges relate to the degree of staff input into the appraisal process and their willingness to undertake training. There are times when staff have not been open in their appraisal and they have been fearful of the consequences of the process. In response the organisation has trialled a number of appraisal formats before settling on the current system. All members of the senior team have been trained by an expert around dialogue and exchange and how to use appraisal. They endeavour to make the appraisal process positive and not scary. It is used to identify areas for performance improvement, but is not used as a tool to reprimand but to support and encourage personal development.

Similarly, there are examples sometimes when it has proved difficult to encourage staff to go for training. As Cyrus (the chef patron – owner) explains, ‘They say I don’t feel like it. That is quite common’. To overcome this, management then aims to ‘convince the person. Certain colleges will come in and chat with the person. We try to offer the person a little excitement in taking something up. Staff that had been very shy have gone for it and taken up some skills’.