Before opening CT’s Deli in downtown Rhinelander in 2015, Rhonda Jicinsky had her five employees over for dinner. Here’s what each was asked to bring: five core values for work.

The phrase “core value” was foreign to some, so Jicinsky printed out examples of what might be possible. After dinner, they read everybody’s ideas and “rewrote, modified, improved and finally compiled” what made most sense to them as a group.

These guiding principles are painted on a wall at the deli, easily seen by customers, employees and whoever else walks through the door. The process and goodwill that pulled the words together was as important as what’s on the list, and the commitment to take it seriously.

For Jicinsky, as a boss, it was a matter of walking the talk and not wanting to duplicate what she experienced as an employee in the foodservice industry. “The owner was present every day and all day,” she recollects. “But he walked around and seldom engaged any of the employees. He seemed mad, but you never knew if it was something you did.”

Although employees were told they were like family, the owner “seldom made them feel like it.” Pay raises were not given unless the employee asked for one. Absent were raise guidelines and a formal review process. “It really created a negative work environment,” Jicinsky says, which motivated her to create a workplace that is exactly the opposite.

The turnover rate for hospitality jobs in 2016 was more than 70 percent for the second consecutive year according to the National Restaurant Association. Near-constant hiring and training is a costly, tiring cycle for the restaurant operator. “Your culture is the primary differentiator between you and your competitors,” says business strategist D.P. Knudten of COLLABORATOR creative, Madison. What’s the difference between a workplace culture that survives and thrives? Some factors seem universal, regardless of restaurant concept or size.

“Communicate your expectations—and never stop doing so,” Knudten says. “There is a continual need to teach and reaffirm” cultural foundations. “Never assume people know what they are. Always assume they could use a gentle reminder,” and never presume an employee can read your mind.

Stay positive, aware
Adelle Mentz, age 23, took over ownership of Schultz’s Bluebird Café, Clintonville—her mother’s restaurant—in January 2018, after six years in the U.S. Army. She has five employees and describes the business (now called Adelle’s Bluebird Café) as small in size but big in cohesion, exuberance and positivity.

“I will ask my employees a positive question about how their night was, or something we talked about the day before,” Mentz says. “This not only shows that you take interest in who...continued on page 12
they are, but it can show you how they’re feeling.”

Staff work well together, she believes, because of positive reinforcement and shared values that stem from her military experience.

“We have loyalty towards our restaurant and our co-workers,” Mentz says. “We know it’s our duty to get our jobs done right. We respect everyone who enters our doors. Our selfless service shows our customers that they come first. We honor what we say we can provide. Our integrity builds a sense of trust amongst each other. And personal courage comes into play if someone tries to give us a hard time.”

Be kind, direct and specific when pointing out opportunities for improvement, she advises. “I have been in situations where people have cut me down with vague and rude comments. It made me realize that I never want to be that kind of boss.”

Be matter-of-fact about what needs to improve or change: “Yelling and trying to make someone feel less about their work won’t take you far.” Be stern but not condescending: Start on a positive note when correcting someone, finish with encouragement and “don’t let people see your kindness as a weakness.”

How’s the boss?
Erin Vranas of Parthenon Gyros, Madison, says times have changed. “No longer can operators bark orders, pay a minimum and expect employees to want to work for them,” she says. “You really have to invest in your employees financially and psychologically if you want to keep them long-term.”

How can you change employee attitude? “Change yours first. Change your whole perspective,” Vranas says. “You need to be the light when you walk into your restaurant, and your management needs to be the same. You’re not happy? Too damn bad. Be the person to your staff that you want your staff to be to your guests. You cannot have a positive environment if you allow any negative attitudes.”

She wants her employees to look forward to coming to work and also offers health insurance and paid time off.

“We try to make work an escape,” she says. “We encourage and reward positivity and immediately redirect negative comments and actions into positive mindsets and behaviors. We train our management to do the same. Be happy or fake it ‘til you make it. If you practice being happy, eventually it will become a habit and you will actually be a lighter person. Your entire life will be transformed.”

The result? Employee turnover at Parthenon Gyros has gone from 83 percent to 11 percent, Vranas says. Her deliberate bridge building “ensures everyone is working toward the same purpose.” Gone are segregations between back of house and front of house, day and night shifts, younger and older employees. “Create the

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“Yelling and trying to make someone feel less about their work won’t take you far.”

—Adelle Mentz,
Adelle’s Bluebird Café

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Susan and Rick Hubanks, Angelo’s McFarland

“The team member comes first. They are your brand ambassadors, the face of your business. If you treat your team well, they will take care of the guests.”

Ryan Batley, Best Western Premier Bridgewood Resort

“Tough question. It depends on the situation. The employee must know that you will have their back and will stand by them if they are in the right. But sometimes we make mistakes. Then the customer comes first. We own the mistake as a team, and we will try our best to resolve it.”

Dawn Eno, Breakfast by Dawn

“The employee does because the customer can only experience what the employee provides. The customer is NOT always right—but the employee can make them feel as if they are.”

D.P. Knudten, COLLABORATOR creative

“The employee, all day every day! If you take care of your employees, really care for them, they will be happy and perform their jobs really well. If they’re doing their jobs well, guess what, your guests are happy! If your guests are happy, your business does well. Then you can give more back and make your employees happier. It’s a fantastic cycle. The old adage that says the customer comes first is dead.”

Erin Vranas, Parthenon Gyros

environment that people want to work in,” she says, and “they will come to you.”

Diane Nielsen, age 28, says she’s held a variety of jobs since age 14 (one-half of her life). Now she is content as a bartender and server at Brat House Grill, Wisconsin Dells. She believes that people don’t leave jobs. They leave bosses.

“This is the one and only place I’ve ever worked where it’s near impossible to be in a bad mood,” she says. “The environment as a whole is goofy, light and fun. But when it’s crunch time, everyone pitches in and carries their weight.”

Her boss, Patty Morabito, believes in leading by example and with levity, when possible. “I lovingly say that I don’t have much of a life because I am always working,” she says. “So I have fun at work. I usually just do crazy things to make myself and the employees laugh.” Sweet treats are a tangible reward.

At Breakfast at Dawn, Spring Green, Dawn Eno agrees that hard work can be
fun. Turn up the music during clean-up or set-up for the next day. “Maybe do a little silly dance or tell a joke or share a story,” she suggests.

**All for one**

“We love our staff,” says Morabito, who will clean bathrooms, change lightbulbs, bus tables, mop floors, greet customers, cook, wash dishes, bartend—whatever is needed. “I like my staff seeing me do the grunt work with them. I believe wholeheartedly that they respect me for it and show it back by working harder.”

Brat House Grill server Dyana Gabryela says she and co-workers “feel important, valuable and listened to. That makes us offer awesome customer service and provide guests with the best version of us.”

“Working in this industry is hard enough, so don’t make it be even harder for the employee,” says Eno. “Work with them. Help them get through a rough day. Help them work with the scheduling and give them encouragement and guidance on how to handle those tough situations.”

Susan and Rick Hubanks at Angelo’s in McFarland routinely ask employees for opinions and ideas for day-to-day business, “which allows them to have a say in their work. It shows our employees that we value their ideas and care about their work experience.”

They also share all reviews from customers, “to let our staff know what a great job they are doing and how important they are to the success of our business.” That builds a sense of pride and loyalty, “which makes them want to come to work.”

This also happens at That’s Amore, Greenfield, where Joe LoPiparo says staff weigh in on all facets of business—from new menu items to the addition of drive-thru service. “It makes them feel like they are a part of something and not a programmed robot,” LoPiparo says.

His open-door policy encourages one-to-one talk about work or personal problems. “I think most people just want a fair shake,” he says, and it is natural to care about employees’ well-being because “we’re here every day, working alongside each other.”

Add integrity to encourage loyalty. “My dad and I are very blue collar and like it that way. We don’t pretend to be something we’re not,” LoPiparo says. “My staff sees that we put our money where our mouth is. If a person or a party is unhappy with us, we may comp an entire meal.”

He acknowledges being taken advantage of during his 37 years of restaurant work, “but it’s a small number and we’ve served millions.” He thinks staff respect the goodwill and realization that “it’s not about the almighty dollar every day.”

**The right hires**

Morabito traces the good vibes at Brat House Grill to the hiring of excellent managers. “We can train pretty much anyone” but her “three basics”—priorities—in applicants are

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trustworthiness, a sense of responsibility and the right personality.

She also believes everyone is replaceable: “Never be afraid of starting fresh. Sometimes a fresh start is best for morale. I learned that the hard way.”

“Get rid of the ‘C’ players immediately,” advises T.J. Schier, president of SMART Restaurant Group and Incentivize Solutions, Texas. “You have to get rid of those who stir the pot, create crises and cause all the drama. Clean your house first and then bring in people who will thrive … Too often operators bring new people into a toxic environment and then say ‘bad hire’ when those people leave. They have it backwards.”

His biggest challenge is finding high-performing supervisors to lead effectively and treat employees well. “It is a trained behavior in most cases … after we ‘un-train’ the way they learned to manage.”

In Rhinelander, Mentz realizes that sometimes people just don’t click. “If you have someone who causes issues and doesn’t respond to your tone and leadership tactics, then it might be best to just let them go,” she says.

**Can we be friends?**

Boundaries between work and personal life are blurring. “We’re friends and we support each other at work and outside of work,” Vranas says, of her staff.

Example: Co-workers got together to volunteer at a food pantry, then watched and supported a newer colleague who was deejaying at a local bar.

“If someone’s having issues at home, we’re there for them. If someone needs advice outside of work, we’re always here to help,” Vranas says. “We are first and foremost a people business rather than a food business.”

Treat employees like family, advises Ryan Batley at Best Western Premier Bridgewood Resort Hotel and Conference Center, Neenah. “In many jobs, you spend more time with your work family than your home family,” he observes. “Many of those team members are working nights, weekends and holidays for their love of serving others—which can be a sacrifice to their family and friends.”

What motivates each may vary because of their diverse backgrounds. “Take the time to get to know your team members and understand how their lives outside of work may be affecting them at work,” Batley says. “Treat people with respect, and they will show you the same.”

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**Do Unto Others …**

Jim Sullivan of Appleton, CEO of Sullivision.com, in *Nation’s Restaurant News* shared these strategies to retain employees in the foodservice industry, which he describes as “tougher than a woodpecker’s lips.”

- **Situational awareness.**
  - Know what affects employee performance and what needs to change.
- **Stop managing people.**
  - Find like-minded people who prefer to be led.
- **Have a mentoring culture.**
  - Each employee should have a mentor.
- **Scout the competition.**
  - Learn from what others are doing.
- **Make a new employee’s first day memorable.**
  - Enthusiasm and energy are key.
- **Don’t accept losing.**
  - Always stick to your standards.
- **Team-first mentality.**
  - Making everybody better is everybody’s priority.
- **Depth matters.**
  - Develop backup plans before they are needed.
- **Re-recruit every shift.**
  - Keep employees engaged and confident every day. “We’re better at hiring than we are at retention, so we churn employees that should be kept and keep employees that should be churned.”

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