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The Truth of Clean Silverware

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

For quite some time, as a college student and new teacher, I worked as a waitress. A few of these restaurants were fine dining establishments, some were cafés and one was a bakery. In all of these places, there were several truths I learned—one was that in general, New Yorkers made you work, but they knew how to tip. Teachers were notoriously bad tippers. I think everyone, no matter what passion or path, should wait tables for a little while. My theory is this will make us much more tolerant and pleasant, in general. But perhaps the most significant truth was the truth of clean silverware, or as I learned much later, the notion of systems thinking.

Many systems theorists love to talk about how everything is interconnected and interrelated and that you can't change one thing in an organization without changing everything. Soon, we're deep into a discussion of Quantum physics and chaos theory, much like the characters in *Mindwalk*. *My molecules are touching your molecules . . . you get the picture?* Other systems theorists draw a lot of graphs, circles and squiggles on dry-erase boards and work up a sweat telling you that your system is broken—your process is damaged.

As a waitress, systems thinking seemed pretty simple to me: I would not make any tips if I did not have clean silverware. In case you never worked the front of the house, wait staff are dependent upon the host staff to seat the tables, and the tables need to be ready. In the back of the house, in the steamy dish pits, often wearing rubber gear on most appendages, are the dishwashers. Sometimes, they get free meals before or after their shifts. Some are young guys working for minimum wage, or internationals with fake documents, tough girls who can handle the kitchen staff language—but they've got the dirtiest, sweatiest, often the least glamorous job—they're scraping and scrubbing industrial-sized

pots and pans, burnt baking sheets and greasy skillets—they're washing the pretty china, fancy dodgers and silverware. If you're a waitress, or a hostess, a chef, or a restaurant owner, you *need* these guys. Otherwise, everyone's standing out front in the lobby, becoming tired and cranky because they're hungry and for some reason, even with empty tables, they can't seem to get a seat!

I was always nice to the dishwashers, even before I knew what interdependence was—it seemed like just plain common sense and good manners. I carried bus tubs back. I sorted plates when I wasn't busy on the floor. I asked if I could get them sodas or iced tea when I had a free minute. This is not rocket science or even some remote organizational theory, *I did not have to study this in graduate school*—my behaviors and choices influence others and their behaviors and choices influence me.

Much popular literature will tell you that it is the *leaders* of the organization that set the tone, the *leaders* will make or break the group, the leaders are responsible for everything that happens. Even though I'd argue that of the many challenges organizations face, most could be resolved with some clear leadership principles, I'd also argue that leadership begins with individuals, regardless of their positions, and is defined by how they lead themselves and how they see themselves as connected to and related to everyone else in the organization.

What about your organization? Who are the dishwashers—those behind-the-scenes workers whose productivity and performance profoundly affect the health and growth of the organization? Who are the waitresses and night managers and hostesses? How can we make one another's work easier and more meaningful? Systems thinking involves a different paradigm from that of a traditional org chart or hierarchy so common in most organizations, where we might imagine that one person's job is more important, more significant than another's. It is in recognizing how we rely on each other that we can begin to build our collective performance based on our collective strength. But first, we have to be willing to lead our own thinking. Indeed, "the art of systems thinking includes learning how to recognize the ramifications and tradeoffs of the actions you choose."¹

¹ Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday, 1994. ❖