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Green Light at UCLA Medical Center
Leadership, training and service combine to cure an epidemic of red ink.

By Janice Matsumoto, Associate Editor

When Carlton Green accepted a position as director of nutrition services at UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles four years ago, anyone could be excused for thinking him to be a little crazy. The department was \$2.5 million in the red; management and supervisory staff were untrained for their positions; shrinkage and waste were rampant; and patient food-satisfaction scores had bottomed out.



Green recalls a meeting between a foodservice consultant retained by the hospital and his soon-to-be new boss. "The consultant listed all the deficiencies, then said she'd never seen a place in this bad shape," Green says. "She pointed at me, saying, 'This man will end up in the cardiac unit,' and started to weep."

Green, who already had a proven track record at University of Connecticut Medical Center, was shaken but not daunted. He told them, "It may take a miracle, but I'll do my best to turn this department around within a year."

The so-called miracle played out right on schedule. Green and his staff not only had balanced the 624-bed facility's budget, they boosted cash revenues by \$100,000 per month, raised patient food-satisfaction scores to 80% and sent department morale skyrocketing.

Credit for the turnaround goes both to Green's skills as leader, motivator, restaurateur and businessman, and to a team of people willing to follow him down new paths.

GOLDEN RULE

The turnaround is all about training, teamwork and service, says Green, who received a 2001 Silver Plate Award from the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association. "A leader's responsibility is to talk with individuals and learn their goals, then help them figure out how to achieve them," Green says. "If individuals reach their goals, the department will, too."

One of Green's first moves was to schedule a meeting with his managers. He asked everyone what he or she did, and then, point-blank, if they were good at their jobs. Two of them opted for honesty over empty talk.

"One was the materials manager, in charge of receiving 35.5 tons of food and supplies a week. Javier Gonzalez looked me in the eye and admitted that he was in over his head. He didn't know how to hold inventories or cost them out. He'd been promoted into the position because he was a good worker," says Green. "Today, he holds a certificate of completion of the HACCP program from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. He may be the only manager in health care with USDA credentials."

Gonzalez's forthright honesty marked the beginning of a training revolution at UCLA Medical Center. Green's training programs, mandatory for all 174 full-time staff, include management workshops, weekly supervisors' in-service training, HACCP training, and ongoing professional

development programs. And the programs bore plenty of fruit: In the past three years, 12 line staff have been promoted to supervisory and management positions; 10 employees are pursuing higher education; 40 have achieved a bachelor's degree or higher, and 15 are licensed dietitians.

Turnover during those three years has been about 30% annually. "As people get their education, they move on. We expect that," Green says.

Green himself sets a fine educational example. A high school dropout at age 17, he went on to earn a bachelor's degree in nutrition, a master's in hotel and restaurant administration and a doctorate in business administration.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

Next on his reform agenda was to eliminate wasteful operating procedures practiced during the golden years of subsidies. Since Green had promised not to fire any employees, cost-control became imperative. As he soon discovered, it was largely a matter of applying--and teaching--common-sense business practices to the staff.

"No one knew exactly how much money was being spent, or the exact number of meals being served," Green says. Enter the monthly budget report, the cornerstone of financial reform. The report, which tracks purchases, inventory, revenues, number of meals served and cost per meal, is open for everyone in the department to look at.

"My goal was to get the staff looking at details the way I saw them," Green says.

Haphazard procedures affected every aspect of operations. Hospitality Manager Rey Hernandez, then a line cook, recalls a lack of accurate meal forecasting resulted in massive overproduction. "Every day we'd throw away hundreds of pounds of perfectly good food," he says.

Nothing escaped Green's scrutiny, and savings began to snowball. From Green, the team learned how to renegotiate vendor contracts; keep floor stocks at a minimum; and implement a forecasting system. With approval from the employees' union, overtime pay was trimmed from 10% to 3.5% of the budget and free employee meals were completely eliminated. Instituting a same-day meal ordering and delivery system slashed the amount of late trays by 80% and cut food waste accordingly.

Customer service blossomed at the same time. Green expanded VIP-patient room service by adding restaurant-style menus and "host service" meal delivery; and assumed responsibility for patient meal delivery from the nursing department. Within three years, not only had the cost per patient meal dropped from \$7.37 in 1996 to \$3.37 in 1999, but also food quality and consistency had substantially improved. For an operation serving 2.8 million total meals annually, that meant an overall cost reduction of \$11 million a year.

The retail side of operations experienced its own renaissance. Weekly production meetings between dietitians, hospitality managers and supervisors led to vast improvements in Café Med, such as the addition of made-to-order sushi, gourmet sandwiches and the International Corner that offers a different cuisine daily. Overall monthly revenue increased by \$100,000 within the first six months.

Success stories abound. The salad bar, offering nearly 40 different fresh ingredients daily, contributes \$40,000 a month to the bottom line. A branded coffee cart generates \$26,000 a month. Catering, which earned \$80,000 annually in 1997, is now topping \$1.2 million in revenues.

"We decided to have the best possible retail operation possible--and market it as such," Green says. They seem to have achieved their goal. "We have people coming in just to buy food to take home to their family."

OPPORTUNITY IN THE MAGIC KINGDOM

Green appreciates the value of training, since it helped shape his own life. His introduction to foodservice came from a high school chef's course for trade-school students. At 17, he dropped out of high school to join the Marine Corps and marry his sweetheart. While stationed in Okinawa, a shortage of cooks catapulted Green into the foodservice career. Eventually Green's skills came to the attention of one of the generals, who sent him to culinary school and then retained him as a manager for the senior officers' dining facility. Green worked for seven different generals during his 14-year stint with the Marines.

By this time, Green was stationed in California. He took an evening job at Disneyland as a cook to help make ends meet. One night, Walt Disney--"we called him Uncle Walt"--strolled through his restaurant and watched Green at work.

"He asked what my goals were," Green says. "Then he promised that if I got my high school diploma, he'd put me in Disney's management training program."

Green didn't have to think twice. Soon he was a night manager at Disneyland. After his discharge from the Marines, he managed several restaurants before deciding that he preferred the saner hours of health care foodservice--and that he had a lot to offer. A job as assistant director at Santa Monica Hospital led to Mount San Antonio Gardens, a life-care facility in California, then to University of Connecticut Medical Center and, finally, to UCLA.

PEOPLE FIRST

UCLA Medical Center's remarkable turnaround is a function of Green's people ability--crucial for a staff from 27 different nationalities working together.

"His talent is in the way he notices and appreciates what the staff does. He makes work fun," says Assistant Director of Patient and Clinical Services Patti Oliver, who commutes three hours round trip to work every day. "He even makes you want to come in on weekends."

Recognizing work done well is one of Green's specialties. He frequently takes his staff to weekly meetings with administrators to give credit where due, and he rewards staff with an annual Employee Appreciation Day, in which food is prepared and catered by managers.

Hernandez agrees. "When he first arrived, the general consensus was that since he's African-American, those were the employees who'd have an easier time," he says of their initial meeting four years ago. "It didn't take long to find out that Carlton's not about ethnicity. He's about doing what's right. If you perform well, you'll be rewarded, regardless of the color of your skin."

"I'd go to the wall for him," Hernandez say. "He's got my trust."

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