

PART III **Starting the** **Design Process**

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I don't often get time to watch television, but this past winter I did catch a show on the Food NetWork channel that captured my interest. I was intrigued by The Last Cake Standing. It was a competition with five pastry chefs, a client or clients and six hours to create an edible masterpiece.

I was amazed by the format of the show. It followed very simple design principles. At the beginning each pastry chef was given a theme. They raced off to meet the client for a quick interview session, raced back to the studio to produce some quick sketches and then moved into building the cake. Before we knew it the finished sculpture (not just a cake) was before the judges.

How does this show relate to building or remodeling your foodservice operation? Well, the basic design process is the same and should start with a design meeting or interview. I believe meeting the foodservice director / manager is critical at the beginning of the design process. Although most foodservice designers have a good understanding of operations, most have not been operation managers. We must rely on your information. Only after knowing your current procedures can we figure out what does and does not work and how to move forward in designing a successful operation for you.

The initial design meeting should cover some basic information relating to your operation:

- How many students are being fed breakfast / lunch?
- How long is a lunch period?
- Is there a set time period for breakfast?
- Number of kitchen/serving staff.
- Type of service you are currently using (straight line, scattered system).
- Obtain a copy of your daily menu including any a la carté items or sides.
- How much food are you cooking from scratch or receiving from another site?

This list could go on, but you get the idea that we need basic information for a foundation to the project.

Either at that initial meeting or in subsequent meetings, your project goals and objectives should be explored. Tell us:

- What you expect.
- What is currently working and what is not.
- How your staff interacts and operates.
- What would make your life easier.

I have found over the years that foodservice staff can whip up lunch for 200 using very little equipment; that the women and men working in kitchens can improvise beyond imaginable levels to get food on the table. Now is the time to explore other options and attempt to solve some of your ongoing problems. This is the time to establish goals that can be revisited as we progress into the design process.

When designing I like to pose the question - What If?

- What if we remove all of the walls?
- What if our budget was open ended?

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- What if we direct the students to move through the space differently?
- What if we don't call it a cafeteria?

Asking the “what if” questions help to entice abstract thinking and creativity. Without a solid set of objectives and goals, the finished product may not operate as anticipated. It should be noted that more often than not, when a solid set of goals have been established, the overall project has been successful. Obtaining that information up front is critical.

Reflecting back on The Last Cake Standing, I wonder what creative tools the pastry chefs are using as they run back to the studio. Have they set design goals? Are they designing the cake in their heads? Or are they asking more open-ended questions around the phrase – What if? Given the creative end results, they are not simply taking inventory of the product on hand and figuring out how to put the pieces together to form a cake. They are creating masterpieces.