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Identifying Management Styles of Chefs: How Staff Well-Being and Work Performance Are Linked to and Depend on the Way Chefs View Their Managerial Role

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Abstract

In this study, we sought to analyze the determinants of the chef's management of the kitchen staff in relation to constraints and resources, in particular those dictated by working conditions. We specifically sought to identify management styles that focus on the well-being of the staff and their work performance. To that end, we interviewed 20 chefs individually, using projective cards from the card game DIXIT. Qualitative analysis identified several common characteristics shared by the chefs in management of their staff, including managerial skills, importance of the "team" concept, a desire to give their profession a new and more positive image, and business constraints. We also found that they needed training in managing both their job and their staff. We discuss our findings on the collective activity of the kitchen staff and its effect on professional identity.

Keywords

chef, management, prevention, projective cards, activity analysis



1. Introduction

The food service industry has been facing significant difficulties in recruiting qualified labour, especially since the COVID-19 crisis. It is now classified as being “in crisis” (Boulevard et al., 2021). Several studies have revealed the drudgery of working conditions: manual handling of materials; strenuous physical positions; night work; and temperatures over 30 °C (CNAMTS, 2021). Nonetheless, very few cooks have a *compte pénibilité* (a “hardship account” that entitles employees with arduous working conditions to early retirement). Cooks belong to one of the 15 occupations most exposed to intense physical demands (DARES, 2014). They are also exposed to musculoskeletal problems and psychosocial risks (PSR) due to situations with physical, psychological and sexual violence (Laneyrie, Kennicker, Cuvillier, 2022). The media have also reported on many cases of alleged outbursts by Michelin-starred chefs (see the Cagna report) against their kitchen staff.

Middle management skills appear to be a way to deal with some occupational health issues (Laborie & Abord de Chatillon, 2022) through prevention, work organization and promotion of health and safety in the workplace (Grosjean, 2003) . We think that one of the industry’s difficulties lies in the forms of management used by chefs. Because few social science researchers have investigated the managerial activity of restaurant chefs, we decided to do such investigation in line with the work of Pelletier-Bosshard et al. (2021) in health and social services and Racine (2021) in the retail sector. In our study, which is part of a larger research program on the work of chefs, we propose to examine how chefs view their managerial role. We will examine the main concerns of these managers for the well-being of their staff in particularly difficult working conditions. To understand the role of management skills in their work, we will use two approaches from O’Leary and Sandberg (2016): defining their professional identity and defining their management skills.



2. Defining the Professional Identity of Chefs and Their Management Skills

2.1 A Professional Identity Shaped by Recognition

While covered widely by the media, the professional identity of chefs seems to lie between the image of French gastronomy (a part of French heritage declared “intangible” by UNESCO) and the day-to-day management of a restaurant, particularly to manage resources (raw materials, financial) and manage staff. In theory, professional identity is a triptych of ‘I, we, others’ (Dubar, 2000). For this study, the term “others” refers to “the client,” “the image of French cuisine,” and the *commis chefs* assigned to the kitchen staff. The term “we” refers to all the chefs in the same industry, particularly the rules of the trade shared by industry professionals and the implicit obligations shared collectively by the profession, i.e., the professional genre as defined by Clot (2006). The term “I” refers to the chef’s style (Clot, 2006), i.e., how each chef adopts and adapts the rules of the professional genre, thus using the technical and psychological instruments of the trade in a unique and innovative manner (Clot, 2010). In this way, personal style develops the professional genre. “Identity represents an individual’s answer to the question ‘who am I?’ or a collective’s answer to the question ‘who are we?’” (Pratt & Foreman, 2000, Horton, Bayerl, and Jacobs, 2014).

According to Fray and Picouleau (2010, p.75), professional identity hinges on three key points:

- the lived experience at work: the objective situation of work and its meaning to the individual;
- work relationships: the subjective perception of interpersonal relationships and the sense of belonging to informal groups;
- career paths and perceptions of the future: description of the different stages and changes of professional activity.

Chefs are strongly attached to their professional image. The significant constraints of their work nonetheless push many to leave their profession. Others, however, remain because their work is recognized (by society, by other chefs, by their kitchen staff) (Healy and Meagher, 2004), and also because they gain



personal satisfaction from doing a good job. In fact, a sense of recognition enables chefs to acquire resources that help them find their place in society. Chefs therefore show their personal skills through day-to-day experiences in the workplace and through the ways they meet routine challenges (Flottes, 2007). In this study, we will seek to understand how they view their relationships with their kitchen staff both as a way to achieve meaning and construct their identity and as a source of recognition at work.

2.2 A Professional Identity Oriented toward Teamwork: Management Skills

To serve food requires teamwork and, in the best case scenario, a work team (Caroly, 2010). Teamwork is a way of working together (Avila-Assunção, 1998; De la Garza and Weill-Fassina, 2000; Caroly and Barcellini, 2019) to distribute tasks, exchange knowledge, and formulate common rules. In fact, it is inconceivable to imagine a kitchen staff meeting their primary objective of providing service without the associated teamwork. Karsenty (2015) defines such activities as “trust management.” Indeed, the kitchen staff include several trades. Staff size generally depends on the establishment’s seating capacity and prestige (Table 1).

Table 1: Main Positions of Kitchen Staff

Head chef	Manages the kitchen staff, organizes the kitchen and manages the work
Sous or second chef	Assists the head chef and manages the <i>chefs de partie</i>
<i>Chef de partie</i>	Depending on the size of the establishment, is either a general cook or a specialized one (“fish chef,” “sauce chef,” etc.). Manages the <i>commis chefs</i> .
<i>Commis chef</i>	Executes the orders given by the <i>chef de partie</i> .
Dishwasher	Washes the kitchen equipment and dishes.
Intern, apprentice, kitchen assistant	Helps the <i>commis chefs</i> with simple tasks.



The variety of positions means that the style of management should be adapted to the different needs, positions and times of service. No compulsory training is required to become a chef. Some hold a CAP (*Certificat d'aptitudes professionnelles*), a BEP (*Brevet d'études professionnelles*), and/or a management degree, while others are self-taught. Because the profession offers opportunities for rapid advancement, it is not always possible to anticipate the training needs of new chefs. Each chef creates basically his or her own personal management style. The absence of formal management training can be prejudicial to the quality of life of kitchen staff members. Also, the practices used to manage a team often reflect the ideology of the "good professional" (Clot, 2010), which in this industry traditionally means an authoritarian style of management.

Managing a team means showing leadership, i.e., influencing the behaviour of one's employees so that they voluntarily strive to achieve the objectives of the organization and the group (Hackman and Walton, 1986; Bergeron, 1979). A chef is thus expected to direct, inspect, organize, empower, encourage and manage change among the kitchen staff (Dejeux, 2014). Conversely, the kitchen staff need to understand the chef's instructions: "It is not just a matter of giving an instruction but also to do so in such a way that the team understands what it means and re-appropriates the instruction as required by the situation" (ANACT, 2015, p. 4). The chef's place in the kitchen is complex because it is at the intersection of three needs: those of the restaurant's finance manager; those of the customers; and those of the staff. It is thus necessary to juggle financial, hygienic and quality goals, as well as those relating to the health of the chef and the team. Some goals may often be perceived as contradicting others.

In this study we will explore the nature of staff management activities from the chef's point of view by identifying management resources and constraints and by understanding how the activities determine professional identity. We will further aim to develop the concepts of personal style and professional genre and contribute to understanding of middle management skills and activities.



3. Methodology to Identify the Determinants of the Chef's Management Style

We used a qualitative method to collect data on how chefs perceive their style of management. Data collection is difficult in licensed restaurants, especially because chefs are often unavailable and because of the diverse range of restaurants. Interviews were used to collect data on management style and skills.

3.1 Data Collection

We conducted twenty 45-minute interviews with the chefs. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The researcher travelled to the chef's workplace at the end of the lunchtime service. The semi-structured interview covered six points:

- The chef's activity: resources, constraints, targets, etc.
- How the public views the job of chef.
- Managing as a chef: how a chef manages employees or a group and the related skills.
- Teamwork and, where appropriate, the work team that brings together the staff and/or co-workers.
- How the chef's activities affect his/her well-being.
- The chef's demographic characteristics.

To help answer the questions, we provided the chef with playing cards (cf. Figure 1) from the card game DIXIT (Roubira, 2016).

Figure 1 – Projective Cards



These coloured cards are printed with illustrations (no text) that depict impossible situations. An interviewee interprets each card and is thus led to more subjective answers. Several projective techniques are used in psychology (Guelfand, 2013). The one we used consisted of presenting the interviewee with ambiguous pictorial stimuli (Chabert and Anzieu, 2004). “The images are also keys for entering into what is real; they translate what we feel and enable us to talk about



it. The images function as mediators between, on the one hand, the body's state and, on the other hand, language" (Guelfand, 2013, p. 44). We thus used them to help the interviewees speak more freely. For Guelfand (op. cit., p. 46), the images serve six purposes:

1. Involvement, by evoking a profound past experience
2. Motivation, by motivating the interviewee to participate
3. Representation, by providing a concrete portrayal
4. Mediation, by promoting "essential mediation between the body and language"
5. Reflection, by contributing to reasoning and problem resolution
6. Anticipation, by portraying the goal to be achieved

This type of method puts "the interviewees in a new position in relation to the subject of what they are saying, inviting them to transpose it by means of analogical terms, to speak about it by means of imagery, to constantly break it down and put it back together until it is exhausted of all meaning and all possible emotions" (Guelfand, 2013, p. 206).

That method enables users to construct meaning from their experiences after the fact by attributing details and properties to the cards they choose. In our study, we asked the interviewees to express the subjective emotion or sentiment they felt when making a choice. The illustration on the card helped them elaborate on their personal and subjective experiences. It also provided touchstones and milestones to help the interviewee relive the situation and thus help us better "understand the complex behaviours or put knowledge modelling into practice to access the cognitive procedures and processes which underlie these behaviours. The method can then be used to identify the reasons for acting a certain way, the goals sought and the motivations that guide the action" (Brangier, Lancry & Louche, 2006, p. 24). Individually and collectively, the interviewees could better put their thoughts into words and express their interpretations of a theme or subject. This method, therefore, promotes active participation. Use of the cards "invokes relational, bodily, spatial and emotional intelligence, as well as linguistic and conceptual/logical intelligence" (Bélisle, 2014, p. 21).



Pre-Test of Cards

We made an initial selection from the 86 playing cards. Working in a group (two researchers in social sciences, a manager and a chef), we chose those cards that had a link to the job of chef. Finally, we chose five about management (cards 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) and four about occupational constraints (cards 1, 2, 3 and 4). The initial selection left us with 12 of the 86 cards. We then pre-tested the 12 cards with 10 chefs and kept 9 that were chosen at least seven times by those chefs. Table 2 presents the meanings of the selected cards.¹ The meanings were co-formulated with the members of the group who had preselected the cards.

Table 2: Meanings of Pre-Tested Cards

Card 1: Time	This card represents time, a chef's main enemy: the chef spends long hours in the kitchen and is always in a rush.
Card 2: Competition	This card represents competition. A chef who always needs to be at the top of the game. A chef who therefore needs to excel every day.
Card 3: Solitude	This card represents solitude. A head chef who is at the centre of the kitchen and has a hard time relying on others.
Card 4: Multi-tasking	This card represents versatility. A chef who wears different hats and needs to look in all directions to make sure everything is perfect.
Card 5: Protection	This card represents the head chef's protection of the staff, like a loving father. The chef strives to protect the entire staff and looks out for each of them.
Card 6: Authoritarian	This card represents authority. A chef who has a hard time delegating and is at the centre of the kitchen.
Card 7: Labour	This card represents the effort to do an arduous job.
Card 8: Appeal	This card represents the chef's appeal to the staff and also to customers. A chef needs to ensure not only that the staff believe in him/her and follow orders but also that the customers come back to eat at the restaurant.

¹ The titles of the cards were not given to the interviewees.



Card 9: Controlling	This card represents a chef who is positioned at the centre of the kitchen and who wants to control everything that happens in it. The chef delegates tasks while keeping control over everything.
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Actual Use of Cards during Interviews

As a prompt during the interview, we asked the chef three questions: “Which card or cards best represent for you the ‘profession of chef?’” (i.e., the profession in general); “which card or cards best represent for you ‘your daily activity’ as a chef?” (i.e., what you do day to day) and “what card or cards best represent for you what you would ‘ideally’ like to be doing as a chef?” (i.e., what you would like to be doing). It was not the card itself that interested us but what the chef would say about it. Then we analyzed the interview content to understand the chef’s profiles and skills.

3.2 Study Sample

Sample Characteristics

We booked the interview appointments directly (by visiting restaurants) or by phone, explaining that we wanted to understand the chef’s working conditions. To place the management activities within the broader context of all the chef’s activities, we intentionally did not present our research as being about the management practices of chefs with their kitchen staff. About 20 of the chefs we approached did not wish to take part in our study. Finally, we received consent from 20 male chefs of French origin working in the Rhône-Alpes Auvergne region, none of whom was an owner-manager. The chefs we interviewed were mostly hired on permanent contracts (except for interviewees #9 and #16, who were managers). They worked in café/bistro restaurants that specialized in French cuisine (ranging from 20 to 300 customers per day). The restaurants were small businesses (fewer than 15 employees). To be included in the sample, the chef had to oversee at least one employee on a daily basis (in our sample, the number of employees ranged from 1 to 10). The interviewees’ demographic characteristics are given in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Sample Characteristics**

N	Age	Training	Customers²	Staff	Exp. in cooking	Exp. in position	Exp. as chef	Wage	Hours / week
1	32	Management degree	60	4	10	5	4	1800	50
2	31	CAP (vocational training certificate)	60	5	16	3	3	2400	70
3	28	BEP (vocational diploma)	300	9	2	<1	<1	1600	45
4	39	BEP (vocational diploma)	60	5	12	<1	<1	2500	50
5	29	Institut Paul Bocuse	60	1	9	1	1 year	2000	38
6	32	Self-taught	60	2	10	<1	<1	1650	40
7	32	BEP (vocational diploma)	100	10	11	1	3	1500	50
8	40	Self-taught	100	7	16	7	9	2000	41
9	43	CAP (vocational training certificate)	140	3	27	10	10	950	60
10	31	CAP (vocational training certificate)	80	5	14	2	2	2235	60
11	32	BEP (vocational diploma)	170	8	18	1	5	2200	60
12	27	Self-taught	20	1	5	<1	4	1500	35
13	43	Institut Paul Bocuse	30	2	24	1	20	Minimum wage	60
14	50	CAP (vocational training certificate)	60	2	35	17	25	1800	38

²Average number of customers per day



1 5	48	CAP (vocational training certificate)	100	2	20	20	20	1700	44
1 6	37	Master's degree in economics	25	1	4	4	4	2500	45
1 7	27	CAP (vocational training certificate)	80	6	9	2	<1	2200	50
1 8	32	BEP (vocational diploma)	45	2	7	5	4	1700	45
1 9	37	Self-taught	52	4	12	10	2	1380	39
2 0	22	BEP (vocational diploma)	62	3	6	6	<1	1550	40

Table 3 shows a variety of educational backgrounds , ranging from self-taught (4) to a CAP (6) and to a BEP (6). Two of the chefs had even attended the Institut Paul Bocuse. The chefs we interviewed had been mostly trained in how to prepare food rather than in how to manage employees. Furthermore, the sample was relatively young with a mean age of 34.6 years. The mean length of time in their current job was 4.9 years, as a chef 6.3 years and as a worker in a kitchen 13.35 years. They had not recently joined the profession and were thus probably better able to think objectively and have a better idea about not only the specific constraints of their line of work but also the resources needed to overcome them. The mean wage hovered around 1,850 euros for a mean work week of 48 hours (39 hours reported). Table 3 shows that the chef's wage was not contingent on the number of working hours per week or even the number of customers, the skill level or the status within the company. There does not seem to be an industry standard, although the collective agreement specifies minimum wages for the different positions. Lastly, five of the chefs we interviewed were living with a partner, and eight had children.

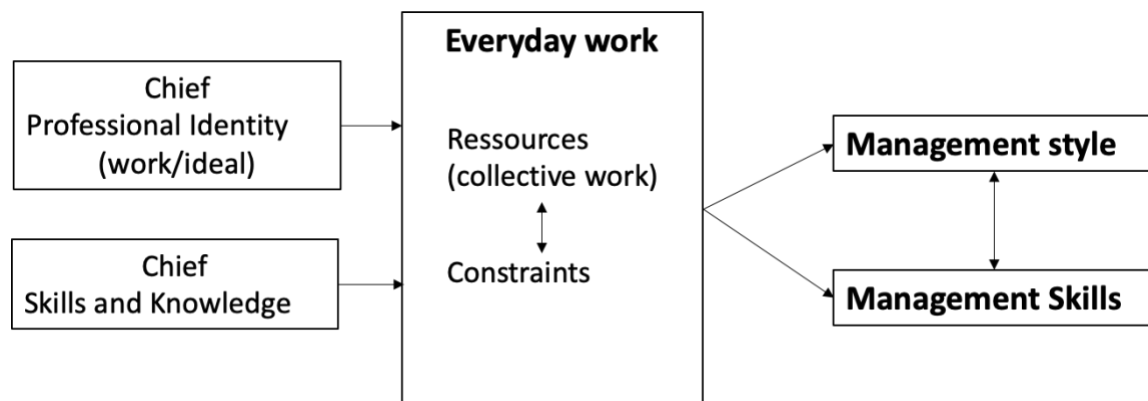
In the sample, ten of the chefs worked in the industry out of love for cooking: *"It's a vocation. It's the profession that chose us. It's a hard job, physically, the*

hours, family life” (chef #12). Nine of them did so because the restaurant was a family business, and two had gotten into that line of work by chance. Fourteen said they wanted to open their own food-service business in the next five to ten years.

3.3 Data Analysis

We analyzed the interview data by theme (Bardin, 2013). In particular, we wanted to study how the chefs perceived their management activities. We will focus here on such activities and not on all the data we collected (cf. themes in section 2.1). Our focus will be on the profession’s resources and constraints with respect to teamwork and the chef’s style of management, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Resources and Constraints of the Chef’s Management Activities



Four cards were most often chosen by our chefs³ (cf. Table 4) when interviewed about the routine work they performed daily (“work” box), about their management style (“performed” box) and about what they would love to be doing in an ideal world (“ideal” box). They never chose the cards #6 AUTHORITARIAN and #9 CONTROLLING.

³Cards chosen at least four times by the interviewees.

**Table 4: Frequency of Cards Selected by Interviewees**

Cards chosen	Work	Performed	Ideal
Card #1: Time	7	2	0
Card #2: Competition	4	1	5
Card #3: Solitude	2	2	0
Card #4: Multi-tasking	5	3	2
Card #5: Protection	5	12	10
Card #6: Authoritarian	0	0	0
Card #7: Labour	3	1	0
Card #8: Seduction	1	2	2
Card #9: Controlling	0	0	0

For each question we asked during the semi-structured interview we transcribed the verbal responses into Excel spreadsheets. For example, for the question on the chef's management approach we created a three-column table showing (1) the number of people, (2) the management style described and (3) the verbal responses. To know in which box to put the verbal response, we used the classification presented by Bergeron (1979) and Dejeux (2014).

4. How Chefs Perceived Their Management Activities

First, we will describe how they perceived their work and management activities. Second, we will present their professional identities by analyzing their answers about the "ideal" job. Third, we will report how they perceived the ability to build a cohesive team as a valuable resource in their skillset.



4.1 Differences in Perception between Imagined, Performed and Idealized Work of Chefs

A Chef's Job on a Daily Basis

To describe their tasks on a daily basis, the chefs chose four images: card #1 TIME (7); card #4 MULTI-TASKING (5); card #5 PROTECTION (5); and card #2 COMPETITION (4). Their perceptions varied. Most of the chefs were concerned about either their kitchen staff (i.e., concern for their well-being) or their work constraints (e.g., deadlines and unpredictable environmental factors), while striving to maintain high standards. Cards #6 AUTHORITARIAN and #9 CONTROLLING were not chosen to represent their profession; in fact, the vision of our chefs veered more toward a protective style rather than an authoritarian one, unlike the style of previous generations: *“Let’s be honest. There is a new generation of chefs, and practices are changing. Chucking waitresses into the washing machine is a thing of the past”* (chef #1).

Being a Chef in Today’s Workplace: Emergence of Management Styles

Several management styles emerged from our thematic analysis. We categorized them as follows, in line with Racine (2022) :

Robin Hood

Fourteen of the chefs felt that they were equitable leaders who did not distinguish between the different ranks of staff members: *“Each job is important. We form a team”* (chef #5). We call this management style Robin Hoodism. To achieve a common goal efficiently and to ensure quality service, they felt it was important to take part in all the tasks: *“I’ve always mopped the floor with my guys”* (chef #1). The role of each staff member was valued.

Sports Coach

Seven of the chefs perceived their role as akin to that of sports coaches. Team members should be constantly motivated to surpass their limits: *“When I’m managing early on, I get to know them, and then I push them to their limits until they snap, and when I’ve seen their limits, I stop and adjust”* (chef #2); *“I don’t see*



myself as a shrink, but I listen a lot and try to draw the best out of the person” (chef #17).’

Paternalism

Six of the chefs had a more paternalistic style: *“I look after my chefs as if they were my children”* (chef #2). Some identified the daily sacrifices made for their team: *“Me, I was always last in line, especially when it came to scheduling days off”* (chef #1). An affectionate, or even paternalistic, dimension is significant in their activity: *“You form emotional attachments. Given the constraints, we cannot offer amazing salaries, so we make up for it by forming emotional ties”* (chef #11). Nine interviewees saw their position as an important link in the chain of preventing occupational risks: *“Someone who protects their team, never doubts it, ensures that everyone is confident, someone who needs to calm everyone and have a solution for everything”* (chef #17). They also provided their staff with a safe environment: *“You need to know how to reassure others and make them feel secure. That they feel they can count on you. If the guys know they can count on you, and you have a solution to all their problems, then the guys will trust you, and you manage best in an environment of trust”* (chef #10). The chefs thus identified occupational health and safety as an integral and daily part of their job. They were aware of the benefits of working with a healthy team.

Training Style

Twelve of the chefs explained that they were particularly attentive to training their staff. Several methods can be identified. Eight of the chefs tried to provide their *commis chefs* with the freedom to manoeuvre in their day-to-day work and thus challenge themselves and come up with new recipes: *“The goal is to give them the wherewithal to create their own recipes. I try to help them grow as fast as possible. No one did that for me, and that really hindered my development”* (chef #2). Seven of the twelve chefs devoted time to kitchen or debrief meetings: *“I hold debrief meetings at the end of service to see how we can avoid committing certain mistakes or wasting time”* (chef #3). Unsurprisingly, the same seven chefs described themselves as very rigorous and demanding (7). On the other hand, nine chefs averred that they lacked the time to train their team as they would like:



“I repeat it once, twice after I shouted at them. You try to start from their level but after a while you give up if they don't understand. You need to be efficient quickly” (chef #9). There is, therefore, an ambiguity between the fundamental value of work and the actions the chefs managed to implement.

Professional Identity of Chef and the ‘Ideal Job’

To represent their ideal job, none of the chefs chose cards referring to occupational risks (TIME, LABOUR and SOLITUDE). They could thus truly cast their minds to an ideal job without all the constraints of their profession, an idealized vision that implies they had succeeded in managing the associated difficulties. Once the work had been organized and under control (TIME/LABOUR) by performing multiple skills (MULTI-TASKING) or by withdrawing from the group (SOLITUDE), they imagined their ideal job as one that would focus on team management (PROTECTION) and success (COMPETITION, APPEAL).

The chefs would thus like to nurture their teams while upholding a high standard of performance. It was important to be not only the best on the team but also acknowledged by one's customers and peers. That need for recognition corresponds to the dimension of “others” in professional identity.

4.2 How Chefs Perceive Their Managerial Skills

Are Chefs Good Managers?

Twelve of the chefs considered themselves to be good managers: *“I've never had any problem; generally we keep in touch, and I get to see them outside of work. If they end up being good, I will have succeeded”* (chef #6). Five of them, however, said there was still much work to be done: *“For me it's the hardest thing in the kitchen. It's the thorn in our side... You don't become a chef in a day either”* (chef #2); *“I think I'm too nice. I avoid conflict too often. I don't come back quick enough to put people in their place”* (chef #3). Overall, the chefs gave conflicting answers on how they could improve their management approaches (ranging from insecurity to the need to trust their team more readily).



Managerial Skills Acquired on the Job

Eleven of the chefs explained that they had never received any management training and had essentially learned on the job: *“You learn day by day how to manage a team; sometimes I think I’ve gone too far, and I’d question myself”* (chef #4). Five of them had been trained on various management tools (orders, schedules), while another five had been fully trained: *“Managing relationships with others, how to speak to them, what to say to them, holding briefings and debriefs. Setting goals, setting your own targets... Learning how to be fair in evaluations...”* (chef #11). For those who had received it, management training had taken place at cooking school or during work for a large restaurant chain.

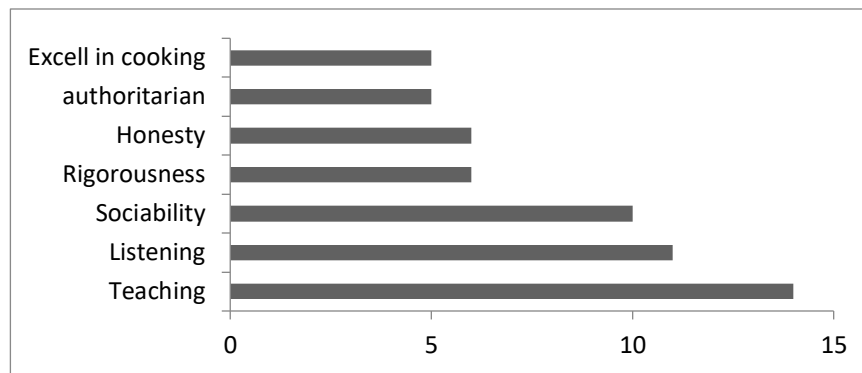
The general lack of management training was all the more frustrating when there was no clear management model to follow. The chefs we interviewed asserted that they did not wish to reproduce the management style of the chefs who had managed them (16). *“Sometimes he would give you a chance: you would make a dish, but then he’d throw it at you and say you’re useless”* (chef #1); *“If I shout, that stresses people out and creates palpable tension. That’s exhausting for everybody”* (chef #10). Consequently, they tended to construct their own management models that deliberately ran counter to the approaches of the chefs they had worked under.

Lack of Management Training Highlights a Need for Interpersonal Skills

Several ‘generic’ skills were identified as necessary for a competent chef (cf. Figure 3).



Figure 3: Skills Required for Being a Good Chef



Most of the chefs used their image of a good manager to define the desired qualities they wished to be taught (14 of the chefs): *“It’s someone who knows how to help others develop, make them grow by bringing them together”* (chef #11). The other skills they mentioned can be grouped under the heading of “soft skills”: openness and capacity for listening (11); sociability (10); and rigorousness and honesty (6). Lastly, of the skills related directly to a particular management style (authoritarian) and the work of the profession, “being an excellent cook” was mentioned as a requirement for being a good chef.

4.3 The Team: A Resource for the Chef?

Developing the Team by Delegating Tasks in a Climate of Trust

Working as a chef requires knowing how to delegate in order to achieve the common team goal, i.e., ensuring quality service: *‘I don’t know why but it’s like the army... You’re all together, you have a goal, and you feel more united than you ever have been’* (chef #17). This is possible only if the chef trusts the team: *“It’s a tough job with few staff members you can trust. You give your trust just once. Because if it’s destroyed, it gets complicated afterwards”* (chef #3). In this respect, most of the chefs explained that they had learned to depend on their team and to delegate: *“Over time, I realized it wouldn’t work if it were just me”* (chef #11). This did not keep them from wanting to inspect the work done by their team: *“From A to Z, after that I’m always there to check. That’s my job. I demonstrate and then I delegate—that’s the point of a chef—and then I check”* (chef #12).



A United Team Viewed as a Second Family

The chefs saw a strong sense of team spirit among their kitchen staff. On several occasions, the chefs confessed they regarded some of them as family because they worked with them for so much of the week (7): *“I’ve known teams where you had the impression of being part of a family... You spend so much time with these people that it creates a sense of family. You trust one another, and you try to help each other outside work”* (chef #10). The chef assumes the role of “protector” within the team: *“You work so much that you need to like working together; you need a bond between the staff and managers. It’s paternal to be close to one’s team, to be the protector”* (chef #7). There was a genuine devotion to the team, mostly seen in the fluid boundary between professional and personal life. Some chefs even felt guilty about going on a holiday or taking a few days off because they were passing on the workload to their colleagues: *“We’re a team, and if I don’t come in, it’s my team who suffers, not the customers”* (chef #5).

5. The Job of Chef: between Being a Manager and Building an Identity

Analysis of the interviews revealed a number of management styles and the perceived benefits and constraints of management activities.

5.1 When Perceptions of Work Develop Professional Identity

Constraints Identified by Chefs for Management Activities

The chefs were unable to develop their management style with the knowledge learned during their training. In fact, only five of them had received management training. Similarly, they were seldom able to draw on their own career path or experiences to develop their management style, since they had worked under an authoritarian style of management that they were determined not to repeat. A possible reason may be the range of career paths before they went into the food-service industry. Lastly, although they attached much importance to staff training in their day-to-day work, they also regarded it as a source of frustration



because they often lacked the time to train their staff properly. “Experience at work” had a strong impact on their profession’s identity (Fray & Picouveau, 2010). Indeed, the chefs mainly chose the cards TIME (1) and MULTI-TASKING (4) as components of their profession’s image. They perceived their profession in terms of the “objective situation of work” (Fray & Picouveau, 2010) more than in terms of their relationships with their staff or their career path. How the chefs entered the profession differed considerably from one chef to another, a possible reason why their professional identity as a chef was not formed by their career path. Manager-staff relations were valued mainly in the reality of their job and in the ideal of their profession. Those relationships were, therefore, less foundational for professional identity, but they did represent resources for performance, on the one hand, and for continuity in the profession, on the other. Another reason was the generational turnover mentioned by several interviewees: the more traditional authoritarian styles of the past are giving way to a more protective style of management.

Resources Identified by Chefs for Management Activities

The main resource of the chefs was their sense of belonging to a team; they regarded themselves as part of the team and sought to treat each member equitably. The other resource was their role as trainer. Twelve of the chefs told us they were enthusiastic about passing on their vocation and giving their staff members one-on-one training. Such training requires two skills: being an effective teacher, and being a good listener.

5.2. Between Teamwork and Workplace Identity

Teamwork, like the work team, seems to be a leading resource of chefs. Once a food service has been organized, and its components brought under control, the head chef’s activities are geared toward managing relationships within the team. Teamwork is prioritized and directed toward a common goal of providing a service that meets a high standard. The chefs seek the most efficient way of working, which appears to tend toward cooperation (De la Garza, 1995). Help and assistance seem to rest mainly on the chefs’ shoulders. In this respect, they did



not view the work climate among staff members as being competitive. A manager can thus contribute to the work team's wellbeing by giving meaning to their work (Weick, 1993) and by helping strengthen their commitment to work (Desgourdes & Leroy, 2019).

Lastly, the chefs mentioned the importance of holding debriefs to solve any problems that might occur during service and to find possible solutions rapidly. An immediate response not only helped protect the team members' sense of wellbeing but also united the team and strengthened its team spirit. Here we are entering a virtuous circle: strong team cohesion contributes to the health of individual members, which further strengthens team cohesion. The debriefs mostly happened when the teams ate together. They took place most often on the company's premises and provided the employees with an opportunity to come together and discuss any problems on the job, the different ways of working among staff members and the conditions for implementing group rules. The employees might even talk about and anticipate problems that could arise before the start of service. This forum was therefore an important space not only for working together but also for creating a work team as a foundation for teamwork (Caroly, 2010). The chefs told us they would speak about their job with friends in the same profession but rarely with members of their kitchen staff because of the difference in hierarchical level. The chefs mentioned the importance of visiting at least one culinary trade fair a year. Such events provided an opportunity not only to find new products and business partners but also to share "quality time" with colleagues and construct the "us" dimension of the profession.

5.3. Avenues for Future Research

We identified several limitations while conducting our research, in particular the sample size (20 chefs), the gender of the participants, and the absence of interviews with the entire kitchen staff.

It would be interesting to interview the staff members and observe the chefs at work in order to identify the times when they assisted each other. It would also be



interesting to examine the locations where a chef would meet with the staff to determine how they were supposed to relate to each other.

Current data could be analyzed to determine how the chef's perceptions were affected by personal variables (age, experience, initial training) and organizational variables (size of staff, size of meal service).

It would be interesting to determine how the image of the food-service establishment affected how chefs built their identity and how that image affected the "race to get the Michelin star," where relevant, and the related management style. Indeed, Mériot (2002) showed that cooks who work in canteens are less satisfied than those who work in restaurants despite generally better working conditions. The type and image of the restaurant in which a chef works could indeed affect the chef's well-being and level of job satisfaction.

It would also be interesting to identify the different chef profiles and their related characteristics in order to identify the "tips and tricks" of the profession and pass them on to future generations. The aim should be to keep as much in touch as possible with current practices in the profession (Boccaro and Delgoulet, 2015). As shown by France's 2018 bill to reform continuing vocational training, such training should not be reduced to simply learning "on the job." Nor should it be kept separate from work. The reform has therefore brought an end to a long tradition of mistrust, the aim being to relieve the employee of production obligations and facilitate learning of knowledge and transferable skills.

Other avenues of research could include interactions between chefs from different food-service establishments. Future researchers might want to explore different forms and criteria of peer-related work recognition. One could also investigate potential meeting places for chefs, such as culinary trade fairs and the like (but not those designed to pit chefs against each other in competition, as in cooking contests). Finally, one could identify any existing controversies within the profession.



6. Conclusion

As we mentioned, the profession of chef is one of the most arduous to perform both physically and psychologically. This reality is seen in the absenteeism rate, the staff turnover and the difficulty in recruiting competent staff. The food-service industry is in crisis at a time when demand is rising. Also, paradoxically, it is being fantasized in the media, and more and more students are choosing careers therein. Measures are needed to keep them interested, particularly by protecting occupational health and safety. One measure would be to promote a horizontal style of management and develop collective intelligence (authors, 2021). Our study shows that managers of small teams experience a gap between ideal work and real day-to-day work, with the result that they may become demotivated and fall back on an authoritarian style of management. A more horizontal style is shown by our study and by Pelletier-Bochard et al. (2022): the manager provides emotional support, facilitates team cohesion, adopts supportive attitudes and gives recognition, even in a hostile and turbulent work environment.

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