

# SUPPORTING TOMORROW'S LEADERS

## Mentorship Brings Concessions Excellence To The Fore

BY SALLY KRAL



**Above:** The Airport Minority Advisory Council facilitates mentorship within the aviation industry in a variety of ways, with both virtual and in-person events that map career options for members.



Labor retention has always been an important part of running a successful business, but it's become a particularly important topic of conversation in the years since the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. Beyond offering a competitive wage and benefits, it's crucial to identify and support young talent within a company to ensure that they not only stick with the company but also remain a valuable and supported member of the team.

"Teamwork is the key to improved employee motivation and working as a team ensures everyone feels valued and plays a part in achieving a goal," notes Peter Amaro, CEO and co-founder of **Master ConcessionAir**, adding that creating a positive corporate and team culture environment has been an important way the company boosts employee morale. "Plus, we allow employees to express

their creative side and bring their ideas to projects, and we always express gratitude by recognizing their good work with rewards, which gives our employees something to work toward."

**High Flying Foods** has studied the work style of younger generations. Maritza Haller, vice president of culture, says that they've learned that communication styles, motivations and expectations differ among Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z employees.

"Based on our findings, we've been able to tailor our recruitment, training, communication and development processes to ensure we retain our best team members," she says. "Young talent is eager for feedback and recognition, and they need to understand the 'why' we do things the way we do; spending the time to meet these needs has had a significant return."



**Below:** (Left to Right) Ricky Smith, chair, AMAC Board of Directors and CEO, Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport; Lauren Miller, director, business development, Miller3 Consulting; John D. Clark, senior vice president, business development, airports and airlines, SSP America; Mori Russell, Southeast regional director, AMAC Board of Directors and vice chair, AMAC Emerging Leaders Committee, and business development director, Concessions International



**Right:** Master ConcessionAir may not have a formal mentorship program, but mentoring and fostering a culture of growth and development are emphasized in the company's vision. (Pictured: one of the company's recently hired interns, Verenice Jimenes, who works directly with vice president of business development LeMonica Hakeem).

In addition to feedback and recognition, mentorship is a key element of motivating young talent to realize their full potential. At many companies, mentorship is provided through formal programs that pair a more established employee with a newer one.

“In any industry, mentoring is critical to enable younger or less experienced professionals to learn without duplicating mistakes others have had to overcome. Given the airport industry’s unique nature, exchanging experiences through mentoring and other networking arrangements is even more imperative,” notes Andre Titus, senior manager of programs and operations for **Airport Minority Advisory Council (AMAC)**. “Often, advice exchanged through a mentoring relationship could spell the difference between success and failure.”

Indeed, bridging the gap between professionals newer to the aviation industry and those leading it goes a long way in strengthening concessions teams and inspiring younger generations to commit to the industry long-term.

### Formal And Informal Programs

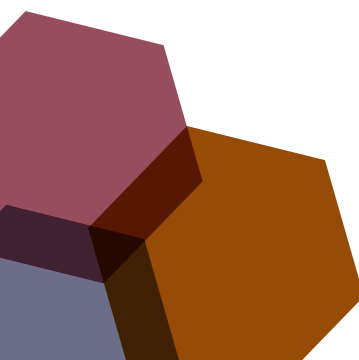
Master ConcessionAir may not have a formal mentorship program, but mentoring is baked into the company. Amaro notes that fostering a culture of growth and development is a major part of the vision.

“The way we connect with our associates is by ensuring we give them a voice and a

vote; we pay attention to what they need to say and what they are actually saying,” he says. “Providing an open ear to employees helps you find out what is going wrong or right in the workplace and essentially helps better the work environment for everyone. Additionally, we always try to motivate younger associates by introducing them to different kind of tasks so they can identify themselves with the roles they feel more confident in, while also respecting their decision-making if that means to stay in a role for the time they think it’s best for them prior to experiencing something new.”

The mentoring program at **Paradies Lagardère** was most recently updated in 2021 with the primary goal of delivering personalized guidance and support to associates to help them navigate their career journeys effectively, acquire necessary skills and adapt to new roles.

“Such shadowing includes regular one-on-one meetings and engagements to discuss career goals and chart out development plans,” says Patricia Crosby, vice president of human resources for the company. “Additionally, ad-hoc opportunities for skill-building, such as attending relevant seminars, conferences or workshops are explored. The program creates an open and supportive environment that encourages communication, recognizes talent, and provides opportunities for advancement and learning.”





**Above Left:** OTG takes a comprehensive approach to employee mentoring and retention, including a talent review process wherein OTG identifies high-potential individuals and invites them to participate in the Advancing Leaders Program (recent graduates pictured).



**Above, Right:** OTG offers professional development programs like the company's annual Career Development Week (events pictured), the OTG University learning management system offering online courses and job aids, and CareerGPS, an interactive career pathing platform that assists users in visualizing potential career progression.

In addition, all Paradis Lagardere employees work with their supervisors on specific annual goals that are reviewed twice a year, and leadership conducts “talent review discussions” with high-performing employees to chart those individuals’ potential for growth and areas of opportunity.

“We then actively encourage these individuals to create personal development plans and offer them the chance to participate in programs such as Speakeasy, Toastmasters and other professional development classes,” Crosby notes. “Furthermore, we invite many high potential individuals to our Annual Management Seminar and other educational events to broaden their skill sets and knowledge base. By implementing these strategies, we aim to not only identify promising young talent but also provide them with the resources and opportunities needed to thrive and grow within our organization.”

OTG similarly takes a comprehensive approach to employee mentoring and retention, including individual development plans and a talent review process wherein OTG identifies high-potential individuals. The company invites them to participate in the Advancing Leaders Program, featuring six tailored coaching sessions conducted by **Here and Now Consulting**. In addition, the company offers professional development programs like the company’s annual Career Development Week, the OTG University learning management system offering online courses and job aids; and

CareerGPS, a recently launched interactive career pathing platform that assists users in visualizing potential career progression across the company. CareerGPS is currently available for culinary positions, with plans to expand to all OTG positions in the next year, according to CEO Rick Blatstein.

Blatstein adds that in 2024 OTG will introduce a formal mentor/protégé program, the details of which were still being finalized at press time. Also in 2024, OTG will launch two new initiatives: the Road to Sous Chef Program and the Bar Bootcamp Program. The former is tailored to help crewmembers become skill-ready for leadership opportunities in the role of sous chef, and the latter provides hands-on training to crewmembers looking to move into the role as bartender with no prior experience.

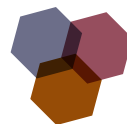
High Flying Foods’ mentorship program was scheduled to launch in December 2023. “We are very proud of this program, the goal of which is twofold: provide opportunity for our next generation of leaders to be mentored by our experienced leaders, and to create growth opportunities for our mentors to be stretched and challenged in their roles,” Haller says. “We selected our mentors based on their skills, strengths and passion for helping others. The process of pairing each mentor with their mentee was carefully crafted to ensure the success of the program and that both mentor and mentee grow together in this relationship.”

At **Delaware North**, professional development events and panels, internal



communication and individualized coaching and mentoring are all vital in encouraging career mobility for promising team members within the company, notes Michelle Goad, vice president of talent development. She adds that Delaware North regularly hosts virtual panels including the Lean into Leadership series and quarterly CHEFS Talks that feature company leaders, external suppliers and client partners.

CHEFS Talks is part of Delaware North’s formal mentorship program for its culinary team, called Culinary & Hospitality Excellence for Future Success (CHEFS). “This year-long program pairs promising culinary talent with one of Delaware North’s accomplished executive chefs, who serves as a chef mentor,” says Lou Piuggi, vice president of culinary and food and beverage development for Delaware North. “CHEFS, which was created in collaboration with the **Culinary Institute of America**, includes an intentional focus on inclusion and creating opportunities for a diverse cadre of participants. The goal of this program is to provide hands-on mentorship and specialized training, all with the aim of



elevating mentees to sous chef positions and helping them achieve relevant certification from the Culinary Institute of America.”

Piuggi adds that since launching the CHEFS program in June 2022, there have been 18 graduates, 12 of whom are currently in the process of earning the Culinary Institute of America’s ProChef I or ProChef Baking & Pastry certification. “Our next group of graduates will begin their certification process in the coming months, and we also have another 20-plus emerging culinarians beginning the program in January 2024,” he says.

## Outside Support

Delaware North’s collaboration with the Culinary Institute of America to develop the CHEFS program has been a major boon to the program, Piuggi notes, as it has helped generate significant enthusiasm among team members. “As we further expand our program and offerings, we remain committed to seeking guidance and insights from both industry experts and relevant organizations when the need arises,” he adds.

External partners, whether within the aviation industry or outside, can be excellent resources for concessionaires as they develop their mentorship programs.

Blatstein notes that in addition to partnering with diversity, equity and inclusion organizations for unconscious bias trainings, OTG also works with external consultants for coaching to guide and support crewmembers. “We collaborate with **Gartner** for best practices and strategy ideation to equip crewmembers with the tools to make informed decisions and enhance performance,” he says.

Paradies Lagardère has established a strategic partnership with **Study.com** to offer a Scholars Program tailored to empower working associates who do not yet possess a bachelor’s degree to progress from a supervisor position to an assistant manager position and above.

“There are currently 18 associates enrolled in the program with six having received their degrees recently; this initiative reflects our commitment to facilitating career growth and education and ensuring every associate has the opportunity to reach their full potential,” Crosby says. “Additionally, we have great relationships with our airport partners and local ACDBE partners so we often work with them to connect with community organizations on recruitment

efforts. Similarly, we’re big supporters of AMAC and their work to develop new business partners into our industry.”

Mentorship is certainly a huge part of AMAC’s vision. “Trailblazers established AMAC, so it’s in our DNA to continue to clear paths and share what we’ve learned with the next generation, which can be accomplished through mentorship,” Titus says.

When the pandemic brought the world to a halt in 2020, AMAC quickly developed a way to remain engaged with members with the launch of Legends & Leapers, a monthly virtual conversation between an aviation industry legend and an emerging leader designed to showcase the commonalities and differences in perspective on the aviation industry.

“AMAC Legends & Leapers was curated to create a virtual space for an exchange of experiences and beliefs based on the notion that legends - long-standing and/or seasoned professionals - and leapers - emerging and/or notable professionals - may have a divergence of sentiments on significant topics impacting the aviation and aerospace industries,” notes Ricky D. Smith, chair of the AMAC Board of Directors and CEO of **Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport (BWI)**. “The series builds on robust networking and mentorship opportunities through AMAC conferences, meetings, and other in-person and virtual gatherings.”

Smith adds that AMAC Legends & Leapers participants frequently reconnect with AMAC members or series audience members to provide or seek advice on various opportunities and challenges.

“Mentorship is the reason many of us are here today,” Titus notes. “The aviation industry is such a niche industry to be in, particularly as a minority. Many are unaware of such a wide array of career paths in aviation but can chart a path thanks to the knowledge and guidance from several industry legends. This is not a unique experience either. You will find that many AMAC members share similar stories of how mentorship helped them through their careers.”

**Below:** To boost camaraderie and connections across its foodservice businesses, Delaware North hosts two annual culinary challenges bringing together over 30 team members from culinary, food and beverage positions—from hourly cooks to executive chefs—for a live friendly competition. Chefs and F&B leaders from Delaware North’s Travel operations at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, Charleston International Airport and Syracuse Hancock International Airport (pictured) participated in the last challenge held in summer 2023.





## Results Speak For Themselves

Evidence of the success of a company's mentorship program, whether formal or informal, can be found in the rate and likelihood of internal promotion. At companies with a strong focus on mentorship, frontline workers can, and do, work their way up to corporate positions.

"At OTG, opportunities are not limited by function or location, and we frequently promote our operations-based crewmembers into corporate support functions - to date we've promoted over 251 crewmembers" Blatstein says. "This approach allows us to leverage the skills, knowledge and dedication of our frontline crewmembers and further strengthen the connection between our corporate and operational teams."

A similar approach is ingrained in Master ConcessionAir's talent management strategy, Amaro notes. "We regularly engage with our frontline workers to identify individuals with the potential and skills necessary to excel in corporate positions, and we actively seek opportunities to promote from within," he says. "We recognize that our frontline employees often possess valuable insights and a deep understanding of our operations, making them ideal candidates for corporate roles. Therefore, we continuously assess and promote individuals based on their qualifications, performance and potential, while also providing the necessary training and support to help them succeed in these transitions."

Brian Kumrow, director of operations support for Delaware North Travel, notes that chef development is a key priority for the company. "In my own experience, I started as a sous chef in Delaware North's gaming division and was developed and promoted to executive sous and then executive chef, and I was able to obtain chef certification through the American Culinary Federation," he says. "Delaware North's diverse subsidiaries opened up more opportunities, and as executive chef at **Austin Bergstrom International Airport (AUS)** I was able to work with the corporate team, the CEO and vice president of food and beverage on a development plan to qualify for a corporate position. Within a year, I applied for and obtained a new role as director of operations support.

"My story is not exclusive, as I know many others who have moved from the



**Above, Right:** Concessions companies that place heavy emphasis on mentorship tend to have employees that not only stick with the company but rise through the ranks. Amy Loll (pictured above) started her career with High Flying Foods as a restaurant manager at San Diego International Airport and in September joined the executive team as the company's culinary director. Nikki T. Harland (pictured right), who spent a good portion of her career in Paradies Lagardère's human resources department, is now COO.



frontlines and into a role with corporate," Kumrow continues. "They range from food and beverage leadership roles to positions in accounting, information technology and human resources."

Haller of High Flying Foods notes that since the corporate office is one of the hubs where the company's culture is developed, all crewmembers should be able to engage with corporate, and vice versa. "We invite our restaurant teams to spend time with our leadership team and we also bring our non-operations corporate team members - such as accounting, human resources, creative and legal - to the field to dine at our restaurants," she says. "We've fostered this interaction for years and have received empowering outcomes from the connections made from these cross-exposure experiences."

One such outcome was the opportunity for one of High Flying Food's cashiers at **San Francisco International Airport (SFO)** to complete an internship at the corporate office while working on his accounting degree, Haller adds. Another recent example is the promotion of Amy Loll, who started in the field as a restaurant manager at **San Diego International Airport (SAN)** and developed through the ranks to general manager then assistant director of operations. In September she joined the executive team as High Flying Foods' culinary director.

At Paradies Lagardère there are several middle and upper management leaders in the organization that were promoted from

within largely thanks to the company's mentoring programs, Crosby says, adding that an internal program called TAP, which the company has had for nearly a decade, also plays a major role.

TAP involves general managers and assistant general managers from across North America being brought to Paradies Lagardère's Atlanta headquarters twice annually to meet with directors and vice presidents for discussions on their desire to grow, assessments of their performances and areas of focus in the immediate future.

"Special projects and mentors can be assigned to help these individuals showcase their talents, which exposes the employee to new work experiences and also allows management to gain a great perspective on an individual's ability to make the next step in their career," Crosby says. "The program has been a great success with many zone manager-level staff growing one or two levels in their career progression. Some of these individuals are now leading large retail or restaurant operations in some of the busiest airports in North America or even overseeing entire districts with multiple airport operations under their leadership.

An outstanding example is our own Nikki T. Harland, who spent a good portion of her career in the human resources field and is now our COO," Crosby continues. "It's truly impressive to witness the growth of these exceptional employees who just needed a bit of support to begin reaching their potential." ■