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How to Turn Good Managers Into Great Leaders

by Jay Goldstein and Chris Tripoli

You cannot operate a successful restaurant without both good management and good leadership, even if it has to be provided by the man or woman in the mirror: you.

For smaller operators, that might be fine in the early years of business, but few restaurant owners want to spend their careers as restaurant managers. Unless you are simply trying to create a job for yourself, you need to either hire good management talent or at least cultivate management skills among current staff members.

Upon reaching such a point, where you have been able to develop a strong manager or team of managers, you are to be congratulated. More than likely it was an exhausting process in the selection and/or training; however, it means that the day-to-day operation of the business is relatively smooth. It also means that you have time to work on larger issues in the business, such as strategy, marketing and business development. That takes you to the issue of "leadership."



As a restaurant owner, you will most likely never entirely be relieved of the role of "leader." For most operators, the dream of retiring to a tropical island to collect a monthly check while someone else runs the show back home is just that - a dream. That said, the growth and sustainability of your operation may be limited by your ability to cultivate other leaders in the organization. These are managers who not only can keep the machinery of the business functioning well, but also can assist you in motivating staff, promoting the business, dealing with crises and, in general, work "on" the business.

If you are at the point at which you have strong management talent, you might want to consider how to take them to the next step as business leaders. In this article, we will explore how to move your managers along in their development to this next level.

First, What is a Manager?

We all have a sense of the word "manager"; you may well ask, why belabor discussion with a detailed analysis of what defines a manager? Consider the various ways people approach the position. Depending on their experience, education and role models, every manager brings a different style to the job.

What is your expectation of your managers? Consider the following perspective.

By definition, a manager is a person who conducts business and directs a team. It is well worth noting that it's someone who directs and not necessarily leads. If you have one or more effective managers helping you run your business, they are actively involved in the day-to-day operations of the business and direct the team to achieve the results you as the owner want. They are working "in" the business rather than working "on" the business. Moreover, they should be helping you remain focused on working "on" the business. A good manager does not relieve the owners from being involved or, in other words, from "leading" the business.

What managers do is keep the operation running smoothly. They are engaged in the large and small details, such as checking guest counts with the host/hostess, seating guests, helping the busser, and running food from the kitchen to help the servers. These managers will check for background music to see that it is set at the correct level, check lighting to be certain it is just right, regularly visit the restrooms to ensure they are clean, and many times they are placed in the kitchen during peak times to help expedite orders, set up the trays, time the tickets and check the quality and appearance of the plates. During off-peak periods you may find these managers receiving deliveries, placing orders to purveyors, interviewing applicants and closing daily reports.



They are required to be consistent with operating systems, daily routines and discipline. They use the critical tools such as opening, running and closing checklists, kitchen line checks and maintenance logs to ensure a consistently managed shift.

Managers support their team and help where needed. They will fill the gaps when necessary after considering the alternatives. They give the team what is needed to perform at peak levels and achieve the objectives. They provide proper training and necessary knowledge, adequate supplies, equipment that is in good working condition and a well-maintained facility.

They supervise the shift, having set it up for success, by observing what's going on, directing, assisting and using all available resources required to execute the concept and ensure that the staff and guests receive the intended experience.

Managers follow the policies and procedures faithfully. They ensure 100 percent guest satisfaction, in part by being active on the floor and take the opportunity to interact face to face with the guests. They proactively look for and catch problems before they affect the guest, and when a problem does occur they effectively address the issue and ensure excellent complaint resolution. They constantly look for ways to develop positive relationships with their

guests.

Managers participate in weekly meetings to review the accomplishments of the week that just ended and plan the goals and objectives of the week that is just beginning.

Typical goals for managers include sales, customer counts, per-person spending averages, staff labor cost by department, daily shift meeting topics and in-house marketing promotions.

Managers are normally evaluated on their ability to complete the task assigned to them and effectively manage their shifts.

Owners or general managers usually meet with these managers once each quarter to assess and evaluate them as well as set up their personal "action plan" of goals to be accomplished before the next evaluation. Areas of responsibility that are typically a part of the manager's evaluation include front-of-the house staff supervision, customer service, cost controls, quality controls, bar operations (if applicable), office and administrative duties, marketing effectiveness, and safety and sanitation issues.

In most cases you will find that successful managers possess a number of the following attributes:

They are much more tactical versus strategic. They are thinking and acting on how to do rather than what to do.

They take something and make it work rather than create the something. Their focus is how to do it rather than what to do.

They are very knowledgeable regarding specific tasks and functions in the restaurant and bar.

Whether it is cooking, waiting tables, bartending, hosting, expediting, quality or cost controls, safety and sanitation, or guest satisfaction, they have the experience in each area, the understanding of it in-depth and the ability to perform each function. This allows them to effectively direct the staff and be credible in doing so.

An experienced and proven manager is confident in his operating skills. This confidence does not necessarily translate into leadership quality. It is worth noting that many effective managers impede their ability to take on great responsibilities by spending too much time performing functions. Some may even love the "Superman" role, so when things are going wrong they are able to swoop in and "save the day."

They go home feeling totally accomplished and satisfied with what they have done, and then they go back and repeat the same thing day after day. Unless someone takes the time to teach them how to assess a situation and apply their available resources wisely, they will be stuck as "doers" rather than leaders or directors. (See "[Case in Point](#)" on below.)

In short, good managers take direction well and execute the mission as given them by their owners or supervisors. They faithfully follow and execute the policies and procedures of the organization.

So, What is a Leader?

Have you ever been in a situation or witnessed one in which staff takes their questions for guidance to a person with no formal title or authority rather than going directly to a manager? The person to whom they are going is their leader, whether formal or informal. While some possess inherent, natural born leadership skills, most people have had to develop their leadership skills over time with experience and guidance.

Leaders communicate a clear vision, set priorities and goals, teach and develop others, reinforce the companies' plan and policies, provide support to managers and staff and

hold people accountable, among other things. Leaders see the "bigger picture" and they understand effect and consequences of decisions on others. They know that their constituencies such as other departments, investors, guests, staff and vendors are all involved and must be considered. They also have a keen understanding of how to use the resources that reside both inside the organization and outside.

Leaders engender trust, loyalty, commitment to the mission and dialogue and discussion. They develop and grow those around them. They are constantly on the lookout for talent and they are steadfast in their commitment to provide opportunities for advancement. They are excellent at planning and following through on the plan.

Leaders vigilantly guide the organization and keep the focus on the mission and the message. They inspire in that they live the vision, mission and values of the company. They recognize people and their contributions. They show the way to a higher path. They do the right things, the right way.

Leaders are strong communicators. Not only are they able to get their point across in an effective manner, they also have an ability to listen and hear what is being said. They can separate the nonsense and get to the heart of the issue. Leaders are always focused on the vision and focusing others on where and why they are going there.

Although some of these skills are required at the management level there is a much more refined and sophisticated set of skills required at the leadership level.

Enter the Manager-Leader

Many full-service restaurants look to the general manager to be the leader in the owner's absence. He or she sets the direction, facilitates the operating plan, and is responsible for the marketing plan and sales goals, and the training and development of the managers. In this scenario, the leader of the restaurant would work shifts, manage people but have the additional responsibility of managing the managers. This leader reports directly to the owner(s) and helps develop the goals and objectives of the restaurant.

Ideally, this manager-leader assumes responsibility for all departments in the front and back of the house. He works directly with the chef-kitchen manager to develop menu items, prices to charge and item costs to maintain. He will chair the weekly planning meetings, assign tasks and projects to managers, approve purchases, and plan the marketing programs.

The big question for many operators is whether their current GM (or whatever title they have given to their top manager) is this person. Many owners get frustrated with their first lieutenants because they do not seem to be able to step into the leadership role, even though they are strong managers. The process might require the assistance of the owner to cultivate these qualities in those who have the raw materials.

How Do You Get From Manager to Leader?

As it was a journey to develop your managers, so will it be a journey developing them from manager to leader. Understand that there is a clear path and methodology to develop your leaders and that you must set the roadmap and provide the resources. During the process you will:

Identify and recognize talent in your organization. It is imperative that you determine who stands out, why they stand out, and that you evaluate candidates consistently. Here are some

suggestions on how to identify leadership potential, traits and characteristics within your managers.

They stand out from the others because of the following:

- ✓ They say what they will do and do all that they say.
- ✓ They seem to attract quality staff to the business; i.e., some of your best hires were a result of their recommendations. Birds of a feather flock together, as they say.
- ✓ You have seen sales and profits grow since they became managers.
- ✓ They have taken the initiative to suggest new products, systems and procedures and have helped you put them in place successfully.
- ✓ Other staff members seek them out formally and informally for help, guidance, direction, support.

If you have effective managers who exhibit some or all of these traits, you do not want to lose them. And rest assured, there are businesses inside and outside the industry that would love to have them on board. Let them know how they are viewed and what the future can hold for them. Tell them they now have this developmental opportunity and seek to understand their goals and objectives.

Create a developmental game plan involving the developing leader in the planning stages and considering their goals and objectives. This is the time to determine what they will do, how success will be measured and with whom they will do it.

Provide opportunities for the developing leader to take on new assignments and learn as they grow. These can include:

- ✓ Participation in new company projects.
- ✓ Participation on teams to meet new or impending challenges.
- ✓ Introduce them to new groups within the organization or community and get them out of their own element. In other words, invite them to chamber of commerce meetings, and introduce them to other leaders in the community.
- ✓ Include them in meetings at higher levels.
- ✓ Have them attend educational seminars and conferences.
- ✓ Include them in the organizational decision-making process.

Also, mentor and provide mentors to them. This should be a formal development program that includes regular meetings and a written agenda with objectives. Have them mentor and teach others. One of the best ways to learn and grow is to teach and share your knowledge with others. Ensure a productive feedback process at the proper frequency with the right content. Also ensure a productive review process.

Measuring Progress

It has been said that the best way to evaluate the effectiveness of the restaurant leader is to visit regularly when he/she is not there. Good leaders lead by example and develop managers by educating them fully, directing them consistently and reinforcing items as needed. So, it is to be expected that a well-led restaurant would be able to operate

successfully when the manager-leader is absent. A more formal evaluation should be completed regularly (perhaps once each quarter) in which the owner(s)-partners would review the restaurant leader's effectiveness in the development and supervision of the managers, and the ability of the restaurant to meet or exceed sales goals, cost management and profit expectations.

This process will help them become a more effective leader in the restaurant, throughout the company and within their community.

Positive Consequences

It is an accepted fact in the industry that retaining good managers and developing them further has any number of positive consequences. It typically leads to sales and profit growth, lower employee turnover, the stability of the business and a constant stream of high-level talent. Given the benefits it is obvious that there is no other way to go if you intend to make your business all that it can be. From a spiritual standpoint, there are few experiences as rewarding as helping an individual rise to his or her full potential. As a business owner, you have this unique and wonderful opportunity.

-- [Restaurant Startup & Growth](#)



An Educator's Vision of What Makes a Great Leader

The process for developing the next generation of restaurant leadership does not rest entirely on the shoulders of current operators and managers. Hospitality management and culinary schools understand that leadership qualities are as important as technical skills.

Christopher Koetke, the dean of Kendall College School of Culinary Arts, provides his vision of what makes a great leader:

Constant progress and reflection. Great leaders understand that leadership is a journey, not a destination. It requires a sense of humility, a willingness to reflect on your own performance, a commitment to continual progress, and a belief that you can always do better.

Mentorship. One of the best ways to become a great leader is to put yourself in the company of good leaders, learn from their actions and model them while maintaining your own style. It also means mentoring those who will come after you since the mark of a true leader is his/her ability to foster leadership among others.

Listening and open communication. A good leader ensures he or she is surrounded by talented people, to whom he or she listens as well as directs. Every person in your operation, from dishwasher to general manager, has a unique view of your operation and each has valuable lessons to share. Remaining open to others' ideas and constructive criticism, regardless of the source, are powerful ways to lead.

Praise and criticism. Be quick to praise and constructive with criticism. Both will motivate your team members to perform at their best and grow their talents.

Case in Point: A Golden Opportunity to Become a Leader

Kelly Bryan knows very well how it feels to develop into a leader. For years she managed Boondocks, a full-service casual bar and restaurant and minigolf concept in Ramrod Key, Florida. A little over a year ago, with the assistance of some outside consultants, she completed a development plan and became the leader of the operation. Working with the owners, the consultants developed a plan to improve the staff selection and training process, menu item and layout review, annual financial planning, and business development. Among these planned improvements was creating a more effective system of business and staff supervision.

The initiative created a golden opportunity for Kelly, a proven *manager*, to move up in the organization to a *leader*. Kelly was provided a timetable and tasks assigned. As a manager Kelly had to "do" certain tasks; however, if she wanted to step into a leadership position, she would have to "direct" them. Kelly formed a task force of key staff to review and update training procedures and restaurant policies. Another task force was developed between the bookkeeper and ownership to create an annual finance direction. Kelly worked with the kitchen management on the menu review, and personally reviewed marketing.

By delegating, she transformed her role from "doer" to "planner." And since she involved others, she created a sense of ownership among the staff, which motivated them and made holding them accountable easier for her to do.

A few months later, an operating plan was rolled out, updated policies put into effect, revised menu adopted and new managers put in place. Kelly now directs a team that manages and works directly with ownership on planning and development. This is a manager who became a leader. Kelly gets more done and the restaurant operation executes more efficiently because of the leadership characteristics she developed through this process.

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