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Building a Better Restaurant Staff: Conflict and Diversity Management Tips





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Introduction

"How do I manage my staff better?"

Everyone needs structure. It's how we know what to do next, whether what we did was successful, and helps us work better with others. For businesses large and small, the basics of that structure is epitomized in the employee handbook and through your own management style.

Looking at your management style can seem daunting, and possibly uncomfortable, as it's hard to recognize strengths and weaknesses in oneself. Gaining that self-awareness and then applying new methods to your management style is challenging in the interim, but worth it in the long run in terms of happier staff — and less stress for you.

Building out a restaurant employee handbook can also seem daunting at first, but getting down to the why, what, and how of it all will make the process smoother and clearer in its importance. If you run a restaurant that has never had an employee handbook — or has one that is in serious need of updating — there are a few great reasons to keep things up-to-date in the form of a handbook.

Set Expectations

Your staff cannot follow the rules if they don't know what they are. It's as simple as that.

Provide Clarity

Things that may seem rudimentary to you as a veteran restaurateur could easily escape someone just starting out in the business, or who worked in a distinctly different environment at their last job. Having it all in writing will give your team an easy go-to when questions are raised.

Put Staff at Ease

Workplace worry often circles around one very big factor: unpredictability. The consequences for making mistakes or breaking an unspoken rule are quite frequently far larger in your employees' minds than in actuality. Spelling everything out, from pay dates and expected time off to stages of disciplinary action and social media policy, will help ease minds and produce a happier, less stressful atmosphere.

Help Avoid Litigation

The reality is, there are a lot of laws governing businesses and how they treat their employees on the national and local levels. Establishing an employee handbook is as much for your protection as a business owner as it is for laying out rights and expectations for the employee. When rules and processes are laid out clearly in written form (provided you've followed the law in how they are devised and presented), it is much easier to follow them, enforce them, and keep your work environment safe and productive.

In the chapters that follow, we are going to take an in-depth look at four particular areas that may seem new, foreign, or more difficult to handle for restaurant owners: conflict resolution among staff, handling different types of gender discrimination, managing diversity concerns on your team, and how to specifically talk to the largest group of employees in the current workforce: millennials.

Not only will you learn some new approaches to your own management style, but also pick up some tips on how you can begin to build or expand upon your employee handbook.

Employee handbooks should address:

Compensation & Review

- Method of payment and benefits
- Worker's compensation
- Review and promotion processes
- Disciplinary process

Time Off

Structure of paid time off Holiday schedules Procedure for absences and vacation requests

Policies & Procedures

Dress code Break and meal policies Social media use regulations Substance abuse policy Anti-harassment and fraternization policies Emergency and safety

procedures

Workplace Accommodations

Family & Medical Leave (FMLA) policies

Policies on breast-feeding accommodation

Equal employment and non-discrimination policies

Accommodation of disabilities, as governed by the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)

Policies on military and crime victim leave



Resolving Conflict

It can be a manager's nightmare: conflict between employees growing out of control. It gets even more difficult when you have a dining room full of guests waiting to be served with a smile. How your staff behaves when confrontation arises is only part of the picture, however. Restaurants perform better and — hopefully — diners enjoy their experience more when employees/servers can carry out employee conflict resolution productively and effectively.

With that in mind, we have seven key tips for managers looking to dive into employee conflict resolution with a clear head, open heart, and the best interests of both their staff and their business in mind.

Understand that conflict is not always bad.

It is a myth that all conflict is detrimental to the workplace. Restaurants, like any business, can capitalize on meaningful, constructive conflict in order to grow, improve, and thrive. Completely avoiding conflict in the workplace could leave the best ideas unsaid, especially if employees are afraid to speak up or discouraged from sharing ideas.

The key to meaningful conflict is to create an environment where employees (and managers) can respectfully disagree about things because they know everyone has the the business' best interests at heart. Part of cultivating that team environment is making sure everyone on the team is informed about specific company goals and feels like they have a stake in the restaurant's success.

Pick your battles carefully.

Know when to intervene and when to let employees work things out for themselves. Not every conflict requires escalation up to a manager to arbitrate. Sometimes, conflicts are small and blow over more quickly on their own than if they are enlarged artificially by the spotlight of an intervention.

That said, try also not to let conflicts between staff members boil out of control before intervening. The longer a disagreement festers between two employees, the more likely it is that emotions will start to run high, and that could result in uncontrollable outbursts maybe even in front of your dining room guests.

Keep it out of the customer eye.

It's a problem for conflicts in the workplace to consume your staff's attention, but

Know when to intervene and when to let employees work things out for themselves. understand under no circumstances should they be allowed to consume your customers' attention as well. Visible arguing, fighting, and even micro-aggressions between staff members should be nipped in the bud as soon as they are identified.



Your staff should be instructed as a matter of course to keep their disagreements away from the dining room. If employee conflicts start to interfere with customer service, managers really have no choice about whether to intervene or not. The conflict has already gone too far.

Treat each side equitably and fairly.

Every manager undoubtedly has favorites among their staff, but when it comes to employee conflict, you cannot be anything but objective. Every employee deserves the chance to be heard without pre-judgment and have equal time to present their side, either one at a time in the same space (without interruption) or one by one with the manager privately. Most important of all as a manager arbitrating employee conflict resolution is not to rely on staff buzz or gossip when judging the situation. Instead, work on getting first person accounts of the problem at hand. Try to keep your attention (and your employees' attention) focused on facts and actions, not emotions and assumptions. It will help clear the air faster.

Identify the source of the problem.

Often, conflict can develop in such a way as to mask the real issue at hand. Is the issue about work or is it personal? Is it even about the other person involved? Sometimes employees can bring their personal issues from home to work – it's hard not to! Something troubling them elsewhere can result in shortness or aggression toward another person in the workplace.

But even when the problem is clearly about something happening in your restaurant, be savvy enough to look past the surface tension. If there's an underlying cause to the tension, it may extend beyond two (or more) individuals and into your policies as well. Is your scheduling inequitable or causing tension between employees? Is work being distributed in a way that is perceived as fair? Are privileges being extended to everyone similarly?

Here are a few tips on how to communicate with employees under duress:

"I don't want you to think that I don't value your efforts here; I do want to point out that you've been causing somewhat of a distraction between ____ and ____. I'd like your thoughts on how we can both ease the tension of the situation."

"I need to talk with you about ____. The perception from your peers is you're ____." (Focus on facts not feelings.)



Find a solution.

This is undoubtedly the hardest part of employee conflict resolution: finding a solution that everyone can be happy with, including you as a manager. That may not always be possible, but strive to land on a solution that incorporates fairness, addresses as many of the stated issues as possible, and has the potential to help avoid future personal conflict.

Once the employees agree on a solution, consider putting it in writing. That way, everyone involved has a touchstone to come back to if they feel the agreement is not being honored, or if they need to remember what they agreed to after the dust clears and tensions lessen. Be sure to communicate who owns the employee conflict resolution and what communication may be required. Remember sensitivity — employees who complain may not take kindly to the offender attempting to make amends.

Focus on (and follow up with) the team.

Ultimately, your restaurant staff is not simply a collection of individuals. They are a team, and they need to function like one for your business to run effectively and efficiently. Remind your staff often that they are their own best resource and that supporting each other — and treating each other with the same level of service and consideration they are expected to give guests — is a base expectation for your workplace.

Rewarding teamwork along with individual accomplishment is one way to encourage harmony and positive conflict while keeping negative conflict and disruption to a minimum. Give your staff every opportunity to be each other's champions and you'll likely have to intervene less as a manager with employee conflict resolution, and be able to spend more time building up your business profits and revenue over time.

Deliver feedback that adds value. For example, "I saw/heard this..." and "Next time, what else do you think you could try to improve the situation?"

In our next chapter, we take a look at the expansion of women in the restaurant workplace — and the unique challenges many are facing in terms of **gender discrimination** (and what you can do about it).

Give your staff **every opportunity** to be each other's champions and you'll likely have to **intervene less** as a manager.



Handling Gender Discrimination

The restaurant industry is no different than most others: challenges for women who want to succeed, or just get their job done safely, are still common. How women and men, managers and employees, deal with these challenges can define the success of your workplace — not to mention play out over your bottom line, as the workforce gets even more integrated in the years to come.

Breaking into "The Boys' Club"

Women represent approximately half of both management¹ and staff² in restaurants nationwide, but barriers still exist when it comes to the perception of the quality of their work — and sometimes their actual presence. Navigating the working environment for women is complicated, awkward, and complex. Managing past cliquey behavior among male employees (including higher-level staff) — and other elements of the atmosphere that leave women feeling excluded — can be quite difficult.

This is especially true at independently or family-owned restaurants that have built (or been built from) longstanding friendships and associations. While this behavior can be quite innocent and unintended, cliquey behavior in male employees can have repercussions for the health and well-being of your staff over time.

One solution to alleviate this phenomenon is developing an open culture for employees and managers at your restaurant. Open book management often focuses squarely on the financial aspects of a business, providing transparency to the success and challenges of the establishment as a whole to every worker — from dishwasher to head chef and everyone in between.

One of this practice's prominent side effects is enabling every employee to have their voice heard in maintaining the health of every aspect of the business. This gives both women and men employees opportunities to be heard — not just by you, but by each other — in a forum that won't favor long-time employees or any kind of "boy's club." The key to success of an open culture is leadership's management of staff interactions in the spirit of openness the process encourages. This is not an easy path to follow, but as the diversity of the workforce continues to grow, it is a necessity for your business to thrive. An open work environment, is just good business.



Gendered Pre-Conceptions

Restaurants may have policies committed to gender diversity, but it is a struggle to put that commitment into successful practice. Restaurant owners and managers should



treat gender diversity like the business imperative that it is, and that starts with better communication, more training, and clearer focus on the results.

Gender bias can be as innocent as only asking men to lift and move heavy boxes, or as insidious as presuming women employees won't be as good at math as the men. Pre-conceived notions about staff that arise from gender bias can have a real debilitating effect on staff as a whole. At its worst, these types of assumptions would appear to contribute significantly to the gender imbalance we see in workplace roles today.

Even though there are nearly equal numbers of men and women working in the industry, we still see pockets of the industry today where 7 out of 10 servers, but only 2 out of 10 chefs, are women.³ Some of that distillation may start showing at the hiring level, but in truth, pre-conceived notions of gender value — and who feels welcome in what position — goes all the way back to early training and culinary school applications for many women in the industry.

Restaurant managers and owners must make an effort to cater their reactions and instructions to the actual skill set each employee brings to the table, regardless of gender. This needs to be true in daily interactions with existing staff and in the entire hiring process, from resume read to final decision.

It's not just about fairness, even though as an ethical business owner that is important. It's also simply good business sense to be able to recognize talent and valuable resources on an individual basis. Your restaurant benefits from every skill your team can bring to the table. There is no value in ignoring any of it, especially given the growing challenge of filling positions.

Work-Life Balance

Two-thirds of women today are shouldering the burden of breadwinning — either alongside an also-working spouse or partner or making it alone as a single parent.⁴ This opens up a challenge for work-life balance that most families over half a century ago didn't have to face. In addition to supporting children and functioning as their primary caregivers, more women than men are becoming primary caregivers for elderly parents, who are now living longer than in decades past.

This extra responsibility outside the workplace can leave women at a statistical disadvantage, both in terms of advancement and perceived diligence among supervisors (male or female) who may not experience the same additional burdens in their home lives.



Making reasonable accommodations (and planning schedules based on employees' real needs) as a manager or owner is only half the battle. Employees need to plan for as many contingencies and variables as possible so as to disrupt their workplace as little as necessary. And above all, leave guilt at the curb. There's an enormous pressure in our country to be the "perfect mother," "perfect daughter," or "perfect employee." Do your best, lean on those willing to support you, and don't be afraid to ask for help.

Challenging Customer Service

When so much of your job is dealing with customers directly, it's practically unavoidable that most women in the front of house will experience additional challenges from guests. No amount of inhouse training can stop a customer walking in off the street from being condescending or suggestive, but smart training can suggest ways for servers and hosts to handle and diffuse the situation.



Staff needs to know it's ok to stand up for themselves when necessary, and that includes talking to a manager about incidents that make them uncomfortable. Don't wave off customers being inappropriate, especially since some men can choose to see a polite smile as an excuse to push even more.

If a customer continues to make an employee uncomfortable and won't take the hint, see if a co-worker of the opposite gender can take over the table while the server goes "on break"; if things get really serious, especially in a bar setting, do not be afraid to ask security staff for assistance. And be certain your managers are ready to back their employees up, as well. The best policies are those enacted all the way from the top to the bottom and back again.

Ultimately, don't let tips decide your behavior. It can be frustrating, but physical safety and self-worth are more important than those dollars. If you're afraid for your or your server's safety, it's always better to have a manager intervene, even if it means a customer leaves without tipping.

Sexual Harassment from Management or Co-Workers

The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature ... [and] offensive remarks about a person's sex."⁵



The EEOC goes on to say that "Both victim and the harasser can be either a woman or a man, and the victim and harasser can be the same sex. Although the law doesn't prohibit simple teasing, offhand comments, or isolated incidents that are not very serious, harassment is illegal when it is so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile or offensive work environment or when it results in ... the victim being fired or demoted."

While 90 percent of women working in restaurants have experienced sexual harassment on the job, it's not always from a boss.⁶ To wit, according to the 2014 report on Sexual Harassment funded by the advocacy organization Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC) United⁷, women in the restaurant field identified being targeted at these percentages overall:

- 67 percent experienced harassment from managers
- 69 percent from co-workers
- 78 percent from customers

In short, harassers can be anyone from a restaurant owner present on a daily basis to a visiting vendor who shows up once a month for a delivery.

And the lowest paid employees (those making the tipped sub-minimum wage set at \$2.13 per hour — plus tips — since 1991) are traditionally the ones most at risk of experiencing sexual harassment.

It's important for restaurant owners and managers to consult their corporate attorney in establishing a thorough sexual harassment policy, as well as a set of ongoing training for all employees that supports openness and prevents repercussions for those who report incidents of harassment. With two-thirds of women restaurant workers surveyed by ROC United feeling they would face negative repercussions if they reported sexual harassment by their manager, it's important for managers to put that fear to rest if female employees are truly going to feel safe and respected in the workplace.

Your restaurant has an important role to play in reaching gender equality, and everyone benefits when you succeed. A fairer, more inclusive work environment will lead to more engaged employees, which we know results in a successful business that attracts more engaged customers.

Along those lines, in our next chapter we look at particular challenges driven by culture, race, ethnicity, and sexuality and how **managing diversity** among your team can lead to stronger business overall.

Women in the restaurant field identified being harassed



from managers



from co-workers



from customers



Talking to Millennials

Restaurant hiring, training, and retention have become huge areas of focus for businesses large and small. And successfully managing millennials is more critical to that effort than ever before. Why? Because they are quickly becoming a disproportionately large part of your workforce.

The biggest challenge upfront is how you, as a manager, talk to them. How you talk to (and about) your millennial employees sets a tone for how they and you perceive their place in the organization.

The following are five key steps to managing millennials successfully that will put you on the path to a positive experience for everyone involved.

Understand they're not kids anymore.

The bulk of millennials are literally moving into their 30s, with the generation AFTER them (Generation Z) hitting their mid-teens, becoming the next wave of entry-level restaurant workers.

Simply put, millennials aren't the future of your workforce. They are your workforce. As baby boomers leave the workforce (and the size of Generation X remains staggeringly smaller by comparison), millennials are the future of every business. There's no getting around it.

And believe it or not, they've already been working long enough to have accumulated experience and perspective that — while different than that of baby boomers — is thorough and valuable. There's a common generalization about millennial employees that they believe they should be promoted more quickly than existing management is comfortable with.

But one possible reason behind the disconnect, proffered at the 2017 National Restaurant Association Show by generational researcher James Poe, is that millennials watch how their colleagues are being treated very carefully. And they believe they have the disposition necessary to treat employees better. Why? Well...

Drop the stereotypes completely.

With the avalanche of articles blaming millennials for everything from the struggle of casual restaurant chains to the collapse of the diamond market, urban legends about the behavior of twenty- and thirtysomethings are running rampant.

Ask anyone what millennials are like, and you may hear that they:

- are lazy,
- seem to feel entitled,
- are shallow,
- · have their heads buried in their phones,
- are too distracted by things outside of work,
- job hop too much.

Unfortunately, by buying into these perceptions, many employers have created a culture in the workplace where it's seemingly OK to treat a whole group of people badly. And the reality behind these stereotypes is two-fold. One, it's simply not true that millennial employees are, as a group, any of these things. Millennials have typically shown to be civic-minded, more environmentallyconscious, and more devoted to working smarter with advancing technology than generations that came before.¹⁰



Two, even if any of these traits can be perceived as accurate, millennials developed like any of us, influenced by those who raised them — their baby boomer and early-Generation X parents. One may argue the merits of wanting participating trophies provided to them as children, but the stronger case for why the millennial generation turned out differently than its predecessors comes from watching their parents' lifestyle — and course-correcting.

Wanting to integrate technology into their lives faster, looking to better the environment or improve health care and social services, insisting on a more tolerable work-life balance, and needing to learn on the job — and moving on when there's nothing left to learn — are all traits that come directly from observing how the generation before managed their lives and the world around them.

But whether or not any stereotype could prove out to be true, employees are not likely to respond positively to any leadership they perceive as being disrespectful. Easy rule of thumb: if you can swap out "millennial" for the name of another marginalized group and it sounds bad, don't say it.

Whether you realize it or not, many millennial stereotypes are specifically aimed at young women.

Also, whether you realize it or not, many millennial stereotypes are specifically aimed at young women (being flighty, taking selfies, being into frivolous trends). This kind of generalization can easily overlap with (or lead to) sexist or harassing behavior among your staff, if not careful.

Be willing to answer questions.

Unlike generations before them, whose parents raised their children on a steady diet of "Because I said so," millennials, for good or ill, were raised specifically to always ask WHY — and expect a genuine answer. But again, that process didn't happen in a vacuum, or pop up spontaneously. It was baby boomers and early Gen X-ers who instilled that attitude in their children.



And it's not a bad thing. It may be understandably frustrating to an experienced manager to have to deep dive into the minutiae of an existing process every time one of their millennial employees seeks clarification. But the benefits of doing so can be massive to your operations. It's not just that your employee may have insight into areas of improvement you never thought of. It's that the process of explaining how something works could trigger ideas for improvements (and cost savings) for you.

Being able to satisfy the millennial employee's need for answers doesn't need to be a huge burden, however. Consider these positive interactions for helping support your workers' need to know more about their job:

The Quick Connect (15 sec)

Make a deliberate effort to say hi every morning and goodbye every evening. Say thank you for their hard work. Compliment them in public, even if your millennial employee is the only one within earshot. And make sure the compliments are genuine, or the effort is all for naught.

The Check-in (20-30 min)

Touch base in a scheduled meeting once a week or once every other week. This will give you a chance to talk in private, and develop a feedback loop: you will be able to tell them how you think they're doing. They'll be able to tell you what they need from you to do their job better.

The Stoplight Board (1 hour or more)

This kind of meeting may be more appropriate for an annual or semi-annual review. Break down your employee's performance with the following cues:

- green: accomplishments
- yellow: still working on it
- red: not happening (with explanations)

By the way, these interactions are not just great for managing millennials. They could be beneficial to your employees of all ages and levels of experience! They may not all work for your restaurant in this exact format, but think about what you can adapt that will work for you. Any effort toward better communication is going to be appreciated and will reap rewards.

If you ask their opinion, take it seriously.

Nothing shows lack of respect more than asking someone what they think and then ignoring it completely.

Different generations look at the world differently. Millennials are asking different questions than you might, especially about where the food comes from, the freshness, ingredient transparency, etc. Millennials, as a generation, also tend to value different things in the workplace, like



flexibility of hours, community involvement, and sustainability. That's not a bad thing.

Embrace listening. Resist saying no as your immediate answer, not just because they are your existing (and growing) workforce, but because they understand your growing customer base — they are it!

In reality, you'll also find that they want the same things as anyone else: respect, appreciation from their superiors, and the ability to improve and move up in their career. Dismissing their concerns, especially after explicitly soliciting them, undermines the first two and makes the third seem unlikely to your millennial employee.

Avoid micro-aggressions.

Watching what you say about your millennial employees as a group (and as individuals) is critically important. But so too is managing any non-verbal microaggressions you may be conveying as a supervisor — intentionally or not. These can manifest themselves as body language and attitude, as much as what you say. A quick eye roll, dismissive tone, or tendency to talk over or around concerns contribute to creating a work environment your average millennial employee may not be willing to tolerate.

A lot of millennials have grown used to baby boomers talking down to them or not taking them seriously. They can easily pick up when there's distain for younger workers, even if it's simply reflected in tone or expression, not actual words. And with unemployment at an all-time low — and the restaurant industry in particular struggling to retain a dedicated, experienced labor force — it's more important than ever to keep trust at the forefront of your relationship when managing millennials.



Because if you lose the trust of a millennial employee, it is characteristically very hard to win that trust back.

First, take some time to self-reflect on previous employee or management situations that you felt were handled well... and those not handled so well.

How was each situation managed, and what was your role (or lack of role) in rectifying them? Are there any situations you're currently facing that can use some of these tips to improve conditions for all parties?

Next, knowing what you want to say and getting it down on paper are two very different things, so taking time to make sure you're building your employee handbook the right way is critical.



"So, where do I start?"

The employee handbook should be a reflection of your culture, so anything you can do to make your employee handbook more enticing to your staff, do it. Give it a more interesting name than "Employee Handbook." Opt for friendly, day-to-day, conversational language that will feel familiar to your staff. Hire a graphic designer or student to lay it out. Include photos of your restaurant when it's busy, of happy employees, and of your pride and joy — the food!

Then, follow these steps to get it on its way!

First, consult your state and federal departments of labor.

Every state is going to have slightly different rules about what must legally appear in an

employee handbook. If you own restaurant locations in more than one state, it may be necessary to produce more than one version of your employee handbook, especially if the laws vary widely.

Have an attorney review your handbook.

You may think you covered your bases, but the only way to know for sure is to have an attorney, preferably one that specializes in employment law in your state, review the contents and language of the book from cover to cover. It may seem like an unnecessary expense at the time, but it could save you multiple times the expense in unnecessary litigation down the road.

Include your handbook in on-boarding.

This can mean walking through the book on the employee's first day or sending the book off as soon as your offer has been accepted. Generally, new employees are excited to know all the details about their new place of work, and an employee handbook is the perfect vehicle for satisfying that curiosity and getting a head start on exposing them to your company culture as well.

Distribute in the format your staff is most comfortable reading.

Do everything you can to avoid making your restaurant employee handbook a chore to read. Part of that comes with clean design, easy-to-understand language, and avoiding large spreads of 8-point copy, single-spaced paragraphs.

But the other consideration is format. If you work with a lot of tech-savvy staff, sending the handbook in a format easily perused on a smartphone or tablet could be one way to get it read more readily. If your staff tends to prefer printed material, you may want to provide professionally printed paper copies (no back-room photocopies, please!). Either way, having a printed option could be helpful for those with learning disabilities, or who just prefer to have a book in their hand when reading. Consult with your attorney to determine whether your state has any specific format requirements (i.e. a handbook must be provided to employees in physical form).

Be sure employees read your handbook.

You didn't go through all this trouble not to have the darn employee handbook read, now did you? To follow up with your employees after passing out the handbook, you can include a page at the end featuring a quick acknowledgement message and a place to have the employee sign. Make it easy to tear out and include instructions for the employee to return the signed page to you.

That doesn't exactly guarantee they read it, however. Consider a quick quiz, either on paper or electronic — no more than 10 questions — asking for basic answers to questions presented within the book. Make it fun. Hand out prizes for 100% scores!

When your entire team is on the same page, you'll be glad you did.

Endnotes

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"It's very simple. If you put purpose before profits, you put culture before strategy, and you put your employees before product, you will become successful."

> — Raveen Arora, Owner The Dhaba, Tempe, AZ Rewards Network client since 2009

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