

Restaurant Employee Culture

Stakeholder study report

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1 Introduction

Beginning August 21st 2017 until September 27th 2017 I began researching and observing the employee workforce in a very busy, yet small restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia. The purpose of this study was to examine the working culture that defines the daily operations of this successful, and busy restaurant with such a small work staff. From previous studies I have already discovered the employees have their own language and business style similar to military structure.

By request of the stakeholders', I broadened the focus of my observations to identify key elements in the operations of the restaurant that could contribute to the design of a business model for a second location they plan on opening in the near future. With my study of how the 13 member staff successfully run this busy restaurant 7 days a week, it may contribute to a business model that could potentially help duplicate the employee culture for when they do open a second location.

A few weeks into the project, the study was put on hold when Hurricane Irma threatened the friends and families of several employees. This set back the schedule of the study, but in the end traveling with the stakeholders' and employees to help those in need ended up benefiting the study. The restaurant itself was shut down for several days as the staff pulled together to help each other's families out, while also helping each other. Even when the storm hit the Atlanta metro area, everyone worked to help one another with food, housing, and cleanup afterwards.

Once the dust settled and business was back on, I was thrown another curveball in my project. With the company having several permits to be able to work tailgates for several sports teams in the Atlanta area, the stakeholders introduced a second tailgate trailer to their arsenal. It was extremely difficult, and not cost effective to try to only use one trailer especially in 24-hour turn around events. There was usually only one tailgate crew, and it consisted of the same people, so the second trailer created some issues that needed to help being adjusted.

The stakeholders' research comprised of 4 in-depth interviews with various employees. I ran into scheduling challenges with my interview methods, and they were not possible on site at the restaurant due to how busy it was. A total of 8 of the 13 surveys I passed out were given back to me. Unfortunately, I feel the timing of the storm had a negative impact on the participation. All results are anonymous, but I do think the results are beneficial.

The following report outlines the key findings from the study.

2 Key findings

Some of the key observations I discovered, and learned from the study before the storm hit. Including data from surveys and interviews.

- 1) The stakeholders carry a great passion about the BBQ industry. Promoting its culture in the neighborhood is a major priority, and advertising is none existent. Something they are proud of.
- 2) Stakeholders are the boss, but they partake in daily operations at all times, and willing to get their hands dirty.
 - a) If someone is feeling overwhelmed, they will help them out, and attempt to show them how to get back on track.
 - b) Whether it is a bad day or a great one, management will consistently motivate everyone in a positive yet structure way.
- 3) Employees not only show the upmost respect for management, but survey results showed they consider them family.
- 4) The restaurant has a military feel to it.
 - a) Besides management, there is underlining rank system, where elders will help the younger employees in a mentor-like way.
 - b) The younger employees look to prove themselves to the older employees, as a way of acceptance.
 - c) Management is consistently interactive with communicating with everyone as a team. Enforces the employees to talk or shout back to get everyone rallied up, in a positive way of course.
- 5) Employees have a lot of trust in each other, and do not accept just anyone.
 - a) In interviews, I found the training process is rigorous, and puts new potential employees to the ultimate test.
 - b) They want to be successful, as they take a lot of pride in their work.
 - c) Even the “lowest ranked” employees think of their position as more than a job, and has a lot of meaning to them.
- 6) Stakeholders go out of their way to help make their employees successful.
 - a) If employees need better tools, or supplies the stakeholders listen.
 - b) They even help if it is not work related, such as transportation, day care, appointments, etc.

Each finding is discussed in more detail below.

2.1 Stakeholders' passion for BBQ culture

Being from Boise, Idaho where BBQ culture is basically nonexistent, I found the deeply traditional BBQ culture of Atlanta, Georgia very intriguing. Discovering recipes are kept secret even from wife and husband shocked me. The job of preventing ingredients from being leaked to the public is an actual skill I witnessed firsthand. Some mixtures of spices are created at secret outside locations, and brought to the restaurant. Some of the chefs partake in this practice as well.

To add to the culture, the restaurant relies on the neighborhood, and "word of mouth" for its success. They do not advertise, and like it that way. They embrace competition, and it actually pulls the entire staff together like a team event. It should be noted they do partake in BBQ competitions, but I was not here to witness any.

2.2 Stakeholders' are willing to get in and help

I learned quickly that the stakeholders' are the boss, but they do not sit in the office all day. Even though there are chefs with their own recipes on staff, the stakeholders assist management whenever possible. Taking out trash, washing dishes, or cutting up vegetables, they are there to make sure everything is great.

2.3 Employees have high respect for the stakeholders

Many of the survey questions were designed to discover what the employees think of management, the owners, and what makes the place successful. Of the 8 surveys I received back, the results showed only high ratings. Some of the comments included:

- "All management is family, they will give the shirt off their back if you are cold."
- "We are treated as equals, and they reward us for when we are doing a good job. They will always acknowledge your accomplishments, even if they are not work related, no other place does that."
- "It is more than a job because of who they are and what they do for my family and I"

2.4 Restaurant has a military feel to it

Every morning either the stakeholders or supervisor gives a "war" like speech to motivate everyone. It includes a lot shouting (in a good fun way), and gets the employees to shout back and get excited. Throughout shifts, I noticed different employees would shout positive things to other members, usually older members to younger ones.

The younger members of the staff like to volunteer to do everything that is offered, and with a smile on their face. It gives the feel of them trying to prove to the older team members that they belong. While working, if they ever need help or have questions, older members are very willing to help. They do not just do the task they are asking from them, but instead take the time to try and teach them. I noticed a lot of patience between staff members.

The way the entire crew works together is like a well-oiled machine. It has an assembly line feel to it, and watching it shows how the restaurant is successful. Everyone has their job, but knows where the rest of the staff is. The atmosphere is fun, but serious at the same time. When lunch rush comes in and the line is backed out the door, the crew almost seems to enjoy the challenge, and will talk about

it once again like they are going to battle. Managers will walk through the kitchen promoting unity, and encouraging them to not give up. This keeps the staff focused on the task at hand, and elevates their morale. The staff responds to this management style as a sports team might when a coach gives a pep talk.

2.5 Employees have a lot of trust in each other

With a staff of only thirteen to operate a restaurant that is always busy, I asked in the interviews about the hiring process, and what is like when new people join. From the data I found that not just anyone can become a crew member. When they do hire, it is usually by recommendation from someone on the staff or someone trusted by the staff. This means they do not put out ads for hire which I found interesting. New possible candidates are first trialled ran in rigorous work, like running a station by themselves during lunch rush.

Quote from an interviewee transcript “this is to not only see if they can do the job, but how they handle themselves. Can they stay calm or do they freak out and walk away. We want fighters that will have our back”

This seriousness also came into play during the storm. It was a very emotional experience, and when helping friends and families move, it also meant very valuable family items possibly being held on to by other people because there was no room or time. In the end the only things that came up missing was my cell phone, and some boxes from top of our truck when we stopped to fix some ones flat tire.

2.6 Stakeholders’ go out of their way to help make their employees successful

Also from interviews I found the employees have received a lot of help from management, most of the time not asked for. From helping pay for daycare, or cosigning on a vehicle so an employee could get to work they want their employees to be successful. I got the impression that management has a strong emotional connection with the staff, and not the typical higher status most management follows.

The staff also told me that they know management will listen if they say they need better tools or supplies to get their job done properly.

This was ultimately proven when the storm came. A lot of the staff had family and friends in dangerous areas that needed help evacuating. Not only did the stakeholders allow their staff to go help their families, but the stakeholders shut down the business to go help as well. We took multiple vehicles, 2 of which were company trucks used for moving supplies and went to assist. Once we returned to Atlanta and the storm hit the area, some staff members had flood damage and broken windows. Stakeholders and management was there to help “getting their hands dirty” and even helping pay for damage costs, because they do not want them to have to worry.

3 Conclusions

There are two clear conclusions as a result of the stakeholder study:

Stakeholders' support

From my observations, interviews, and surveys the results show the staff completely respect the stakeholders', and view them as family. They have nothing but respect, and are proud to work for them. From doing grunt work in the kitchen, and trash duty, to closing the restaurant doors and willing to lose potential revenue to help their staff in the time of need. It helps make sense why this crew works together so well.

Employees promote teamwork and unity

Observing the staff revealed they do not work for themselves, but for each other. They promote a military feel, and when one starts to drag, the others will help. When one does not know what to do, or needs help, there are other staff members willing and wanting to help, and guide them to be successful. Witnessing how much they support each other, and teaching whenever possible, is something that needs to be captured, because it is a core element of the restaurant's success.