

Bullying: a dish best removed from the menu

Management apathy, customer perpetrators and a culture of sexual harassment as camaraderie are three prevalent and distressing observations made by current food and beverage employees. A healthy work environment should minimize psycho-emotional trauma and discomfort to its employees and customers so as to maximize productivity and loyalty. The revelation that the food and beverage industry at present is still rife with bullying and sexual harassment, while not necessarily surprising, should be of paramount concern to owners and managers looking to attract highly qualified and talented individuals to the field and their organizations.

In the foodservice industry at present, the level of service expected from food servers during the delivery of a meal has been shown to be as important as the food being served (Edwards, 2012). While high quality service is expected of the worker in this service sector, the internal customer service or positive treatment of these individuals often goes over-looked. In fact, in this industry, a culture of workplace bullying is so prevalent that even reality tv cooking shows like Hell's Kitchen display this aggressive behavior on a silver platter. Because the foodservice industry is a fast paced environment that requires irregular hours and an unpredictable environment, the results often lead to high levels of stress and inappropriate language in the workplace. Workplace bullying, which refers to the repeated abuse or misuse of power, has been shown to negatively impact employees' perceptions of their work environments and negatively impacts their productivity. Given that the restaurant industry is one of the largest and fastest growing sectors of the US economy, (The Aspen Institute: Workforce Strategies Initiatives, 2012) it is incumbent upon human resources managers and legal teams to identify these negative cultures in order to protect their greatest assets: the employees.

Scholars have identified that evaluating the emotional intelligence of leaders and core competencies of foodservice workers are some means by which to help eliminate workplace bullying, as they have been shown to reduce the causalities of workplace bullying, turnover rate and management power. Emotional intelligence represents an individual's cognitive ability to assess the thoughts, actions and the well-being of others. The concept resonates with a current zeitgeist emphasizing the importance of self-awareness and understanding, redressing a perceived imbalance between intellect and emotion in the life of the collective Western mind (Zeidner *et al.*, 2004). The emotional intelligence of managers and mental state of employees has been shown to contribute to employee satisfaction and happiness of the firm.



Workplace bullying

According to “Stop workplace bullying”, workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power. Bullying behavior creates feelings of defenselessness and injustice in the target and undermines an individual’s right to dignity at work. Workplace bullying is a problem occurring in the hospitality industry. This environment sometimes invites short tempers, sexual harassment and vulgarity. Recent movements such as the #MeToo movement, put a magnifying glass on the misconduct by people with power. This movement suggest that workplace abuse is present when there is a hierarchy of power.

For some, making such an issue or concern public, offends their sense of privacy and dignity, fearing it may signal to the world that they cannot properly manage their working (public) life. Such a perception may serve to reduce the likelihood of reporting the incident and consequently enable their silence (Ballard and Easteal, 2018). The hierarchy of power can engender silence from a subordinate, because of fear, loss of job or humiliation from others. Workers become fearful to speak up because of the consequences that they might face.

High levels of employee turnover are problematic in restaurants – leading to higher employee costs, lower service quality and a deterioration of organizational performance (Batt *et al.*, 2014). The overall turnover rate in the restaurants-and-accommodations* sector was 74.9% in 2018, up from a rate of 72.5% in 2017. According to the National Restaurant Association, the 2018 turnover rate represented the highest level since the Great Recession, after falling to a cyclical low of 57.1% in 2010. The foodservice industry is experiencing tremendous disinterest, and a high turnover rate. Workplace bullying could be a significant reason why the turnover rate is high.

A series of interviews was conducted with food and beverage employees concerning their experiences with workplace bullying. After the interviews were collected, they were examined for commonalities, these can be referred to as themes. Three major themes emerged from the interviews: (1) Management apathy, (2) Customers as perpetrators, (3) Sexual harassment as camaraderie.

Management apathy

Many of the interviewees expressed concern and frustration with the lack of action taken by management concerning bullying and sexual misconduct behaviors in their food and beverage workplaces. After being asked if they had responded in the affirmative to being victims of or witness to these behaviors, they were asked if management took any action. The vast majority indicated that management did nothing. This lack of action and overt apathy in response to a pervasive issue can cause issues for attracting and retaining talented team members to the restaurant industry and individual organizations. If food and beverage industry continues to have a reputation for allowing this misconduct to flourish, the problem of attracting and retaining talented employees will endure.

Customers as perpetrators

There is the old adage that the customer is always right. This ingrained philosophy has been twisted from providing excellent customer service into allowing customers to be inappropriate with staff members. Several of the participants made reference to these actions in their interviews. One individual commented on how “random guys tried to hit on me”. This same employee recounted a story of an older customer continuing to make perverted and inappropriate comments to her.

Customers often feel they have the right to treat food service employees as “servants” rather than people that happen to be providing a service. There is a tremendous distinction to be made here, as food and beverage employees should be treated with dignity and respect, instead of looked down upon as less than or invisible. Couple this feeling of entitlement with alcohol, which may reduce inhibitions, and you have a perfect storm for customers to abuse their servers, bartenders, hostesses, etc.

Adding insult to injury, the previous theme of Manager Apathy can exacerbate this issue in that even if a server who is feeling uncomfortable brings this to the attention of management there is no guarantee they will take action. In fact, the manager may side with the customer coming full circle to “the customer is always right”.

Sexual harassment as camaraderie

Many of the interviewees discussed how they were witness to and/or victims of sexual harassment by colleagues. They discussed that once colleagues were familiar with each other it was expected that the perception of this behavior changed from sexual harassment to consensual joking around, whether there was consent or not.

One interviewee said how she was often referred to as “baby girl”. And another relayed how a colleague said, “I’ll do it if you let me touch your boob”. These examples are just two of the many more small and large instances where sexual harassment is expected to be part of everyday life in the food and beverage industry.

When these behaviors become a norm, it is exceedingly difficult for employees to speak up and discuss how it makes them uncomfortable. This industry should take a hard look at the culture that has been created over the last several hundred years, and examine if this is healthy and what we want to pass on to the next generation. Management should take a greater and more active role in creating and enforcing policies that minimize the acceptance of these behaviors, support individuals who report these issues and change the culture of the industry to make it more inclusive and friendly to everyone.

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References

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Further reading

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