



WHAT MATTERS MOST | BY NICK DIULIO

August 31, 2010

## Rock-Solid Foundation

Building a culture of positive values and morals may not sound like a business essential, but the stability it creates with employees will trickle down to your customers.

The concept of morality often conjures up notions of grand, abstract debates concerning religious faiths, relative social norms, and political persuasions. But when it comes to running a quick-service operation, experts say there's nothing abstract about it. For owners and operators, maintaining a focus on morality and positive values can mean the difference between success and failure—especially during a recession.

Mark Murync, philosophical counselor and adjunct professor of philosophy at Molloy College, says the first thing owners and operators need to do is surrender the notion that morality is a purely subjective concept.

"Trustworthiness, honesty, and reliability are almost entirely objective," Murync says. "No one would consider someone honest, trustworthy, or reliable unless they had already proven themselves so in the past."

The concept seems simple and ubiquitous enough, but Murync says operators get into trouble when they fail to understand that a restaurant's culture of morality and values should always be measured as quantifiably as any other aspect of its operation.

"A restaurant's beliefs, values, and morals are essential to its growth and customer satisfaction," says Pete Bye, president of the consulting firm MDB Group. "They define the restaurant's reason for being."

Bye says that every quick-service customer makes a choice about where to eat based on his answers to a myriad of questions, most of which are steeped in that customer's core value structure, such as: Will they understand me? Will they respect and value me? Will I feel comfortable at that restaurant?

"This leads the restaurateur to some important considerations. For example, 'How do these answers differ from those of my employees and myself?'" Bye says.

"Customers have so many choices today that the operators who understand and adapt more effectively are the ones who will experience the strongest reputation and greatest success."

But before a quick serve can begin building that reputation with customers, operators must first build and maintain it with their employees. Just like improper training or employee relations can cause high turnover rates and customer dissatisfaction, a lack of attention to morals and values can compromise the effectiveness of an operation's employees. Murync says this focus should be in place even before the first training session begins.

"Anyone can be taught almost anything, so you need to look for character," Murync says. "Morally stable people tend to value doing a good job as much as and even more than the compensation. Look for people who take pride in their work and accomplishments."

Berit Brogaard, an associate professor of philosophy and psychology at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, says that when trying to build a team of employees who share an operation's moral culture, hiring managers should always ask job candidates specific questions about how they might handle problematic moral or ethical situations that could arise.

Brogaard also says it can pay off to look for "morally stable people who are trainable" rather than people who simply have the right background.

"It can be difficult to ensure that one's employees are morally stable people, but there are ways to increase the chances," Brogaard says. "When hiring a manager, for example, it could pay off to look for someone who has good parenting skills. A stay-at-home mom now looking to get back to work and who has a strong background in the restaurant business, for example, could be a good choice."

This focus on hiring morally stable quick-service employees can prove critical during times of economic stress. Corinne Gregory, a small-business consultant and author of the book *It's Not Who You Know, It's How You Treat Them*, says that maintaining an employee culture founded on positive values is often inextricably linked to how invested those employees are in the brand's success.

"If you want employees you can grow and develop, you need to develop a culture of trust and respect," Gregory says. "Without that, creativity can't flow. And when creativity is not flowing, you can't have the interchange of ideas that is critical in overcoming the rocky points, such as the current economy."

Betsy Wright, marketing director for Charley's Grilled Subs, credits the company's successful move through the recession to emphasizing its firm stance on its founding vision—"To honor God and strengthen our neighbors."

"Challenges and obstacles are a part of life and business," Wright says. "Our company values support the belief that if you do the right thing, the rest will work out."

Doing the right thing, Wright says, includes endorsing employee participation in charitable events and community participation. The company highlights "Brotherly Love" programs in its newsletters, and franchisees are involved with organizations that benefit adoption, troubled teens, and blood drives, among other things.

"The more the employees care and the happier they are, the better they take care of the customer," she says. "And happy customers equals repeat customers, which equals better sales."

Beverly Floyd, owner of the consulting and training group The Corporate Vine, says morally strong employees from top management down are critical to an operation's ability to practice the values it preaches.

"You have to hire and promote and bring in the type of character that your organization says they speak to," Floyd says. "If they don't, it's never going to work. You're never going to walk your talk."

And, Gregory says, customers will notice whether or not an operation is indeed walking the talk.

"The less customer focused you are, regardless of your price points, the more it could be costing you," Gregory says. "People don't like to be treated rudely. It doesn't matter to me what I'm paying for a product. I don't expect to be treated as though I don't matter. If I don't matter to that business, why should that business matter to me?"

And while focusing on morals and values is particularly crucial during this time of economic stress, Floyd says it will only be that much more paramount once the dust settles and the economy recovers.

"That's what will make the difference," Floyd says. "Right now we want the cheapest or closest place, but there will come a time when I will drive farther because a particular place is more friendly and shares my values."



**Morally stable people tend to value doing a good job as much as and even more than the compensation."**

Copyright © 2010 Journalistic Inc. All Rights Reserved.