015 The Operators Blind Spot

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I have never walked into a client's restaurant and not found something that was obvious to me and invisible to them. Not once.

The service flow that's been broken for two years. The table that wobbles. The greeting that's gone from warm to robotic. The server who used to care and doesn't anymore. None of it registers — not because the operator doesn't care, but because familiarity destroyed their objectivity. They are the last person in the building to know what their Guests are actually experiencing.

The Entrepreneurial Seizure

The kitchen manager who opens a restaurant because they cook brilliantly has made one fatal assumption: that understanding the technical work of a business qualifies them to run the business that does that technical work. It doesn't. The skill that produced the seizure — the cooking, the hospitality, the craft — is not the skill that runs the operation. It is the skill that gets the doors open. What happens after the doors open is a different discipline entirely. The operator who never makes that distinction stays trapped inside the technical work for the life of the business — doing the thing they're good at while everything that surrounds it drifts.

The blind spot isn't ignorance. It's familiarity. You built the place. You've walked the same path through it a thousand times. You've explained the same systems so many times they sound reasonable to you even when they stopped working years ago. You've looked at the same blind spots so long you've forgotten they're there.

That's what I get hired to see. Not what's wrong — any consultant can make a list. What I get hired to see is what you can no longer see because you're too close to it.

Every single engagement starts the same way. I walk in, I observe, I look at the data, and within the first few hours I find it — the thing that's been sitting in plain sight, costing the business every day, that nobody inside the operation is talking about because nobody inside the operation can see it anymore.

The solutions are always in the restaurants. So is the problem. You just need someone who isn't you to find it.

I once reviewed a three-unit seafood operation in the Southeast that had been running at such inefficient levels for so long that the inefficiency had simply become the new normal for the brand. Nobody saw it. Not because the problems were hidden — they were everywhere. The food was inconsistent. The shifts had no plan. The Guests arrived and left at the same emotional level they walked in with. Managers worked from a reactive posture every single shift. But because it had always been that way, no one in the building recognized it as broken. It was just how things were.

That is the blind spot at its most dangerous — not when you can't see a problem, but when the problem has been there so long it no longer registers as one.

Whatever you are, scale makes you more of it. The operator who manages by intimidation at one unit doesn't become collaborative when they open a second. They become more of what they already were — and now it's running across two kitchens, two management teams, two Guest experiences. The discipline compounds the same way. The owner who handles the small moments with integrity — the supplier conversation nobody sees, the cast member correction that costs time — is building the same compounding advantage. The math is neutral. It doesn't care which direction you're running it.

The operator who walks their restaurant like a stranger every single time they walk through the door sees the stuck door handle. They notice when the energy on the floor shifts. They ask questions their team doesn't expect. They have an outside set of eyes — a coach, an advisor, a trusted operator — who tells them what they can no longer see themselves.

Most operators pour all their energy into evaluating the options in front of them and almost none into examining the thinking that's doing the evaluating. The blind spot is not the decision. It is the process producing the decision. The operator who never questions the lens is operating by default — and the outcomes will repeat until the lens changes. [By Design Or By Default] applies not just to the result but to the process that produced it.

The Self-Reflection Diagnostic

Before you walk onto the floor. Before you run the pre-shift. Before you have the difficult performance conversation. One question: what story am I telling myself about what I'm seeing — and what is a different story I could tell? That question does not solve the problem. It calibrates the lens before you engage with it. The operator who skips it walks into every conversation

already decided. The one who asks it walks in open enough to actually hear what is happening instead of confirming what they expected to find.

The Rorschach Trap

The operator who came up through the kitchen sees every problem as a product problem. The one who came up through front of house sees every problem as a people problem. The one who came up through finance sees every problem as a numbers problem. All of them are partially right. None of them are seeing the whole. The problem isn't the diagnosis — it is that the diagnosis arrived before the question was fully understood. The tool you know best is always the one that looks most like the answer.

Disequilibrium as a Running Discipline

The sharpest diagnostic tool in positioning work is disequilibrium — the gap between what the Guest is carrying when they walk in and what they actually find. Most operators read that gap once, at launch, and never revisit it. The building changes. The neighborhood changes. The Guest changes. The gap that made you interesting in year one may have closed — or opened into something larger you haven't named yet. Disequilibrium is not a one-time positioning exercise. It is a running diagnostic. Every shift produces a new version of it. The operator who reads it continuously knows what the building is actually solving for. The one who reads it once and moves on is running on a description of their market that is already outdated.

The Pyramid Is a Diagnostic

Five questions. Answer them honestly about every person in your leadership tier. Is there genuine trust here — the kind where someone will say "I was wrong" or "I need help" without calculating the cost first? Can we actually argue about ideas without it becoming personal or political? When we make a decision, does everyone walk out committed to it or just compliant with it? Do we hold each other to the standard when it slips, or do we look away? And are we watching the scoreboard together — or is everyone quietly managing their own territory? The break point somewhere in that chain is the floor that collapsed. Most operators who are underperforming against their potential have a specific answer to one of those five questions that explains the gap. Find it. That is where the work starts.

The Business Feeling Heavy

Complexity doesn't arrive as a crisis. It accumulates through small yeses — each one individually sensible, none of them part of a plan. A new menu item added because a vendor offered a good price. A new daypart tried because a slow Tuesday seemed like an opportunity. A new platform added because a salesperson made a compelling case. Each decision made sense in isolation. Together they add weight without adding direction. The business gets heavier. The operator gets less capable of seeing it clearly. The heaviness is not a motivation problem. It is a structural problem — the business has grown in circumference without growing in coherence. The operator who feels like they are working harder than the business is producing has usually been saying yes to the wrong things for longer than they remember.

The Battler Identity

You can get so good at surviving crises that you start creating them. Not on purpose. Subtly — by not putting systems in place to solve root causes, by leaving the gaps in the team open, by waiting for the thing to break instead of building the thing that holds when you're not there. The operator who identifies strongly as the person who gets through hard things keeps creating hard things to get through. The identity runs in the background. Decisions get made through it without the operator noticing. Every conversation with another operator reinforces it. The hospitality industry rewards the story of suffering — long hours, thin margins, constant fires — and the operator who stops fighting fires can feel like they're losing the identity that defined them. The battler identity isn't dishonesty. It is a story that starts running the operator instead of the other way around.

You won't build a better business if you continue to look at your existing business in the same old way.

Cross-fundamental note: connects to 4.X — Speed of Knowledge (the blind spot is what happens when intelligence stops moving — the operator who gathers, routes, and acts on real-time intelligence closes the blind spot faster than the operator who doesn't) and 3.X — The Single Most Damaging Leadership Behavior (contempt often develops inside the blind spot — the leader who has stopped seeing their cast clearly has usually stopped seeing themselves clearly first).

What Changes Tomorrow

Tomorrow, before you react to a piece of feedback or a bad night, ask yourself what story you are telling about it — and whether that story protects your identity more than it serves the truth. Run

one decision through the Pyramid diagnostic before you act on instinct. Familiarity is the thing most likely to be lying to you about your own building.