122 The Operators Judgment

Perspective Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/122-the-operators-judgment/

There is no shortage of advice for the restaurant operator.

There are books, podcasts, consultants, industry associations, trade publications, online communities, social media gurus, equipment vendors with whitepapers, and software companies with thought leadership blogs. The content never stops arriving. The advice is always confident. The frameworks are always clear. The results are rarely what was promised.

After 44 years in this industry — on the floor, in the kitchen, in the back office, at the table with operators whose businesses were thriving and operators whose businesses were dying — I have come to one conclusion about all of it: the most dangerous thing an operator can do is outsource their thinking.

Not their accounting. Not their scheduling software. Not their inventory system. Their thinking. The judgment that sits underneath every decision — what to build, who to hire, what to charge, how to lead, what the Guest actually needs — that judgment cannot be borrowed from a book, downloaded from a framework, or produced by an algorithm. It has to be developed. Deliberately. Over time. Through the specific, irreplaceable experience of running an operation and paying attention to what it produces.

This arc is about that development.

What the Industry Got Wrong

The restaurant industry has been selling operators the wrong product for decades. Not bad food. Not bad service. Bad thinking.

The thinking that says: find what works elsewhere and replicate it here. Study the winners and do what they did. Follow the best practices. Copy the chains. Adopt the framework. Run the playbook.

That thinking produced an industry full of operations that look the same, feel the same, produce the same forgettable experience, and wonder why they cannot hold a Guest, build a margin, or survive the next headwind. It produced operators who are transactionally proficient and strategically empty — who know how to execute a service sequence and have no idea what kind

of business they are building.

The problem is not that operators are not working hard enough. The problem is that they have been given someone else's thinking to work hard at. And someone else's thinking, applied to your building, your Guest, your market, and your cast, produces someone else's result — which is to say, not yours.

What This Arc Is

The sections that follow are not a set of tactics. They are a rewrite of the operating logic that produces tactics.

Before the operator can make a good hiring decision, they need to understand how to think about people. Before they can build a marketing strategy, they need to understand how to think about their market. Before they can design a Guest experience, they need to understand how to think about what a Guest actually needs. Before they can make any of those decisions well, they need to understand how they think — what biases they carry, what blind spots their experience has produced, what sources they trust and whether those sources have earned that trust.

That is what this arc builds. Not the answers. The capacity to find the right answers for your specific operation — and to recognize a wrong answer when the industry tries to hand you one.

The Mentor's Obligation

I have spent four decades watching operators make the same mistakes in different buildings. The details change. The market changes. The technology changes. The mistakes do not — because the thinking underneath them does not change.

The operator who chases trends without a strategic anchor. The operator who copies a competitor without understanding why the competitor's model works in their specific context. The operator who adopts a framework wholesale without testing it against their own reality. The operator who cannot distinguish between advice that is genuinely useful and advice that was designed to be sold. The operator who has never developed the judgment to tell the difference.

My obligation — as someone who has been in the rooms where those decisions get made, who has seen what happens on the other side of both the good ones and the bad ones — is not to give you the answers. It is to give you the thinking that produces them.

The answers change by market, by concept, by Guest base, by cast, by season, by competitive set. The thinking that produces the right answer in any of those contexts does not change. It is disciplined, honest, experience-tested, and yours.

What You Are About to Read

The arc begins with the most important rewrite of all: the distinction between best practices and next practices. Best practices describe what worked for someone else in a context you do not fully understand. Next practices describe what will move your specific operation from where it is to where it needs to go. Only one of those is a strategy. Only one of those compounds.

From there the arc builds the disciplines that produce independent judgment — how to learn from your own experience, how to know the edges of your competence, how to read the market without being seduced by it, how to consume information without being consumed by it, how to evaluate advice without being misled by it, and how to use the tools of the modern era — including artificial intelligence — without surrendering the one thing no tool can replace.

By the time you finish this arc, you will not have a new set of answers. You will have a different relationship with the question — one that does not require you to borrow someone else's thinking to find your way forward.

That is the only kind of thinking that builds something worth building.

What Changes Tomorrow

Before you read another article, watch another webinar, or adopt another framework — ask one question: whose thinking is this, and has that person successfully done what I am trying to do, in a context that resembles mine? If the answer is no, read it as perspective, not prescription. The difference between those two is the difference between an operator who is always chasing someone else's success and an operator who is building their own.