138 Something Changed In Your Room

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Something changed in your room and you didn't decide it.

Your labor cost went up. Not because your cast got better. Not because you raised the standard and the market rewarded it. Because someone in a room you were not in decided what the floor of your wage structure would be, wrote it into law, and sent it to you as a compliance obligation. You absorbed it, adjusted your schedule, repriced the menu, or cut a position. You called it a cost of doing business. It was. But it wasn't your cost decision. It was someone else's political decision, landed in your P&L, paid for by you.

That is the operating reality of the restaurant industry in 2026. The room you run is not the only room being run on your behalf.

There is a second room. It convenes without you. It produces legislation, ordinances, model bills, agency guidance, and regulatory frameworks that arrive at your door as operating conditions. The people in that room are not operators. They have never run a shift, never closed a till, never had to look a cast member in the eye and explain why the schedule changed. They have standing in that room not because they understand your business but because they showed up and you didn't.

This is not a complaint about government. It is an observation about rooms. Every room produces outcomes for the people who aren't in it as well as the people who are. The difference is that the people in the room had a hand in shaping the outcome. The people who weren't in the room absorbed it without input.

You have been absorbing outcomes from a room you chose not to enter for as long as you have been in business. Every minimum wage increase. Every tip credit change. Every predictive scheduling ordinance. Every service charge mandate. Every joint employer ruling. Every one of those arrived as an operating condition you had no hand in shaping. Some of them helped your operation. Most of them complicated it. None of them asked for your input before they became your problem.

The operator who says "I don't do politics" is describing the mechanism that produced every one of those outcomes. He opted out. The room kept meeting. The outcomes kept arriving.

Absence is a position. It is the position that says the people in that room can decide for you. It is the position that says your voluntary agreement with your cast, your Guest, and your market can be overridden by people who were never party to it. It is the position that says the operating conditions of your business are someone else's to set.

It feels like neutrality. It is not. There is no such thing as neutral in a room that keeps meeting without you.

The question this arc answers is not whether you become a political operator. Most operators shouldn't. The question is whether you can read the room that is shaping yours — see it clearly, name what is happening inside it, and understand how its outcomes land in your P&L before they arrive as surprises. The read discipline you apply to your own room applies here too. Same operator. Wider field of vision.

The cost of not reading it is already visible in your numbers. It has been for years. You just called it something else.

What Changes Tomorrow

Tomorrow, name one policy debate happening in a legislature or regulatory body right now that will land directly on your P&L if it passes. Absence from that conversation is a position too — it's just the position of accepting whatever the second room decides for your room.