2820 How I See It

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The thinking that produces everything on these lists is transactional. The operator who runs a transactional operation is not trying to deliver a bad experience — they are trying to deliver an efficient one. Speed, sequence, coverage, cost. Get the Guest in, get them fed, get them out, repeat. That is not a hospitality failure. It is a design choice. And the behaviors that follow from it are exactly what you would expect from a system built to process transactions rather than build relationships.

The problem is that most operators do not know they made that choice. They think they are running a hospitality business. They have the mission statement. They ran the training. They hired people who seemed friendly. And then they wonder why the experience feels hollow to the Guest even when nothing went technically wrong.

Transactional thinking produces transactional behavior. You cannot coach your way out of a system designed for the wrong outcome. Here is what that system looks like from the inside.

I have literally walked into thousands of restaurants.

Here is what I see.

Servers standing at the server station while Guests walk through the front door. No movement toward them. No change in tempo. No acknowledgment that something just happened that matters.

No manager on the stage. Not during the push, not during the build, not during recovery. The shift is running itself and everyone has decided that's fine.

A busser with a towel hanging out of their back pocket, pre-bussing a table while a Guest is still seated, stacking dirty dishes directly in front of them. The Guest is watching their used plates accumulate like evidence of a meal they are now ready to forget.

A server holding dirty dishes while having a conversation with Guests at another table. The dishes are in the frame. The Guest can see them. The server cannot.

Seats not wiped when tables turn. A hostess seating a Guest at a table that still has crumbs and a ring from the last Guest's glass. The new Guest notices. They always notice.

Large parties being seated without a word to the kitchen. The tickets hit all at once. The kitchen is not ready. The experience degrades before the first drink arrives.

A server asking "you guys doing okay?" to a table of four adults celebrating something. Nobody answers that question. It is not a question — it is a reflex, and Guests recognize the difference between a reflex and genuine attention.

"Singing." The singsong vocal inflection that shows up at the table, at the counter, at the drive-thru window — the voice that sounds nothing like the person using it, performed for the transaction, dropped the moment the Guest turns away. It is the sound of someone who has decided this job is something they endure rather than something they do. Guests feel it instantly. They cannot name it. But they feel it.

Someone bellowing "have a great night!" from behind the host stand at a Guest who is already halfway out the door. The same energy that opened the door should close it. The last moment of the experience is a moment. Treat it like one.

Check backs happening only at the next service step — not because there is genuine interest in how the table is doing, but because the server is running a sequence. Guests know when they are being processed.

No refill on a glass that has been empty long enough for the Guest to notice. That Guest noticed the moment it happened. The server did not.

A Guest leaving without anyone acknowledging them. They came in. They spent money. They had an experience. And they walked out the door into silence.

This is not a comprehensive list. It never could be. Every operation has its own version of these moments — its own specific places where attention has quietly left the building. What matters is not whether your list matches mine. What matters is whether you have a list at all — and whether you are honest enough to act on it.

These are not isolated failures. They are the aggregate of a culture that stopped paying attention. The stage tells you everything about the standard you are actually holding — not the standard you think you are holding, not the standard on the training sheet, not the standard you described at the last all-hands meeting.

What I see on the stage is the truth of your operation. The question is whether you are willing to see it too.