3050 Stop Hiring Bodies

People Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/3050-stop-hiring-bodies/

The want ad is not a recruiting tool. It is a public confession.

Every time it runs, it tells the market — candidates, competitors, Guests, vendors — that the operation could not develop the person already in the building into the role it now needs to fill externally. The pipeline broke. The development failed. The retention didn't hold. And now the operator is paying to find on the outside what they could not build on the inside.

"The two choices you have are: to step forward into growth or remain in your death spiral."

I have coached 148 independent restaurant owners over the course of my career. Do you know what the single most common mistake is among the ones who struggle? It isn't their food. It isn't their concept. It isn't even their location. It's who they put on the floor and behind the line.

There is no right way to develop the wrong person. The operator who hires a body and then tries to train their way to the standard they needed has already lost the investment twice — once in the hire and once in the development that was never going to produce what the role required. Selection is not the first step in the development process. It is the whole process. Everything that follows is either building on the right foundation or papering over the wrong one.

Character Before Competence: The Five Criteria

The hiring criteria that matter are not skills. They are beliefs and dispositions — optimism, warmth, curiosity, empathy, self-awareness with integrity. None of these can be installed through development. They either exist at the hire or they do not. The operator who hires for availability and develops for character has the sequence inverted. Character is what you select for. Technique is what you build afterward. The most underrated criterion is self-awareness — it is the only one that allows a cast member to receive coaching, recognize their own gaps, and grow. Without it, every other quality eventually plateaus.

They hire bodies. Warm ones, preferably with a pulse and a pair of non-slip shoes. They do it because they're desperate — somebody quit last Tuesday, the weekend is coming, and they need coverage. So they grab the first person who walks through the door, hand them an apron, and

pray.

Twenty-four percent of restaurants go out of business in year one. Seventy-six percent are gone by year three. And when I dig into the wreckage with owners who call me too late, the story almost always starts the same way: "We just couldn't find good people." That's a lie they're telling themselves. They could find good people. They just wouldn't wait for them. They wouldn't invest in a process that identifies them. They hired for a schedule gap instead of hiring for a future.

I understand the pressure. I know what it feels like when you're short-staffed on a Friday night and the host stand is a revolving door of angry two-tops. But desperation hiring is the most expensive decision you'll ever make, and most operators don't realize it until the damage is already baked into their culture.

You need the right people right now — not just people right now. And you have to engineer the business according to the tools you have in hand.

Nick Peyton, maître d' at one of the most decorated dining rooms in the country, put it plainly: the best servers are slightly dysfunctional people pleasers. He meant it as a compliment. The person who is genuinely, compulsively wired to make other people feel good — not because the training manual says to, not because the manager is watching, but because it is who they are — is the person you are looking for. That orientation cannot be installed. It can only be found. Which is why the interview is not a skills assessment. It is a search.

The Farm System

Road 1 recruits. Road 2 develops. The operator who is always recruiting is always on Road 1 in People — regardless of what they claim to believe about their culture.

Here's the thing about recruiting that nobody wants to say out loud: if you're constantly recruiting, that's a symptom. A-level talent doesn't respond to job postings. They're not scrolling job boards looking for their next opportunity. They're being pulled — toward operations that are worth working at, toward leaders worth following, toward cultures worth being part of. The business that has to recruit constantly is advertising its own dysfunction. The best people already know where the best places are. Your job isn't to find them. Your job is to build something they want to find.

The franchise that drafts, develops, and promotes from its farm system builds continuity, culture, and capability at a fraction of the cost of free agency. The franchise that relies on free agents is always paying premium prices for talent whose habits were built somewhere else and whose loyalty is to whoever offers the next contract. The restaurant equivalent: the operator who

promotes from within has a cast member who already knows the standard, already holds the culture, already has relationships with the people they are now leading. The operator who hires a free agent has a stranger with a resume who has to learn the operation, the culture, the cast, and the standard simultaneously — while being expected to lead it.

The want ad at any rung above entry is not a recruiting decision. It is the proof that the farm system was never built.

The Bench Is Built Before The Need

The bench is not built in response to the departure. It is built before it — continuously, as a standing discipline of the People fundamental. Every cast member who is being developed is a potential backfill for the role above them. The operator who knows their bench at all times never scrambles when the unexpected departure happens. They promote from the bench, open an entry-level position, and the operation keeps running.

The operator who waits until the departure to start planning the backfill has not built a People fundamental. They have built a People dependency — the operation's continuity depends on individual cast members staying, and when they leave, the operation is exposed.

External hiring for specialized expertise is legitimate at founding — when the operation has no cast yet and no pipeline to draw from. The first kitchen manager, the first lead, the first person who carries the standard before the farm system exists. That external hire is the seed of the farm system. The moment the domain expert walks in, the operator's job is to extract what they know, embed it into the training architecture, and identify the internal candidate who will hold that role next. Planning to replicate starts at the offer letter. The external hire who develops their replacement has done their job. The external hire who hoards their expertise until they leave has done the operation a slow, expensive disservice.

The Real Cost of Bad Hiring

Let me be blunt: a bad hire doesn't just cost you one bad shift. A bad hire compounds. It's not addition — it's multiplication.

You bring on someone who doesn't share your values. Within a week, your best server notices that the new person doesn't pre-bus their tables, cuts corners on side work, and complains about Guests when they're in the kitchen. Your best server says nothing — at first. But they're watching. And what they're watching is you. They're watching whether you do anything about it.

When you don't — because you're too busy, because you're conflict-averse, because you need the body — they draw a conclusion. They conclude that standards don't matter here. That mediocrity is subsidized. And within a month, one of two things happens: they either lower their own performance to match the new baseline, or they leave. Either way, you just lost your best person because of your worst hire.

The wrong person in the wrong seat doesn't just underperform — they actively degrade everything around them. One disengaged cook slows the whole line. One apathetic server loses a table that would have become a regular. One toxic personality poisons the morale of three good people who were doing fine until they showed up. The cost isn't linear. It's exponential.

And it's measurable. Black Box Intelligence's 2025 State of the Restaurant Workforce puts the hard cost of replacing a single hourly employee — separation, recruitment, and training — at $2,706. For a non-GM manager, it's $11,940. For a General Manager, $17,651. Those are just the hard costs. The Cornell Center for Hospitality Research puts the full replacement cost — including lost productivity, service degradation, and management time — at $5,864 per hourly departure. They don't account for the disruption to your Guest experience, the burden on the cast who stay, or the institutional knowledge that walks out the door every time someone quits because you hired a body instead of a person.

The Multiplication Effect

Here's what happens when you hire one wrong person. Day one, they seem fine. Maybe a little rough around the edges, but you figure they'll settle in. Day three, your best people start noticing the gaps — the shortcuts, the complaints, the lack of care. Day seven, someone on your team has already adjusted their own performance downward because they see that the standard isn't being enforced. Day fourteen, you've got a morale problem that didn't exist two weeks ago. Day thirty, your best server is updating their resume.

That's not a hiring mistake. That's a cultural infection. And you introduced it because you were desperate on a Tuesday.

Turnover Is An Operator Condition

The industry average turnover rate is not a structural inevitability. It is the average of every operator — including the ones who have defaulted their People fundamental entirely. Black Box Intelligence data shows full-service hourly turnover running at 96% annually — meaning the

average full-service operation replaces nearly its entire cast every year. Not in three years. Every year. That number is the average of every operator, including the ones who built something worth staying in and the ones who built nothing at all.

Turnover is the same failure as discounting — expressed in a different domain. The operator who discounts cannot see how to create value the Guest will pay full price for. The operator who cannot retain cast cannot see how to create an environment the cast will stay in at the current wage. Both are failures of Perspective. Both are paid substitutes for something that should have been earned.

Every departure has a cause. The cast member who leaves for more money was not developed enough to believe the growth here was worth the current rate. The cast member who leaves for a different opportunity was not given a compelling enough path inside this operation. None of those are industry conditions. They are operator decisions that produced predictable results.

The Too-Little / Too-Much Trust Operator

The too-little-trust operator is the bottleneck operator. Runs everything through themselves. Delegates nothing. Wonders why they cannot scale or take a day off. The too-much-trust operator hires on instinct, avoids accountability conversations, and calls it culture. Both are trust failures — in opposite directions. The discipline is calibration: how much can this person hurt me, what is the evidence they won't, what is the cost if I am wrong, and is that cost survivable? Most operators never ask those questions out loud. They make the bet and find out later what it cost them.

How I See It

Mediocre: Short-staffed on a Friday night, the operator hires the next warm body who walks in and can work weekends. They ask about experience. They ask about availability. They never ask whether this person genuinely cares about making a stranger's day better. Six weeks later they're wondering why the Guest experience feels off and the team dynamic is toxic.

Ideal: An operator who treats every hire like a culture decision — because it is. The interview isn't about filling a slot. It's about filtering for the thing that can't be trained: care. They'd rather run short for another week than put the wrong person in front of their Guests.

One honest qualification: for a single-unit operator in a genuinely labor-scarce market, the calculus around holding a position open is different. Not every role carries the same cultural risk. A dishwasher hired under pressure while you keep looking is a different decision than a server hired

under pressure who will be in front of your Guests every shift. Know which roles can absorb a compromise hire temporarily and which ones cannot. The principle doesn't change — but the triage does.

The Choice Nobody Will Admit

Every operator who has told me the market was too tough to find A players was hiring C players by choice. Not by necessity. By choice — because it was easier, faster, and less uncomfortable than the short-term pain of running shorthanded while holding out for someone worth hiring.

That is not a labor market problem. That is a leadership problem.

The market has never been the reason. In every labor market across four decades — tight, loose, pandemic-disrupted, post-pandemic flooded — the operators who were serious about standards found the people who met them. The ones who weren't serious found reasons why they couldn't. Both groups were right, because both groups were building the operation they actually wanted, not the one they said they wanted.

Stop hiring bodies. The cost of the wrong hire — in management time, cast morale, Guest damage, and the compounding drag of a standard nobody will hold — is always higher than the cost of running lean for another week. Always. The math only looks different when the operator is too tired or too scared to hold the line.

What Changes Tomorrow

Look at your current open positions — or the positions you filled in the last ninety days with external hires. For each one, name the internal candidate who should have been ready to fill it and wasn't. That gap is the People fundamental failure the want ad was covering for. That is where the farm system needs to be built. Stop filling the gap. Start closing it.