3070 A Level Talent

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There is a category of cast member that changes the operation simply by being in it.

Not because of their title. Not because of their tenure. Because of their standard — the way they show up, the way they execute, the way they make everyone around them better without being asked to. The Guest experience is different when they're working. The cast dynamic is different when they're on the floor. The culture records their presence and holds it as the reference point for what's possible.

This is A level talent. And understanding how to find it, recruit it, develop it, and think about it when it leaves is one of the most important things a Road 2 operator can master.

What A Level Talent Actually Is

A level talent isn't a personality type. It isn't always the most charismatic person in the room or the most technically skilled. It is the cast member whose belief, standard, and investment in the work consistently produces an outcome above what the role requires.

They don't need to be managed into the standard. They hold it themselves. They don't need to be reminded of the Guest. They think about the Guest before the Guest arrives. They don't coast between tasks. They find the next thing that needs doing without being told.

And critically: they make the people around them better. Not through training or formal mentorship necessarily — through presence. The new cast member who watches an A level cast member work for one shift understands something about the standard that no pre-shift or training manual could have communicated. The bar moves. The culture records it.

A level talent is the highest-return investment available in the People fundamental. And most operators don't know how to find it, recruit it, or think about it correctly.

A Level Talent Is Already Working for Someone

The first thing to understand: A level talent is not looking for you.

They're working. Somewhere, for someone, delivering at a standard that made them visible to the market. They're not on job boards. They're not responding to help wanted ads. They didn't become A level by being available — they became A level by being invested in wherever they were.

The operator who waits for A level talent to come to them has already lost the competition for that person. The passive operator gets the candidates nobody else wanted. The active operator gets the candidates everyone else is trying to keep.

This means finding A level talent requires a different posture entirely. Not posting. Looking.

Where to Look

Your own cast. The A level people already in your operation know other A level people. They worked alongside them somewhere before. The question isn't "do you know anyone looking?" — they're not looking. The question is "who's the best person you've ever worked alongside?" That's the recruit. The introduction is the access. The relationship is the recruitment.

Your industry relationships. Distributors, reps, trainers, other operators — people who move through multiple operations and see who's delivering at a standard worth noting. The vendor who calls on twelve restaurants in your market knows who the best kitchen manager in town is. Ask. Not "do you know anyone looking?" — ask "who's the best person you've seen in this role in this market?" That question gets a different answer.

Your Guests. The industry is smaller than it looks. The regular who works in hospitality elsewhere. The Guest who mentions their team, their concept, their people in a way that tells you they understand the business from the inside. The operator who is genuinely present in the dining room — connecting with Guests rather than managing the floor — hears things that never surface in a recruiting conversation.

Your reputation. The most powerful recruiting tool is the one that works before you ever make a call. The A level talent who hears about your operation through the network — who has been told by someone they respect that this is a place worth working — reaches out before you knew they existed. That conversation only happens if the reputation preceded it. Which means everything in the People fundamental is also a recruiting act.

Direct observation. A level talent is visible to operators who are paying attention. The server at a restaurant you visited who delivered at a standard you recognized immediately. The host who handled a difficult situation in a way that told you everything about their character before you said

a word. Go to the places where A level talent is working. Watch. Then introduce yourself.

A Level Talent Finds Their Roles Through Relationships

The job posting is for everyone else.

A level talent moves through the industry on the strength of relationships — who they know, who knows them, who trusts them enough to make a call before the position is even posted. The operator who has built genuine industry relationships has access to that network. The operator who never invested in those relationships competes for what's left after the network moves first.

This means the operator's industry presence — their reputation, their relationships with other operators, their visibility in the market — is a recruiting tool as real as any job board. The operator who is known, who is respected, who has a track record of developing people that others can vouch for, gets the call when A level talent is ready to move.

Recruiting A level talent is relationship building before it's hiring. It's reputation building before it's recruiting. It's culture building before it's relationship building.

A Level Talent Travels in Packs

Recruit one A level cast member and you've recruited access to their network.

A level talent knows other A level talent. They worked together somewhere before. They trained together. They competed against each other. They stayed in contact because people who operate at that standard recognize each other and maintain the relationship.

When an A level cast member joins your operation and finds the culture worth staying in — finds the development real, the standard held, the leadership genuine — they tell people. Specifically. They tell the other A level people in their network that this is a place worth working. The next A level hire is easier than the first because the reputation traveled through the pack before the job posting existed.

The reverse is equally true. The A level cast member who leaves talks too. They tell their network what the culture actually was, whether the development promise was kept, whether the standard was real or performed. The reputation that attracts the next A level hire or repels them is built by the ones who came before.

This is why the exit conversation matters beyond the individual relationship. The A level cast member walking out the door is walking into a conversation with the next A level candidate you

haven't met yet.

A Level Talent Doesn't Work With Anything Below a B

A level talent self-selects out of environments that don't hold the standard.

Not always immediately. Not always dramatically. But inevitably.

The A level cast member who arrives into an operation that tolerates C level performance doesn't stay. Not because they complained. Not because they demanded change. Because the environment that accepts below-standard performance is one that A level talent eventually finds not worth the effort. The standard they hold themselves to stops feeling supported. The culture stops feeling like theirs.

This means the operator who wants to attract and retain A level talent has to maintain a B level floor across the entire cast. Every person on the cast who is performing below that floor is a tax on every A level person working alongside them. Not just operationally — culturally. The A level cast member who watches the standard go unenforced learns that the standard is negotiable. And A level talent doesn't stay in environments where the standard is negotiable.

The negative growth cast member isn't just a performance problem. They're a retention problem for every A level person watching.

Take Every Opportunity to Work With A Level Talent — Even Briefly

The operator who won't hire A level talent on a short timeline because "they'll just leave" is making the most expensive trade available: certainty of mediocrity over the possibility of a temporary standard-setter who permanently raises the floor.

The A level cast member who is only with you for six months doesn't just deliver during those six months. They demonstrate what the standard actually looks like — to every cast member watching them, to every Guest experiencing them, to the culture absorbing their presence. They set the bar higher by existing in the operation at that level.

The team that worked alongside A level talent for six months performs differently after they leave than they did before that person arrived. The bar moved. The culture recorded it. The standard is now visible in a way it wasn't before.

Short tenure A level talent isn't a hiring risk. It's a culture investment. Take every opportunity you can get.

The Free Agency Model

Every professional sports franchise deals with free agency. Players develop, earn market value, exercise their options, and sign with teams that match what they've become. The franchise that developed them doesn't get to keep them just because they built them. That's not how the system works — and the franchises that understand this build better rosters because of it, not despite it.

The restaurant operator who thinks about their cast through this lens stops taking departures personally and starts taking development seriously.

Your best cast members will become free agents. Not if — when. The question is whether you developed them well enough that their market value reflects the standard you held, and whether your reputation as a developer makes the next great candidate want to come build their value with you.

The operator who hoards talent — who tries to keep people by limiting their growth, by making the exit costly, by creating dependency instead of development — produces the opposite outcome. The people worth keeping find a way out anyway. The ones who stay are the ones who couldn't get a better offer. That's not a roster. That's a holding pattern.

The free agency model requires one thing the dependency model doesn't: the confidence that if you develop people well enough to lose them, you've built a reputation worth recruiting into.

That confidence is earned. One departure at a time.

Poaching — Both Directions

When competitors recruit your people, that's validation. The market noticed what you built. The operators who never get poached are the ones whose people aren't worth the effort of recruiting.

The defense against poaching isn't trying to prevent it. It's making the opportunity inside your operation compelling enough that the external offer isn't worth taking. Not through counteroffers — counteroffers are Road 1 retention. You're buying time, not commitment. The cast member who stayed for the counteroffer is already gone in every way that matters.

The defense is genuine growth, genuine culture, genuine development that makes the conversation short: "I appreciate the offer. I'm not done growing here yet."

When you recruit from competitors: the A level talent working in a culture that doesn't develop them, in an operation that doesn't hold the standard, in an environment that undervalues what they deliver — that person deserves to know a better opportunity exists. Telling them is not aggression. It is the market working as it should.

In a 2007 Fast Casual Magazine survey, 64% of operators reported hiring an employee away from another restaurant. That is not a minority practice. That is the industry's actual hiring strategy. Poaching is just what you call it when someone does it to you.

But the operator who poaches purely to weaken a competitor, who recruits people they don't genuinely intend to develop, who makes promises they don't intend to keep — that's a different act entirely. You're selecting for someone willing to leave without cause, and you're promising something you're not building. The A level talent who was recruited under a false promise becomes departure by neglect on an accelerated timeline. And the network they came from will know why they left.

Recruit actively. Recruit honestly. Build the culture that makes the recruitment unnecessary over time.

The Recruiting Mindset

Finding A level talent isn't a task you complete when a role opens. It's a posture you maintain continuously.

The operator who only recruits when they need someone is always behind the talent they actually need. By the time the role is open, the network conversation should already be happening. By the time the offer is made, the relationship should already exist.

Every section of the People fundamental contributes to the recruiting result. The development that produces departure by growth. The exit conversation that earns the referral. The culture that travels through the network. The reputation that arrives before you do.

The operator who builds all of it doesn't scramble to find A level talent when they need it.

They already know exactly who to call.

Engineer Your Circumstance

Great talent does not apply to disorganized, mediocre operations run by leaders who have stopped believing in their own standards. A players have options. They walk in, look around, feel

the energy — or the absence of it — and decide in about three minutes whether this place is worth their time. If you have not done the work to deserve them, they will not stay for the interview.

Stop asking where all the great people went. Engineer your circumstance.

Ask what it is about your operation that would make an A player want to work here. What does your culture say to someone walking through the door for the first time? What does your leadership say? What does the energy of your team say? The A player you are looking for is making exactly the same read of your building that your Guests are making — and they are reaching the same conclusion your Guests reach about whether this place is worth coming back to.

Get your house in order first. Clean building. Clear standards. A cast that is visibly developing and being treated with respect. A leader who is present on the floor and clearly invested in the people working there. Fix that, and the talent follows. It always does. The best people in any market are looking for a place worth their time. Your job is to become that place before you ask them to show up.

You are not hiring a server. You are hiring a human being who will run the server verb.

That distinction changes everything about how you look at the candidate across the table. The server skills — the menu knowledge, the table mechanics, the sequence of service — those are teachable. Every one of them. What is not teachable is the human underneath the skills. The discipline. The initiative. The honesty. The capacity to be present with another person at the table. The willingness to grow.

Those are not server qualities. They are human qualities. And they either exist in the person sitting across from you or they do not.

This is why operators who hire for server skills and get bad servers are solving the wrong problem. The server skills were fine. The human was the gap. And no amount of training closes a human gap — training only amplifies what is already there. A disciplined human with no server skills becomes a great server. An undisciplined human with every server skill becomes a liability with a uniform.

There are no personal goals and professional goals. There are just goals — the things a person is moving toward, the reasons they show up, the standard they hold themselves to when no one is watching. The operator who understands this hires differently. They are not evaluating whether this person can learn the menu. They are evaluating whether this person is the kind of human who

takes their own development seriously — because that is the human who will take the Guest seriously, the standard seriously, the cast seriously.

Hire the human. Develop the server. In that order, every time.