3095 FUNDAMENTAL 3 PEOPLE

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The restaurant industry has a talent competition happening at every level, every day, in every market. Most operators aren't aware they're in it until they lose someone to it.

Poaching is the word the industry uses when a competitor recruits one of your people. It carries a connotation of aggression, of theft, of disloyalty. Strip that away. What's actually happening is the free market for talent operating exactly as it's designed to — people moving toward better opportunities, better cultures, better development, better compensation. The operator who experiences this as an attack didn't understand the game they were playing.

A Level Talent Is Already Working for Someone

The first thing to understand about recruiting A level talent: they're 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're not available in the conventional sense because 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 operator who builds a reputation, stays connected to the industry, and actively recruits from the pool of people already delivering — that operator is playing a different game.

This means poaching isn't optional for the Road 2 operator. It's the only way to access the talent that matters most. You recruit from the people already working. You find them through your network, through your reputation, through the A level people already on your cast who know where the other A level people are working.

The passive operator gets the candidates nobody else wanted. The active operator gets the candidates everyone else is trying to keep.

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

The second thing to understand: 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. The departure follows — sometimes loudly, more often quietly.

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.

A Level Talent Travels in Packs

The third thing to understand: 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 — for any reason — also talks. 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. Make the exit worthy of the relationship — and the relationship worthy of the reputation you need.

When Competitors Poach From You

If your best people are being recruited by competitors, 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."

The cast member who leaves after a genuine poach attempt tells you one of two things. Either they were ready for departure by growth and the competitor simply opened the door first — celebrate it. Or the internal opportunity stopped being compelling before the poach happened — that's departure by neglect with a competitor as the mechanism.

The poach didn't take them. The gap in the development relationship did.

When You Recruit From Competitors

The operator who recruits A level talent from competitors isn't doing anything wrong — as long as they're recruiting for the right reasons.

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.

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.

The free agency model handles both sides. People move toward better opportunities. Markets decide value. The operator who builds the better development culture wins the talent competition over time — not through aggressive recruiting, but through reputation.

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

IP Terms

By Design Or By Default — Every outcome in your operation is the result of a deliberate decision or the absence of one. The operator who waits for talent to come to them is recruiting by default. The operator who actively builds a reputation, maintains industry relationships, and recruits from the pool of people already delivering at the standard is recruiting by design — and getting a fundamentally different quality of candidate as a result.

The Relational Loop — Operator → Cast → Guest → Cast → Operator. A closed circuit. A level talent who joins the operation and finds the loop real — finds the development genuine, the culture consistent, the standard held — completes the circuit at a higher level and raises the floor for everyone in it. The reputation that travels through the A level network is the Relational Loop operating beyond the four walls.

Lost Opportunity Tax — The compounding cost of not maximizing your operation's potential. The LOT on the recruiting side is paid every period the operator waited for talent to come to them instead of going to where the talent was. Every A level cast member who spent another year in an operation that didn't develop them — while you had the culture that would have — is a period of compounding you didn't get.