3175 The Six Root Causes of UnderCoaching

People Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/3175-the-six-root-causes-of-undercoaching/

My wife and I walked into a restaurant four weeks after it opened. We'd been there on opening night — the kind of opening that makes you believe the operator had finally figured it out. Hosts at the door with genuine enthusiasm. Managers everywhere, talking to Guests, supporting the staff. One server for every two or three tables. The kitchen producing beautiful food in record time. The bar alive with energy. Guest comment cards that night said keep up the great work.

Four weeks later, we walked in at 3:30 in the afternoon. Nobody at the front. We waited ten minutes while the bartenders talked to each other and eventually yelled back to the kitchen for the host. The host who appeared barely made eye contact. "Two? Smoking or non?" Threw menus on the table and disappeared.

Ten minutes before a server arrived. "Are you ready to order yet?" She didn't write anything down — she was very good at remembering things, she told us. Two of the four items came out wrong. When I pointed it out: "Well, I guess I could have misunderstood what you were telling me." No check-back until our drinks were completely empty.

I spoke to the manager before we left. His response: "We had hoped it would last longer than it did, but we knew that eventually business would drop off. Now we're all about our bottom line."

That statement is one of the saddest things I have ever heard in forty-four years in this business. They knew. They expected it. They accepted it as inevitable.

The opening wasn't a standard they built. It was a performance they put on — overstaffed, over-managed, energized by novelty — and when the novelty faded, so did the standard. There was no Coaching infrastructure to sustain what the opening had produced. The false culture collapsed the moment operational reality set in. The panic response that followed was predictable: coupons, discounts, quick-fix marketing that told their Guests the price they paid at the beginning was too high. It wasn't a marketing problem. It was a Coaching problem. And no promotion fixes that.

Under-Coaching is not a mystery. It has causes, and they are predictable. I've watched them produce the same outcomes across forty-four years and hundreds of operations. Here they are.

One: Lack of skill. Managers who were never Coached cannot Coach. You can never Coach in any way you have never personally experienced yourself. A manager who grew up in an operation with no Coaching infrastructure has no model to draw from. They manage the way they were managed. If that was poor, they produce more of it.

Two: Failure to establish proper culture. Culture is what happens in your business in the absence of a policy or direct supervision. If the culture doesn't value Coaching — if it isn't embedded in the daily rhythm of how the operation runs — Coaching becomes an add-on that gets dropped the moment the shift gets busy.

Three: Fear. Fear of confronting bad behavior. Fear of not being liked. Fear of approaching Guests. Fear of working the floor. Fear of success. Fear shows up differently in every manager, but the result is always the same: avoidance of the conversations that would move someone forward.

Four: Trying to be a friend instead of a leader. Taking talent for granted because you like the person. Hoping problems resolve themselves because addressing them is uncomfortable. Rewarding everyone the same regardless of performance. Allowing people to stay in their comfort zones because pushing them risks the relationship. This is not friendship. It's avoidance dressed up as loyalty.

Five: Condoning bad performance. Every time you accept less than full execution, you set a new standard. Slow drinks. An imperfect plate sent out because the line was slammed. A five-minutes-late arrival tolerated because you were glad they showed up. Every concession teaches the team what the real standard is — and it's always lower than the one posted on the wall.

Six: Failing to develop great players. A players aren't born — they're developed. The cast member you think is an A player right now is really an A-level opportunity waiting to be built. Skills rust without practice. If you're not actively developing your best people, you're watching their ceiling slowly lower.

Most operators soften feedback because they care more about how the conversation feels than about whether the problem gets solved. That is not kindness. It is selfishness — the coach protecting their own comfort at the expense of the cast member's development. The cast member who receives soft feedback on a real problem leaves the conversation feeling fine and unchanged. The problem compounds. The coach feels like they did their job. Nobody grew. Direct feedback is not comfortable to give or to receive. It is the price of actually developing someone.

Lead With Questions, Not Answers

The operator who leads with answers shuts down the cast. The operator who leads with questions opens up the cast's thinking — and more importantly, opens up their ownership of the solution. "What have you tried?" is the most powerful question in a restaurant leader's toolkit. It tells you whether the cast member has been thinking about the problem or waiting for direction. It signals that you expect them to have already engaged — which raises the standard without stating a policy. "What's one thing I could do differently?" is the most underused. The leader who asks that question and listens to the answer is inviting the cast to participate in their own development. That is the Road 2 conversational standard made visible.

Curiosity, Compassion, Courage

The Road 2 conversational posture has three components. Curiosity first — not performing competence, gathering understanding. Compassion second — aware of what the other person is navigating, not just what problem needs solving. Courage third — willing to ask what is uncomfortable, to surface the question everyone is avoiding, to choose clarity over comfort. That sequence is what separates the coaching conversation that changes something from the one that just uses time. Road 1 conversations are answer-oriented. Road 2 conversations are question-oriented. The shift from one to the other is the shift from expert problem-solver to the leader who builds the cast's capacity to solve problems without you.

Name the Pattern, Not the Incident

Most difficult conversations in a restaurant operation argue the content indefinitely — who said what, who did what, what the standard actually requires — while the pattern underneath goes unnamed. The move that changes the conversation is metacommunication: stepping out of the specific incident and talking about how the communication itself tends to go. "I've noticed that when something goes wrong, the conversation tends to move a certain way. I want to talk about that." That is a harder conversation than addressing the incident. It is also the only one that changes what happens next time. Addressing the incident resolves one moment. Naming the pattern is what changes the culture.

The Kindest Thing Is to Tell the Truth Fast

Silence is not kindness. It is cowardice — and the operator who absorbs feedback about a cast member's performance, tells themselves they'll find the right time, softens it until it loses its edge, and waits until the exit conversation to deliver what was known six months earlier has not protected anyone. They have protected themselves. The cast member who deserved to hear it directly got a blindsided verdict instead of a coaching conversation. The same feedback, delivered in the moment, would have changed the trajectory. Delivered six months later, it changed nothing except the cast member's trust in the relationship. The kindest thing a leader can do is tell the truth fast. The cruelest thing is to watch someone fail slowly while staying comfortable.

Every Hard Conversation You Avoid Is a Tax

Every piece of feedback you sit on. Every "I'll bring it up next week." Every correction you swallow because the timing feels wrong or the conversation feels uncomfortable. All of it is a tax — on the relationship, on the business, and on the person who deserved to hear it directly. The operator who avoids the hard conversation isn't managing their way toward a better outcome. They are compounding the cost of the gap between the standard and what is actually happening on the floor. The feedback that doesn't get delivered in real time doesn't disappear. It accumulates — until it arrives as a verdict, not a development conversation. At that point it is too late to produce a different outcome. It can only document a failure that was already decided.

The Road 2 Feedback Filter

One question before every feedback conversation: does delivering this feedback in this way make this person better — or does it just make me feel better? Road 1 feedback is timed for the operator's comfort. Delivered when it can no longer be avoided. Framed to minimize conflict. Vague enough to avoid the difficult specifics. Road 2 feedback is timed for the cast member's development. Delivered in real time, when the behavior is still connected to the moment. Specific enough to change what happens next. Clear enough that the person knows exactly what is expected going forward. The filter is not complicated. The discipline to apply it is.

Think about how the winningest coach in NFL history ran a sideline. On every play. Watching every detail. Calling plays. Sending in feedback in real time. Rewarding great execution immediately. Redirecting poor performance before it could spread to the rest of the team. When they won: praised performances, recognized individuals, and prepared for the next game. When they lost: same process. The system didn't change based on the scoreboard.

That's not a sports story. That's a management model. The shift is your game film. The cast member in front of a Guest right now is your player on the field. The standard you hold in that moment — or don't — is the Coaching decision that compounds over the season.

Most restaurant operations look like the other team: everyone calling their own plays, no momentum, no game plan, finger pointing, low morale. People wanting out.

You don't have to be the best technical operator in the building. You have to be the best Coach on the sideline. Every play. Every shift. Every day.

One final thing worth naming. You might hire what you consider an A player — but they are really only an A-level opportunity waiting to be developed. Great players aren't born. They're made. Just because someone performed at a high level in another operation doesn't mean they walk through your door ready to replicate it. The environment, the standards, the leadership, the culture — all of it shapes whether the potential becomes performance. Your job is to build the conditions where A-level opportunities become A-level players. That work never stops. Neither does the Coaching.

The Interest Rate on Skipping

You do not save time by skipping Coaching. You borrow it at very high interest.

The operator who bypasses the development conversation because the shift is busy, because the cast member seems fine, because there is always something more urgent — that operator is not managing their time. They are deferring the cost. The cast member who was not coached through the gap develops a workaround. The workaround becomes the habit. The habit becomes the standard. And six weeks later the operator is spending three times the time managing a problem that a five-minute conversation would have prevented.

Every hour not spent Coaching generates more than an hour of firefighting. That math runs in one direction. The operators who say they do not have time to Coach are the ones spending half their week on fires their teams would have handled if someone had spent five minutes with them at the right moment.

The root causes of under-Coaching are real. But underneath all of them is the same miscalculation: that not Coaching costs less than Coaching. It does not. It just bills later.