3385 Values Before Strategy

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"Business strategy must be synthesized with core values. When it is not, businesses fail."

The Question Nobody Asks First

When I sit down with an operator for the first time, I don't ask about their food costs or their labor model. I ask them what they believe. Not what they think will sell. Not what their investors want to hear. What they actually believe about running a business and serving people.

Most of them freeze. They've never been asked the question. They jumped straight from concept to execution — from "what do I want to build?" to "how do I build it?" — without stopping at the most important question in between: who am I, and what do I stand for?

Your business is a direct reflection of who you are. Your restaurant will reflect your discipline or your chaos, your generosity or your fear, your standards or your excuses. The culture that forms inside your four walls isn't random — it's a mirror. If you haven't decided what you believe, your business will reflect that too. It'll be a collection of borrowed ideas and convenient shortcuts with no backbone to hold it together when things get hard. And they always get hard.

This is why values have to come before strategy. Strategy answers how. Values answer why — and why not. Values are the filter through which every decision has to pass. Should you discount to drive traffic? Your values answer that. Should you keep the high-performing server who poisons your culture? Your values answer that too. Without that filter, you're making every decision on the fly, case by case, based on pressure and expediency. That's not operating. That's reacting.

The Contradiction Diagnostic

The fastest way to read your own culture is to find the contradictions between what you say and what experience teaches. "We want ownership" plus every decision requires sign-off — the unwritten ground rule is permission, not ownership. "We develop our people" plus no one has ever received a genuine coaching conversation — the unwritten ground rule is manage, don't develop. "Guests come first" plus the owner visible frustration in front of Guests — the unwritten ground

rule is the owner comes first. The contradiction is not the culture problem. The contradiction is the culture. [By Design Or By Default] applied to the space between stated values and operational reality.

What I Believe

Over forty-four years in this industry, I've distilled what I believe into a set of core convictions. These aren't motivational posters for your back office. They're operating principles — the ones I've seen separate the operators who thrive from the ones who spend years grinding and wondering why nothing changes.

The most fundamental: the Guest Experience is the only product you offer. Not your food. Not your cocktails. Not your atmosphere. Those are components. The product is the totality of what someone feels from the moment they become aware of you to the moment they walk out your door and beyond. Every touchpoint matters. The parking lot. The restrooms. The final payment. The follow-up. If you don't understand that the experience is the product, you'll spend your entire career optimizing ingredients while your Guests leave feeling nothing.

That leads directly to another conviction most operators resist: marketing is the only thing that makes you money — everything else is a cost. Before you push back, understand what I mean by marketing. Restaurant marketing involves every aspect of the Guest Experience. Everyone in your building is marketing your business — from the host to the dishwasher to the vendors you utilize. When your dishwasher keeps the restroom spotless, that's marketing. When your host makes a Guest feel like the most important person in the room, that's marketing. Great operations are the foundation of great marketing. You cannot execute great marketing with a badly managed business.

One that gets operators riled up: you cannot shrink your way to greatness. Business dips, and the first instinct is to cut — cheaper products, fewer staff, less training. All you're doing is making the experience worse, which drives more Guests away, which creates more pressure to cut. That's not a strategy. That's a death spiral.

The economy has nothing to do with your success or failure. I know that sounds provocative. But I've watched operators thrive in recessions and collapse in boom times. The economy is real, but it's not the variable that determines your outcome. Your operations, your values, your ability to deliver an experience worth paying for — those are the variables.

And discounting is antithetical to great businesses that offer a differentiated Guest Experience. Discounting trains your Guests to wait for the deal. It erodes your margins. Worst of all, it signals that your experience isn't worth full price. You earn premium pricing by being worth it, not by being cheap.

When Strategy and Values Don't Align

Business strategy must be synthesized with core values. When it is not, businesses fail. Here's what that looks like in practice.

An operator who genuinely believes in developing people — in training, coaching, investing in their team — but whose strategy is built around minimizing labor costs and running skeleton crews. Those two things cannot coexist. Every day, that operator is forced to choose between what they believe and what their strategy demands. Something has to give, and it's almost always the values.

Or the operator who believes the Guest Experience is everything — but whose business strategy is built on discounting and volume. You can't deliver a premium experience at a discount price point. The math doesn't work, and more importantly, the mindset doesn't work. You end up chasing transactions instead of building relationships. Your team learns that volume matters more than connection. Your Guests learn that your price is the only reason to visit.

This misalignment doesn't kill you overnight. It creates a slow bleed. Your team gets confused by the mixed signals. Your culture becomes incoherent. Your Guests feel something is off but can't name it. And you feel exhausted — because you're constantly fighting yourself.

The fix is simple to describe and difficult to execute: decide what you believe, and then build a strategy that serves those beliefs — not the other way around. When culture and strategy are aligned, performance follows. When they're opposed, chaos does.

Throw Out the Golden Rule

The Golden Rule never was. You can't treat people how you want to be treated and expect success. You have to treat them how they want to be treated.

This is a subtle but critical distinction. The Golden Rule is self-referential — it assumes everyone wants what you want. In hospitality, that's a fatal assumption. Your Guests are individuals, and so are your employees. What motivates one server has zero effect on another. What makes one Guest feel welcome makes another feel smothered. Great operators pay attention. They adapt.

They ask, and then they listen.

Behaviors that create emotional attachments drive loyalty — not points, not low prices. Developing Guest loyalty depends on your ability to engage Guests at all touchpoints on an emotional level. That can't happen if you're treating everyone the same way. It happens when you treat each person the way they need to be treated.

Fun Is Not Optional

Fun must be a core value. This is a hospitality business. If your team isn't enjoying the work, your Guests will feel it. Fun isn't frivolous — it's functional. It affects energy, retention, and the quality of every interaction. Employee satisfaction isn't enough. Engagement is required to impact the bottom line. People who are engaged — who are having fun, who feel connected to the mission — perform at a different level. You can't mandate engagement. You create the conditions for it, and fun is one of those conditions.

Action and Courage

Success demands action, and action demands a plan and the courage to carry it out. The single biggest difference between operators who transform their businesses and those who stay stuck is not intelligence, capital, or location. It's the willingness to act on what they know. That takes courage. It takes a plan. And it takes values clear enough to guide every move.

Every decision you make when no one is watching is a rep. The operator who makes the right call when it's inconvenient, unprofitable, and unwitnessed is compounding character. The operator who makes the expedient call is contracting it — and won't notice the interest accruing until the stakes are high enough to matter. Culture is what happens in the absence of policy or direct supervision. Compounding character is what produces that culture. The daily private decisions are the reps that determine what the operation becomes under pressure.

The Foundation Nobody Builds First

Operators jump to strategy. They jump to design, menus, technology, marketing tactics. They skip the foundation, and then spend years patching cracks that shouldn't exist.

The order is non-negotiable: establish values first, then build systems that express those values, then find people who share those values to execute within those systems. Skip a step and the whole structure wobbles.

Innovation is the goal — not problem-solving. If you're constantly solving problems, you built your foundation wrong. Building on strengths provides the fastest route to success. Know what you believe. Know what you're good at. Build from there.