3610 Leading People vs Using Them

People Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/3610-leading-people-vs-using-them/

There's a distinction most operators never make — not because they don't care, but because they've never been asked to look at it directly.

Are you leading your cast or using them?

Using looks like leading from the outside. The operation runs. The shifts get covered. The food goes out. The Guest gets served. By every visible metric, things are working. But nobody is growing. The cast shows up, does the work, goes home. The operator gets the output. That's extraction — not malicious, not intentional, but extraction nonetheless.

Leading is different. Leading means that the people in your operation are becoming something through the work they do with you. They are developing skill, judgment, character, and the capacity to deliver at a higher standard than they could when they arrived. The work is producing more than output — it's producing people.

The test is simple. If the people you lead aren't growing, one of two things is true: you hired the wrong people, or you aren't actually leading them.

That's not a comfortable distinction. Most operators who are using their cast don't know they're doing it. They're running the operation. They're holding standards. They're managing performance. But they're not building people. And without the building, all of it is extraction with better manners.

The Difference in Practice

The using operator fills roles. They need someone in the position and they put someone there. Whether that person grows in the role, whether the role grows them, whether there's any trajectory attached to the function — those aren't questions that get asked. The role gets covered. That's the measure.

The leading operator designs roles to develop people. Not just to fill the function but to build the person doing it. They think about what skills this role develops, what judgment it requires, what the person will be capable of after six months in it that they weren't capable of before. The role is

a development vehicle as much as it's an operational necessity.

The using operator responds to problems with personnel. Cast member isn't performing — replace them. Turnover is high — post the position again. The system keeps running the same way and keeps producing the same results because the variables being changed are people, not the environment that produced the problem.

The leading operator responds to problems with curiosity. Cast member isn't performing — what's in the environment that's producing this outcome? Is the standard clear? Is the development happening? Is the feedback specific enough to change behavior? Turnover is high — why aren't people growing here? What's the real reason they're leaving?

The data confirms what the leading operator already knows. In a 2024 survey of 1,500 active restaurant employees, 7shifts found that 45% had left a job specifically because of poor management or negative interactions with a supervisor. Not because of pay. Not because of hours. Because of the person standing between them and the operation. Nearly half your turnover isn't a staffing problem. It's a leadership problem.

And it isn't just hourly staff walking out. Black Box Intelligence reports that management turnover in limited-service restaurants is running at 55% — ten points higher than pre-pandemic levels. In full service, it's 38%, up from 31%. The managers you're counting on to hold the operation together are leaving at the same accelerated rate as the people they're supposed to be leading. When your leaders don't stay, your culture doesn't either.

There is a version of this question that runs in the other direction: would your cast get better and stay longer if you served them as well as you serve your Guests?

That is not a rhetorical question. It is the accountability test for everything in this section. The operator who leads — rather than uses — is extending the same relational standard inward that they expect the cast to extend outward. You cannot produce hospitality from a cast that is not receiving it.

One asks who. The other asks why. And the answer to why is always about the system, the culture, and the leadership — not just the person.

The LOT on Using People

The Lost Opportunity Tax on extraction is paid in two currencies.

The first is operational. The cast that isn't growing isn't compounding. Their capability today is their capability tomorrow — and the Guest Experience they deliver reflects the ceiling that was never raised. The operation that relies on extraction instead of development is running at a static capability level that erodes relative to any competitor who is developing their people.

The second is cultural. The cast that is being used knows it — not always consciously, but they feel it. The absence of trajectory. The sense that the work is a transaction rather than a contribution. The feeling that the operator sees them as a function rather than a person. That feeling doesn't stay private. It becomes the signal the culture sends — and it determines who stays, who leaves, and who the operation attracts next.

The using operator wonders why they can't retain good people. The leading operator wonders where to find more of them.

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 fills roles without asking whether those roles develop the people in them is using people by default. The operator who designs roles as development vehicles, asks whether the people in them are growing, and builds the environment that makes growth possible is leading by design.

Lost Opportunity Tax — The compounding cost of not maximizing your operation's potential. The extraction version of the LOT is paid every period the operator ran the operation without developing the people running it — and discovered, eventually, that the ceiling on the operation's capability was the ceiling on the cast's development. Both compounds. One in the right direction.

The Relational Loop — Operator → Cast → Guest → Cast → Operator. A closed circuit. The leading operator runs the loop at full power — developing the cast, which elevates the Guest Experience, which deepens the Guest relationship, which compounds the operation. The using operator runs the loop at minimum power — extracting output without building capability, which produces a Guest Experience that plateaus, which produces a Guest relationship that doesn't deepen, which produces an operation that doesn't compound.