3625 The Other Side of the Feedback Loop

People Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/3625-the-other-side-of-the-feedback-loop/

There's a failure that doesn't appear on any list — because most operators can't see it. It's invisible by design.

Your team isn't telling you the truth.

Not because they're dishonest. Because somewhere along the way, you made it clear that the truth had a cost.

Who Goes Quiet First

The silence in a broken culture is never peaceful. It is the sound of people who stopped trying.

The first people to go quiet are not the mediocre ones. The mediocre ones were never saying much. The first people to go quiet are the best ones — the cast members who care most, see most clearly, and have enough self-awareness to know when speaking up has stopped being worth it. They read the room. They stop raising their hand. They start doing exactly what they are asked and nothing more. And eventually they leave — not dramatically, but decisively — because a building that punishes honesty is a building that has nothing left to offer them.

What remains is a team that tells the operator what they want to hear while the business deteriorates around them. The operator almost never sees it coming because they built a culture designed to keep them comfortable instead of informed. Every problem that reached crisis level was visible to someone on the floor for weeks before it became a crisis. Nobody said anything. Not because they didn't care — because they learned, through one reaction or one dismissal or one moment when speaking up had a cost, that this was not a place where honesty was safe.

The feedback loop does not close because people forget to give feedback. It closes because they remember what happened the last time they did.

Think about the last time someone on your team told you something you didn't want to hear — a process that wasn't working, a manager making things worse, a pattern in the Guest experience that had been building for weeks. How did you respond? If you got defensive, dismissed it, or if that person walked away visibly worse off for having spoken — you closed a door that hasn't fully

opened since. Not just for them. For every person who was watching.

Your team is always watching. They want to know what happens to the person who tells the truth. In most restaurants, they already know. The last one who raised a concern got labeled difficult. The last one who pushed back got marginalized. The last one who turned out to be right got a flat "thanks" and watched nothing change.

So they stopped talking. And you stopped knowing.

The operator who says "my door is always open" believes it. The team that walks past that door every day knows better. An open door means nothing if the last person through it paid for the visit.

This isn't a people problem. It's a broken dynamic — one the leader created, usually without realizing it, and can only fix by earning it back. Not with a policy. Not with a meeting. You earn it by how you respond the next time someone tells you something uncomfortable. Curiosity instead of defense. Action instead of dismissal. Visible follow-through instead of silence.

Handle that moment right — once, in front of the room — and you've sent a signal to everyone in the building that the truth is safe here. That signal spreads.

Only 40% of employees say they have had a formal opportunity to provide feedback to their manager (Gallup). In a restaurant where cast-to-operator communication is almost entirely verbal and in the moment, the number is probably lower. The cast member who has never been formally asked what they think has no reason to believe their thinking matters — and that belief shows up in how they treat Guests.

The question also matters as much as the asking. "How's everything going?" produces one answer: fine. It is not a feedback question. It is a social ritual. The cast member who hears it from the owner knows the correct response and gives it. The feedback that would actually improve the operation — what is breaking, what the cast is struggling with, what the Guest is saying that the operator never hears — requires a question specific enough that "fine" is not an available answer. What is slowing you down right now? What is one thing I do that makes your job harder? What would you change about how we run this operation? Those are feedback questions. "How's everything going?" is a greeting.

Only 26% of employees feel that the feedback they give leads to any meaningful change. In a restaurant where every shift surfaces real operational friction, that number means your cast has already stopped telling you where the problems are. You have to close the loop out loud — not in a

quarterly review, not in a meeting. On the floor, the next shift after you made the change: you told me the printer placement was slowing ticket times, here is what we changed. That sentence is more powerful than any recognition program you will ever implement.

The leaders who genuinely know what's happening in their operations didn't get that information by being approachable. They got it by being safe. One is a personality trait. The other is earned.