

## TAKE-HOME POINTS



By the time you've finished reading this article, you should be able to:

- ✓ Identify problem employees who can be saved from those who cannot.
- ✓ Describe typical problems in the hiring and training processes and how to address them.
- ✓ Explain how to motivate employees by catching them "doing something right."

# Accentuate the Positive

## How to Keep Marginal Employees From Going Bad

**T**he true test of a great manager is the number of employees they have turned around, not the terminations. You can fire all the people you want, but you are not going to be a successful restaurant manager until you learn how to take employees who may seem marginal, flawed or difficult and turn them into productive long-term members of your team.

The bottom line — literally — is that turnover is expensive. Once you factor in the cost of interviewing, hiring and training, finding a new hire and retraining them for a position is akin to paying them overtime for every hour they work until they get up to speed.

Management resources are limited, and that includes quality employees. Great restaurant managers learn to allocate their resources strategically, identifying the employees most likely to turn it around, and then making sure those employees receive special attention. That is not to say that great restaurant managers are incapable of making a hard firing decision when necessary. Some problem employees just can't be saved.

When you identify a problem employee, ask yourself if the challenges this teammate poses are more than can realistically be addressed. Every manager will have some issues that they just won't be able to solve. These are your "threshold issues," and may include substance abuse, drama from home that creeps into the workplace, lethargy or a tendency to challenge authority. Curing these go beyond your expertise and your "pay grade." That said, as this article illustrates, you can save some of your employees with a little extra effort and common sense.

*By Matthew Mabel*

## Meet Indigo, Tyrone and Phillipe

Indigo was a line cook who showed up to work every day on time with a positive attitude, but could not seem to follow standards and recipes at her station. Far too often, food was remade on her shifts. And she wasn't getting any better.

Tyrone was truly a great server known for a high check average and the ability to handle extra tables with ease. But his clothes led people to believe that though he may have had a home, he definitely didn't have a washer and dryer. But that didn't bother him. When he left at the end of the shift, his managers wondered where he was going; he seemed clueless about his life as he drifted out of the parking lot.

Phillipe was hired as a busboy after an interview in which it was revealed that he had worked at some respected competitors' operations. The hire decision was easy. But once he was on the floor, he constantly questioned established procedures. Managers were always complaining that they were spending too much time with Phillipe discussing policy, and not enough time with guests.

Bear in mind: Management is in charge, and is never the victim. So, before we go forward, let's take a look at how Indigo, Tyrone and Phillipe reached this point.

## The Hiring and Training Process

Does your restaurant have a high number of problem employees, and are you constantly dealing with people who are Indigos, Tyrones, Phillipes, or worse? If so, then

the first place to look is the hiring process. An improvement in hiring will be a global solution that will reduce the number of problem employees.

Examine every step of the hiring process, from the application you hand to prospective employees to the final interview.

- ✓ Does the application ask the right questions?
- ✓ Does the interview consist of open-ended conversation that draws the applicant out as opposed to a series of yes-or-no questions or others that are easy to field?
- ✓ Does the applicant have stories to back up their claims of experience? Do you take the time to check references or are you in too much of a hurry to get someone into training before the busy season?
- ✓ Is the hiring manager the sort of person who sees the best in people and overlooks warning signs?

Set a goal to review every step in the hiring process with a view toward a specific reduction in turnover over a finite period of time. Then follow through and measure your turnover. Also, check your progress anecdotally to satisfy yourself that hiring is getting better and you have fewer problem employees.

Training deserves scrutiny, too. There is no point in blaming problem employees if they have not been offered thoughtful, clear and all-encompassing training that includes testing and measurement along the way to prove they are ready to serve your guests. Outstanding people may succeed in your restaurant without training, but an average hire has a high risk of failure.

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As with hiring, improving the training process is a global solution. Examine the content, pace and delivery of your training, and pay special attention to the trainers and managers in charge of training. Have you got the right people in the right places? Is there a history of your training team signing off on new hires, declaring them trained, only to see them fail? Set a goal to improve the training, make sure the right people are operating the training, and measure it, with the result being, once again, reduction in turnover and anecdotal progress that things are improving.

Hiring and training are complex subjects that could not be covered adequately in the space of one article. See “Additional Resources” on Page 23 for links to more information on the hiring and training process, at RestaurantOwner.com.

### Start With Catching Them Doing Something Right

How many times have you interviewed a potential manager, asked about their philosophy and heard, “I am firm but fair; I treat everyone the same way.” Over the past 30 years of interviewing restaurant managers, I guarantee I have heard that hundreds of times. At first it sounds good — crewmembers knowing at all times where they stand; blind justice handed out fairly. Anyone can get behind that.

One problem: All people are different, and “firm but fair” overlooks that fact. When you are dealing with varied personalities, the only logical management solution

that will succeed is to treat people differently — to treat them like themselves. To some, the first time they hear that “firm but fair” has its limitations and pitfalls, it takes a while to sink in.

So how are you going to motivate the Indigos, Tyrones and Phillippes? The first thing to do is praise them for something they are doing well. Admittedly, this is counterintuitive, but when you complete this step, you will gain credibility. The problem employee will find it easier to listen to you.

Even the most marginal employee in your restaurant — the one you are thinking about firing — is doing something right. You just have to figure out what it is. That marginal employee is probably not accustomed to hearing anything good about their performance but, once they do, things may start to change.

By the time a problem employee gets to “restaurant rehab,” they already have their defenses up, and are concerned that they are going to have to look for another job — again. They are expecting to hear about their transgressions and anticipating an unpleasant conversation. Maybe they’ll still have a chance to keep their job. Maybe not. But when you start by praising them for something they do well, you let them know that, this time, the outcome may be different. You build their self-esteem and let them know that you have not given up on them. By changing the tone, you create the space to have open and honest communication on issues later. Giving praise balances your point of view, which equates to your making a better deci-



sion when the time comes to decide if a problem employee should continue to be on your team.

Once you have broken through the wall, you will be able to reach out to the actual person beyond the problem employee — to take them out of the “firm but fair” realm into their own status as an actual human being. This lays the groundwork for more effective communication on how they must improve and helps you gain valuable knowledge about their motivation. Take some time to have a conversation about the employee’s life and attitude toward work.

- ✓ Are they working at your restaurant to start a career or just pull a paycheck?
- ✓ Do they have heavy financial responsibilities at home?
- ✓ Are they saving to go to school and earn a degree or are they living a carefree life in the here and now?
- ✓ What’s their attitude about work, past employers and your restaurant?
- ✓ Throw in some off-the-wall questions about the last music they downloaded or the one place they would most like to travel.
- ✓ Share some of your own thoughts as you establish more of a relationship.

In these conversations, most people will reveal what motivates them — something you will need to know if you want to succeed in turning them around.

## Getting to the Point

You have taken the time to praise them, to get to know them better, and to focus on what motivates them. Now have a frank conversation about the job performance that has to change: the food cooked to standards, the uniform pressed and cleaned, and remaining focused on the guest during a shift.

Layer specific information on top of the praise and the interpersonal connection you have established. Be clear that these behaviors are career-limiting behaviors. Even if the problem employee has been written up for these issues, you will need to address them again. Reinforce the idea that, if these issues remain unaddressed, it will be hard for them to keep a job, whether at your restaurant or others.

Once you gain agreement on the issue, establish an action plan. Ask the problem employee what the management team of the restaurant can do to help them correct their behavior. Asking people what they need is a very powerful form of communication.

Next, ask the problem employee what they are willing to do to rectify the situation — and when are they going to do it? This sets a goal and a timeline for improvement and also makes your next decision easier and easily justifiable. Wrap this up with some motivation you learned about in the earlier conversation. If they achieve the goal by your agreed-upon deadline, you get an employee in good standing. If not, the employee may be terminated.

If you have correctly evaluated the threshold issues you wrote down at the beginning of this article, it is worth putting a reasonable amount of time into encouragement,

providing of tools, and evaluation of the problem employee in your quest to add them to your list of successes. If you have never done this before, you will learn from this experience, and, like all new things, you will get better at it as your restaurant management career evolves.

## What Happened to Indigo, Tyrone and Phillipe?

Indigo’s manager sat her down and praised her for her dependability. She noticed that Indigo was disappointed in the production problems she was causing. This gave the manager another clue that Indigo’s difficulty wasn’t a lack of motivation. The manager reflected back to Indigo that the management team appreciated that she cared about standards.

The manager also found out something new: Indigo was working in the kitchen to save up for college. She really needed this job — it was the gateway to her going into nonprofit management. Obviously, Indigo was a disciplined, caring person who had a goal in life. So what was the problem?

A thought popped into the manager’s head; Indigo had passed the company’s online kitchen training, but maybe the online training had not been effective for Indigo’s personal learning style. Though she had passed the tests, she hadn’t actually soaked in the knowledge.

The manager offered Indigo two options: to either allow her to be retrained or to move on, separating from the restaurant and finding another way to pay for college.

Indigo readily agreed to be retrained — this time with a mentor who would walk her through each of the menu items she would be preparing. This suited her learning style much better. As a result, her restaurant job continues to support her savings and her dream. This was a lot more effective than just instructing her to “make it the way you saw in the video” or “watch the video again.”

Tyrone was a different story. Frankly, his managers simply thought he was clueless and marveled that he could do anything right in the first place. The praise piece was easy, however, everyone agreed his service on the floor was outstanding. His high PPA (per person average) was evidence that he offered great drinks and menu items to every table, so he deserved credit for all of that. When he heard that, he lit up.

Then came the “getting to know you” piece, which was difficult. It was hard to “pin down” Tyrone on anything; he seemed to take a circuitous route to nowhere when asked a question. It was clear he was taking life as it happened, i.e., having fun, enjoying himself and not really thinking about the future. But there was one thing he kept coming back to: his interest in, and love of, people, from friends to family to a complete stranger he had met on the bus on the way to work that day.

Breakthrough. Tyrone’s manager realized that what really motivated him was relationships and helping others. Tyrone did not care what someone looked like or from where he or she came.

None of that mattered to him. So, no wonder he came to work with a black polo shirt with a stain on it and his khakis looking like they had been crumpled up next to his bed three nights in a row. Appearance did not matter to him; it was the people who were important.

This was an opportunity to explain to Tyrone that, even though appearances did not matter to him, it mattered to the guests and his co-workers. He had never stopped to think that people who saw stained and rumpled clothes on a server might start to think about whether sanitation in the kitchen was up to standard.

Tyrone finally got it. He did not have to care about how he looked; he just had to understand the expectations of the people — the guests and co-workers — that he cared about. He loved helping those people, whether talking about a new appetizer or picking up an extra table from another server who was in the weeds. He did not have to think about the future, which is a good thing because there was no way he was going to do that, anyway. He did not have to change; he just had to adapt.

And finally, there is Phillippe, the one who was always asking questions on the floor, subordinating the needs of the guests. His manager asked him to stay late one night after a shift, first inquiring if that would interrupt the schedule of his wife and young child. She told Phillippe that she was glad he was thinking about the restaurant all the time, how to improve it, taking nothing for granted. She appreciated that Phillippe cared.

By talking with him, she learned that Phillippe had aspirations. He was not just working to support his family, but loved the atmosphere of restaurants, loved business and wanted to advance in the industry. He and his wife also wanted to be able to have another baby in a few years.

That is when his manager shook her head and said, “You know, Phillippe, sometimes I think you are so difficult — never leaving things alone and never just doing it the way we tell you — but now I realize that you are management material. You are always thinking of how to make the restaurant better. It is just that you are doing it in the middle of the shift when there is no time to stop and talk about process improvement.” Phillippe had already been thinking like a manager in his personal life and at work; he just did not have the experience yet.

Phillippe and his manager made an agreement. Phillippe would make a mental note of all of his ideas, but not bring them up during the shift. He would pick the best ones each week and e-mail them to her. She would bring some of them up at the weekly operations meeting and let Phillippe know which had been approved. It was not long before Phillippe was put on a management training track, being included in discussions with existing assistant and shift managers. Phillippe was given the platform to speak up and influence with his opinion, but not yet given the power to make the decision. That would come later. He stopped driving managers crazy with ideas during the shift, and gained the confidence that his career was going in the right direction. He had been identified as “future management material.”

## Additional Resources on Hiring and Training Your Staff

- > **Ten Interview Questions Restaurant Operators Should Ask Before Hiring Anyone**  
[www.restaurantowner.com/members/250.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/250.cfm)
- > **How to Avoid Negligent Hiring**  
[www.restaurantowner.com/members/1148.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/1148.cfm)
- > **Why Stupid People Get Hired, and What You Can Do to Avoid This**  
[www.restaurantowner.com/members/757.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/757.cfm)
- > **How to Find & Attract More Quality Employees**  
[www.restaurantowner.com/members/161.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/161.cfm)
- > **How to Find the Right Manager for Your Restaurant**  
[www.restaurantowner.com/members/1150.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/1150.cfm)
- > **Waiter & Waitress Training Manual Template**  
[www.restaurantowner.com/public/702.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/public/702.cfm)
- > **Restaurant Training Manual Templates**  
[www.restaurantowner.com/public/176.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/public/176.cfm)
- > **Web-based Restaurant Staff Training**  
[www.restaurantowner.com/members/1206.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/1206.cfm)

## What's So Funny About Listening, Praising and Understanding?

Indigo, Tyrone and Phillippe had successfully been turned around. It took listening, praising and understanding — balanced with straight talk about their future. That all paid off and allowed them to contribute to the mission of the restaurant. None of this talent marched out the front door or was sent packing. There were no additional costs associated with new hires and even more training.

Through their interaction with Indigo, Tyrone and Phillippe, their managers learned new skills they would refine for the rest of their careers. The restaurants they worked in benefited from Indigo's committed cooking, Tyrone's outstanding service and PPA, and Phillippe's ideas. Management took the time to understand, motivate and coach them, treating them as individuals. They did what all great managers do every day — whatever is best for their restaurant.

**RS&G**