



TAKE-HOME POINTS

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

- ✓ List 12 traits of good managers, and how to incorporate them into your new supervisory role.
- ✓ Identify ways to establish trust with your superiors and staff as you transition into management.
- ✓ Explain why transitional periods are a great opportunity to reinvent yourself.



NAME
RESTAURANT MANAGER

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No.
FIRST

BY MATTHEW MABEL
**A DOZEN THINGS
THAT WILL HELP YOU
GET OFF TO A GREAT START
AS A RESTAURANT MANAGER**

Moving into your first restaurant management position can be a daunting transition. And if it's at one of the top restaurants in your area, that just ramps up the pressure.

Just ask Vianei Munoz-Vidal. A former server at Tom Colicchio's Craft restaurant at the W hotel in Dallas, she then moved to Samar by Stephan Pyles. This noted Dallas chef's operation features "International Small Plates" from India, Spain and Eastern Mediterranean countries, and was named the city's "Best New Restaurant of 2009" by *The Dallas Morning News*. It's also where Munoz-Vidal is beginning her management career.

When I first met her, she was paying me a table visit at Samar two months after her promotion. Her natural friendliness, energy, hospitality and enthusiasm for the restaurant were very evident, and I asked her what the biggest thing was that she had learned since leaving the server ranks and joining the management team. She told me, "I used to be a player in the orchestra, but now I am the conductor. It is a lot different."

Though being a manager is certainly a different mindset from being a server, Munoz-Vidal has successfully made the transition. Management is a series of transitions, however, and how you handle those transitions can determine the level of success you achieve in your management career.

Your first management position sets the stage for your entire career. Whether you want to be a general manager one day, own your own restaurant, make another move later in your life to a position in marketing, sales, concept development or training, or just to be known as being among the best in your profession, it is a good idea to think about where all this is going. Where do you expect your first management position to lead you? It is important to prepare and strive for improvement.

1. Emulate Those You Admire

Before you take the reins as a manager, it is a good idea to reflect on who you admire, and what pieces of their management technique you can emulate. Think about each and every manager you have worked for since you got your first job in the industry — or in another industry if you started outside of hospitality.

What were their best qualities? How did those qualities support their successes and those of the team they led?

Which of those qualities are you comfortable making part of your tool kit? Which are not for you or would be too much of a stretch right now?

What about people for whom you've not worked; people you have met in your community or even read about or studied from afar? This could be anyone, from your next-door neighbor to Danny Meyer or Charlie Trotter. What does their style offer you in things you can adopt and use to build your career?

Don't just think about it. Write all of this down in a file on your computer or phone; somewhere you can look at it often and continue to refine it. When you first get started, look at it every day. After your first few months in management, back off to once a week. By the end of six months, look at it monthly. Don't be afraid to make changes once you find out what works for you and what does not. Reacting to changing circumstances is part of being a good manager.

2. Read and Learn

Whether your first management job is at an award-winning restaurant, a casual dining mainstay or the local diner, there are many things you can

learn from the people who run some of the finest restaurants in the country. Just understanding their attitude and approach will pay huge dividends in your dining room and kitchen with your staff and vendors.

Munoz-Vidal suggests reading Danny Meyer's book "Setting the Table: Transforming the Power of Hospitality in Business" (Harper Collins 2006), which tells the story of the birth and growth of the service ethic and a New York restaurant empire. She also recommends the documentary "Le Cirque: A Table in Heaven" (HBO 2007), about the ups and downs of moving and opening the legendary New York Restaurant. I would add to that list "Lessons in Service" by Charlie Trotter (Ten Speed Press 2001).

3. Reinvent Yourself

Any time you make a transition in your life, you get a tremendous opportunity to reinvent yourself, to present yourself in a new way. As a new manager, your persona can be completely new. Ask yourself what type of internal change would support your greatest success in management? Maybe there is something about yourself that you know, deep down inside, does not

present you at your best. Perhaps you could show more enthusiasm, be more outgoing, become a better listener, or display more understanding. Maybe you could just dress differently; e.g., dressing like an adult, losing those logo T-shirts you wore in college. Or it could be time to stop smoking and start working out.

Make changes right away and you'll be less self-conscious about them. Take inventory of yourself, choose the one change you think would be most advantageous, and do it. This may be the only time in your career that people do not look at you and ask, "What happened to him?" as they observe the new behavior.

But make sure the change is real, and not faked. You have been promoted to manager, not actor. So no matter how much you admire a famous executive's management technique or wish you were as funny as Jeff Foxworthy and Chris Rock combined, it is important to be realistic about what fits you. Use the pieces that fit to build your management persona. Make sure they are extensions of your true personality, values, and beliefs and experience about what makes a restaurant successful. Don't try and stretch so far that you appear insincere or unreal.

4. Understand Your General Manager's Specific Expectations

There is a good chance that you are going to want to make your mark as a new manager by having a specific success story. That is human nature. Anyone would want to show the general manager that they have made the right decision. The trouble is that this could be exactly the opposite of what your general manager wants you to do.

If you have an understanding of what your general manager expects from you in the first months of your management career, that's great. If not, ask your general manager for a time to sit down — away from the clamor of a shift in your restaurant — and find out exactly what is expected of you. Don't

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assume anything. You may be assigned a certain aspect of training, sanitation, purchasing or customer service, or you may just be asked to run shifts and soak it all in. It is just as important to start off with a great relationship with your general manager as it is with your crew, guests and vendors.

5. Break the Bond

Being promoted from within your restaurant is one of the toughest situations to handle. One week you are working side by side with cooks, expeditors, servers, bartenders and porters, and the next day you are supervising them, pointing out when they are doing well, but correcting them when they are not following the sequence of service, the schedule or the culture of your restaurant.

You are going to have to break the bond. You can still be friendly, but early on being friends is going to be harder. Maybe you should pass on going out for drinks after work. If you play favorites as a manager, your credibility will erode and there is a chance you may fail.

6. Set an Example

When you were a cook, server or hostess, you did your part. Now that you are in management, though, you need to set the tone for your whole shift. Everything about you — your timeliness, appearance, language and behavior — sets an example. Everyone is watching you. So rise to the challenge. If you are on time, looking great, enthusiastic, happy and determined to show off the great menu items your restaurant offers, your staff will do the same. If you slack off on one detail, they will start to think to themselves, “Well, the manager doesn’t care about that, so why should I?” You probably even said that yourself when you were a cook, server or hostess. Don’t let it happen on your shift.

Since you are now a manager, you represent your restaurant when you are out in the community you serve. You have become one of the faces of that restaurant. So set an example all the

time. When you represent your restaurant well, you can always be promoting. Don’t ever miss a chance to hand out a business card and create a first-time guest by inviting someone to come see you at work.

7. Cut the Gossip

Great restaurants need managers who can be trusted, display leadership, and can be confided in. But restaurants are full of gossip. It can be hard to get through a shift without hearing stories that may or may not be true about co-workers, guests and the restaurant across the street. Sometimes you come home from work thinking you have absorbed more dirt about people than viewers of “Access Hollywood” or readers of *The Star*.

The solution at one of the organizations I worked with was to have a “no gossip” rule. That’s a tough one to live by, but, as a new manager, it is important that you exemplify leadership and get out of the gossip mill immediately. Don’t instigate it, don’t pass it on and, if you can, don’t listen to it. People respect managers who steer clear of gossip.

8. Choose Your Words Carefully

So how do you win over your former co-workers? Talk about what is best for the restaurant. Often, first-time managers make the mistake of using themselves as the reason they give directions, saying to a hostess, for instance, “I want you to greet the guest differently.” This is the management equivalent of the server who goes to the table and says, “My specials tonight are....” Guess what, they are not her specials; they belong to the restaurant.

If you talk about what you want, your staff will be thinking you are on an ego trip and that it is all about you. If you change the language to say, “Let me show you how greeting the guests differently would be best for the restaurant,” you enroll them in something that is good for the whole group, not just for you. After all, if everyone puts

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all their energy into what is best for the restaurant, the restaurant will be there to support employees, guests, vendors and ownership.

Similarly, using language like, “I suggest,” “I recommend” and “You have an opportunity to” when talking about desired behavior will make you a lot more influential than when you tell people, “You need to....” The only person whose needs you really know about is you.

9. Always Bring the Good With the Bad

Being heard is a challenge for every manager. If you are talking but no one is paying attention, you are going to have a hard time accomplishing anything.

Every manager has to spend part of his or her day correcting people, pointing out their flaws and identifying opportunities for doing things better. That is part of the job. So how do you win over people who expect you to say things they may not want to hear?

Bring the good with the bad. When you focus on the positive, you create an atmosphere people like to work in. You gain credibility from those who are wary of a dictatorial manager who only sees the flaws. You establish relationships through recognizing the great things that are happening in your restaurant on every shift every day. This will foster a spark in attitude that your guests can feel in the dining room.

Whenever you see someone doing something well, speak up. When you have to be critical, always bring the good with the bad. Tell the person what he or she is doing right before you tell them what they are doing wrong. Look at correcting a situation as an opportunity and you will find it is a lot easier to enroll people in your plans than if you become known as a policemen or school principal type in a restaurant manager’s position. If this does not come naturally to you, put it on your list of manager qualities you wrote under the topics “Who Do You Admire?” and “Reinvent Yourself.” There is no more important skill you can adopt than learning to praise people effectively.

10. Ask, Don’t Tell

Managers are often tempted to take the expeditious route and simply tell people what to do. It gets the job done quickly, which may be all that counts on a Friday lunch or Saturday dinner. As a manager, though, your true strength should be in developing people. If you always tell staff what to do, that makes them dependent on you. Dependents are good on tax returns, but not so good in restaurants.

Adopt the mantra, “What is your recommendation?” when an employee comes to you with a question. Ask them to tell you what they would do first, before you decide what the outcome of the issue ought to be. This shows respect and gives them a chance to grow, learn and perfect their thought process. Practice this every day and you will end up leading a strong team that learns to make sound de-

isions. Don’t feel the pressure to always have the answer; feel the pressure to be developing employees every day on every shift.

11. Actively Participate in Weekly Operations Meetings

The weekly operations meeting is the time for a whole management team to come together to discuss the state of the restaurant they operate together and make plans for its improvement. It is important for you to establish yourself as part of the team in this meeting, but it is also a good idea for you to work your way into the flow of the meeting. Before each meeting, think about what is most important to you in the restaurant right now. Be prepared to speak up with your point of view when the agenda turns to that topic. You will contribute to the well-being of your restaurant, but also become a credible force in the team. Your opinion on the topic you care about the most is where you are going to be the most convincing. This is the management equivalent of servers who are best at selling menu items they love to eat.

It is also important to realize that you are the rookie on an established team; respecting the veterans is going to serve you well. Don’t try and do too much in the meeting. Just start out by being reliable and thoughtful, and work your way up from there.

12. Always Focus On the Guest

Don’t ever lose sight of the guest. The people who decide where to eat breakfast, lunch or dinner every day are the true focus of every good management decision. Many managers forget this and get so focused on process, rules, regulations and procedures, that they put what is good for the operation of their restaurants in front of what truly motivates guests. They may even fall into this trap because they get rewarded for doing so. But to lose focus on the guest is to stand on very treacherous ground. Every time you make a decision, support a policy or begin an initiative, see if you can complete the sentence by saying, “And the benefit for the guest is....” Do that every day on every shift and your management career will be long and successful.

There is no substitute for talking to guests. Make it your practice to do that every day on every shift. Meet guests, learn their names, and find out what motivates them to decide where to eat. As I noted earlier, I met Vianei Munoz-Vidal, not at a trade show, seminar or convention. I was eating dinner. She made a table visit, flashed a warm, confident smile and asked how we were enjoying our dinner. There is no substitute for talking to guests. Make it your practice to do that every day on every shift. Meet guests, learn their names and find out what motivates them to decide where to eat.

Congratulations on being promoted into restaurant management; but remember, this is only the first of many steps in your growth in the industry. Review this material often and use it to write your own ticket in a long and (hopefully) successful restaurant management career.

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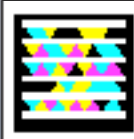
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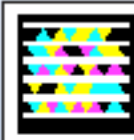
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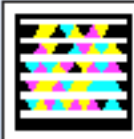
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