

Confessions of a Hospitality Headhunter

5 lessons from placing top talent at the most revered restaurant groups - Proverbial wisdom you rarely hear that makes a huge impact on your business.



WILLOW TREE
RECRUITING

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INTRODUCTION

“The Truth About Talent, Culture, and Results”

Drawing from extensive conversations with key players across the most respected restaurants, including owners, corporate leaders, managers and chefs, we offer an exclusive insight into some best practices that can make the difference between struggling and thriving.

These aren't one-off observations; they are patterns we've uncovered after placing leaders in Michelin-starred restaurants, bustling multi-unit groups, and visionary independents.

Here are the 5 insights that will change the way you hire, retain, and lead.



Insight #1: Turnover is More Costly Than You Think

It's often 2x-3x higher. Try \$30k - \$50k, and that's a conservative estimate.

You know what it's like: Overtime, running short-staffed, stress on you and your staff, inconsistent quality and service, delayed store openings.

\$30k

Cost

Management turnover costs \$30k on average according to Cornell Hospitality Research. For GM and Executive Chef roles, it's closer to \$50k.

6-12

Months of Impact

According to Black Box Intelligence: One GM departure can impact sales and guest satisfaction for an extended period of time.

\$200k

Lost Revenue

Based on a collection of reported case studies, GM turnover can result in \$200k in lost sales.

Solution:



Inquire

Ask employees why they are leaving without being defensive when they give you an honest answer. Just listen and ask questions.

Ask industry colleagues about your reputation from an employee perspective to gauge if you are a desirable place to work, offer competitive compensation, and growth opportunities.

Check out your ratings on Glassdoor. Set the noise aside and pay attention to themes.



Invest

Invest in the expertise, time, and structure in your hiring process. Hiring the right person once is cheaper than hiring twice.

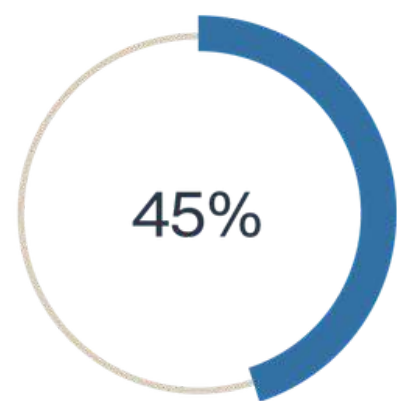
Invest in your employee experience, culture, and leadership to retain your top performers.



Insight #2: Poor Management Drives Turnover

Poor leadership is the most common reason for management turnover.

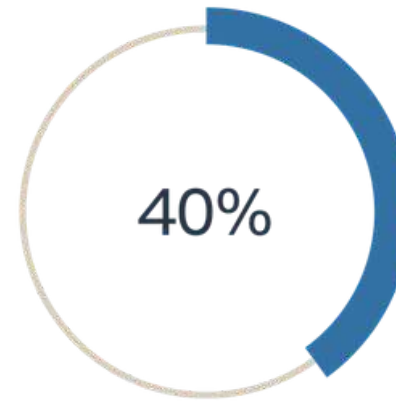
We've heard it all: the good, the bad and the ugly about why candidates leave their jobs. Top reason: Poor management. But what is it? Obviously bullying and yelling are toxic, but other behaviors also hurt, like favoritism, lack of empathy, little or no training, inconsistent SOP's, low ethical standards, excessive hours, and lack of career growth. The variables driving performance are shared between the manager and the employee.



A Gallup study found that 45% of staff departures were directly attributed to their manager, more important than comp.



A Black Box Intelligence study identified that high leadership scores improved retention by 20%.



An aggregate of case studies found a 40% reduction in turnover after a toxic manager was replaced.

I know this isn't you, but...

An MIT Sloan Management Review found that a toxic workplace culture is "ten times more important than compensation in predicting turnover," further highlighting the negative impacts of toxic leaders and culture that lead to higher rates of attrition.

Solution:

-  Define what good management looks like, model it, and consistently reward it.
-  Invest in leadership training and don't be afraid to be decisive and make tough calls when a leader is poisoning the culture. Don't let it fester.



Insight #3: Culture Fit Isn't a Vibe - It's a Strategy

Hiring for "culture fit" without defining it is like trying to serve a dish you never tasted.

Too many owners and operators make hiring decisions based on a gut feeling that a candidate "just fits" or is particularly well liked. But culture isn't a vibe, it comprises a specific set of behaviors and values that should be as clear and intentional as your menu design.

With a set of values that you consistently uphold, it's easier for managers to make the right decisions quickly, as well as avoid hiring people who may look good on paper, but are not be a good fit for values.

Without a defined culture framework, you risk onboarding people who erode what makes your restaurant special. In a city with intense competition for both guests and staff, your culture can be your secret weapon or your silent killer.

Solution:

-  Invest time in defining the core values and behaviors for your restaurant. Then model, manage and screen for those values with every employee and candidate
-  Integrate your core values and behaviors into your end-to-end hiring process including job descriptions, interview process, background checks, and onboarding.
-  Keep communicating and modeling your values to your team so that they are embedded into your culture and influence behaviors, key decisions, and the guest experience.



Insight #4: Adaptability is a Key Indicator of Success

Top-performing GMs are not defined by experience or pedigree, but rather by adaptability.

In the hospitality industry, operating demands change faster than menus. I've found that adaptability beats experience every time. To be clear, the years and quality of experience are valuable, but almost more important is the ability to pivot and adapt at a moment's notice, whether it be handing a VIP who shows up unannounced or navigating a sudden health inspection. Can they handle those moments with grace?

McKinsey & Harvard Studies:

Adaptability outperforms pedigree and experience in predicting executive success.

Korn Ferry Study:

Discovered top-performing managers scored 30% higher on adaptability scores.

Quick Tip: Ask candidates to give work examples of situations that highlight curiosity, learning orientation, creative problem solving, entrepreneurship, and decisiveness under pressure. And praise employees for exhibiting those traits, even if those situations don't always work out.

Solution:

-  Probe and look for candidates who embrace ambiguity or are comfortable being uncomfortable.
-  Assess adaptability in interviews: "Tell me about a time you were given a difficult task that you'd never done before. How did you handle it and what was the result?"
-  Integrate and cultivate adaptability into your work culture. Praise employees for exhibiting those traits (even if they are not always successful), create opportunities for employees to learn new skills, and support it.



Insight #5: The Resume Lie That Everyone Falls For

The perfect resume can often be a big trap in hiring the best talent for your business.

Resumes can often read like a Michelin Guide; it's easy to be dazzled by the "right" former employers, impressive job titles, and career highlights. While these are certainly noteworthy, resumes only tell you about their past, not their leadership skills, learning orientation, values and motivations, or growth potential under your tutelage.

Quick Tip: Interview candidates who meet 75% of your qualifications checklist and focus your interview on assessing their motivations, values, adaptability, and how their skills mesh with your concept and the skills of your current team. When you are questioning, are you looking for reasons why they will be a good fit, or reasons to eliminate them? Make sure your own bias isn't affecting the candidate and your impression of them.

Solution:

-  Focus on understanding the candidate's character, motivations, and values to get clearer visibility into the person beyond the resume.
-  Ask behavioral based questions: "Tell me about a time when you experienced a challenging work culture and how you handled it."
-  Assess for leadership, adaptability, and cultural alignment to identify if this candidate is a great fit beyond pedigree, and also has a high potential as a leader in your organization.

TO RECAP

While each of these insights might appear to be simple, these are recurring, impactful themes that can dramatically improve your hiring outcomes, retention, and long term performance.

- 1 Turnover costs are far more than most realize.
- 2 Poor leadership is the #1 cause of turnover.
- 3 Culture fit isn't a vibe, it's a strategy.
- 4 Adaptability outperforms pedigree
- 5 The resume doesn't tell the whole story.

ARE YOU STRUGGLING WITH THESE COMMON HIRING CHALLENGES?

Can't Attract Quality Candidates?

Your job postings aren't drawing the top-tier candidates you want, and the applicants don't meet your qualifications

New Hires Don't Last

After the initial excitement is over, many of your new employees quit or aren't working out.

Existing Team is Burning Out

Your existing staff (not to mention you) are working longer hours to cover gaps in staffing, leading to potentially even more turnover.

High Interview-to-Hire Ratio

You're interviewing 1-20 candidates just to find one decent prospect, wasting precious time your business doesn't have.



WILLOW TREE

RECRUITING

Since 2017, we've been the trusted recruiting partner for the top restaurants, hotels, and restaurant tech groups. More than filling roles, we deliver lasting value by building teams that thrive.

We have proven success placing great management talent in-unit, field, and corporate levels up to C-level.

And we have great relationships with our clients and candidates.



Industry Network Access

We have extensive connections across the hospitality industry.



Pre-Vetted Candidates

Every candidate goes through a rigorous screening process.



Seamless Process

We know what it takes to effectively partner and manage the process.

>> Fast Turnaround

We fill critical roles quickly without sacrificing quality.



Trusted by Hospitality Leaders

Testimonial

★★★★★

"They just get it — the industry, the challenges, and what it takes to find the right fit. Even when we're searching for a needle in a haystack, they help us navigate the talent pool with ease and precision. If anyone can find it, it's them!"

- Angela Wang, The Group Hospitality

Our Results

- ✓ Average 5-6 Resumes Per Hire
- ✓ 200+ Placements Since 2022
- ✓ 55,000+ Candidate Database
- ✓ Proud GGRA Member

Testimonial

★★★★★

"I'd recommend Willow Tree to any restaurant group that wants a recruiting partner who understands the industry and actually cares about long-term fit. They bring a balance of professionalism, hustle, and heart that's rare in hospitality recruiting."

-Chris Maynard, Square Pie Guys

CHE
FICO

Bon
Délice

waterbar


KITAVA
KITCHEN

FOG HARBOR
FISH HOUSE





Ready to Transform Your Hiring Process?

Explore how our dedicated experts can address your hiring challenges and build the team your business deserves.

Book A Free Consultation To Discover How We Can Help.

Book 30-Min Consultation



THANK YOU



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