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The Cost of Making It Happen

How catering growth concealed failures in executive planning and the extraordinary effort required to keep restaurant operations running.

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At a meeting of restaurant general managers, a catering sales manager stood before the room and described how demanding her job had become. There were customers to contact, relationships to maintain, orders to secure, and sales expectations to meet. She spoke about the workload and the stress that came with it.

Then she explained how the work was divided.

“I get the orders, you make them.”

She said it matter-of-factly, without any apparent intention of being dismissive. She was describing the operation as she understood it, and technically, she was right. Her responsibility was to generate catering sales. Ours was to prepare the food, package the orders, coordinate deliveries, and make sure customers received what they had been promised.

What her explanation left out was everything that had to happen between securing an order and delivering it.

The ingredients had to be available. The production had to be scheduled. Employees had to be willing and available to work. The restaurant needed sufficient equipment, refrigeration, storage, and delivery capacity. And all of it had to happen while the restaurant continued serving its regular customers.

The catering order might have been secured in minutes. The operation required to fulfill it could take days to organize.

That distinction was rarely reflected in the way catering success was discussed.

An Order Is Not a Production Plan

Restaurant operations run on deadlines that customers and catering sales managers may never see. Vendors have ordering cutoffs. Deliveries arrive on established schedules. Ingredients must be ordered far enough in advance to accommodate production.

When an order is accepted after a vendor's cutoff, the restaurant may have to locate ingredients elsewhere, borrow product from another location, or rearrange production around a deadline that should have been considered before the commitment was made.

These workarounds consume time and resources, yet they can become invisible once the order is successfully delivered.

A catering sales manager does not need to know every vendor's schedule or every detail of production. But purchasing deadlines, staffing requirements, and capacity limitations should be considered before an order is confirmed.

Without that coordination, the ability to accept an order becomes disconnected from the ability to fulfill it.

When Catering Takes Over the Restaurant

I have been responsible for catering productions so large that the work extended around the clock. These were not ordinary orders that could be absorbed into a normal shift. They required extensive preparation and employees willing to work hours far outside their regular availability.

I found myself practically begging team members to be flexible, asking them to rearrange their schedules and work extreme hours to fulfill commitments the restaurant had already made.

I was asking employees for flexibility that the organization itself had failed to demonstrate. The catering commitment was fixed. The delivery deadline was fixed. The only thing left to negotiate was how much of their personal time employees were willing to surrender.

There is something deeply uncomfortable about that position. Employees have families, obligations, and lives outside the restaurant. Their willingness to help should never be mistaken for an unlimited resource.

And the disruption was not limited to the exceptionally large orders.

Unpredictable catering demand repeatedly undermined the weekly schedule. I could develop a staffing plan around the restaurant's anticipated needs, only to rewrite it as new orders arrived or requirements shifted. Employees were moved between shifts,

coverage rearranged, and hours reconsidered. Some weeks, the schedule barely resembled the one I had originally written.

A schedule is more than a collection of labor hours. Employees arrange childcare, transportation, appointments, and personal commitments around it. Constant revisions affected their lives while consuming management time that should have been spent leading the restaurant.

The physical demands created additional challenges. We sometimes lacked adequate space to store finished catering orders before delivery. Large productions required appropriate storage conditions and sufficient refrigeration where necessary, even as the restaurant continued serving its regular customers.

When delivery drivers were away completing catering orders, we were short inside the restaurant. I covered positions because there was nobody else available. I personally handled catering setups because we lacked the resources to assign someone else.

We kept finding ways to make it happen. And in doing so, we helped conceal just how much the operation depended on improvisation.

The Executive Who Was Supposed to See the Whole Picture

A catering sales manager has a responsibility to understand the practical limits of the operation and seek input before making commitments that exceed them. But senior leadership must establish the processes that make those conversations part of doing business.

A restaurant manager can solve an immediate staffing problem. A catering sales manager can secure another customer. Neither can independently create the infrastructure needed to sustain a growing catering operation.

That responsibility belongs to the executive overseeing the business.

What frustrated me most was the apparent indifference from the catering sales manager and senior executives toward the extraordinary effort required to make these commitments work. From where I stood, the strain on restaurant teams did not receive the same attention as the revenue those teams were generating.

Catering performance was easy to celebrate when the discussion centered on orders secured, customer contacts, and sales growth. Customer relationship management platforms could track leads, sales activity, and revenue. Catering sales managers could receive recognition for impressive results, and executives could point to those accomplishments as evidence of success.

The numbers were not necessarily wrong. They were incomplete.

A dashboard could show the value of an order without revealing the extraordinary labor, disrupted schedules, or management intervention required to deliver it.

A completed order might still be financially worthwhile. But determining that requires understanding the full cost of fulfillment, not simply celebrating the revenue.

There is a particular kind of management failure that becomes difficult to recognize precisely because employees are so good at overcoming it. The emergencies are resolved, the deadlines are met, and customers receive what was promised. From an executive's perspective, the operation appears successful. But what looks like organizational competence may actually be a collection of exhausted employees compensating for decisions that should never have reached them as emergencies.

When Leadership Stops Planning

Senior leadership did not always fail to produce a plan. Sometimes it produced plans without involving the general managers responsible for carrying them out.

I remember proposals that made little sense when examined against the realities of restaurant operations. We understood what our restaurants could reasonably accomplish because we dealt with those limitations every day. Yet that knowledge was not always sought before decisions were made.

When those plans reached us, we sometimes pushed back because they were not workable. Our objections were not attempts to avoid responsibility. We were identifying problems that could prevent the organization from delivering what it had promised.

What made the experience particularly frustrating was the response. In my experience, even good-faith objections could be met with resentment rather than curiosity. Instead of treating operational concerns as information that might improve a plan, leadership could treat the challenge itself as the problem.

Eventually, the planning largely stopped.

Rather than developing workable processes with the general managers, senior leadership shifted the burden of figuring everything out to the restaurants. Catering commitments still had to be fulfilled. Customers still expected their orders. Revenue expectations did not disappear. What disappeared was meaningful executive involvement in determining how those commitments could realistically be delivered.

That was not empowerment. It was the transfer of responsibility without the corresponding support.

An executive does not need to understand every detail of restaurant production. But an executive should recognize whose expertise is necessary to make a plan workable.

When experienced managers identify shortcomings, the appropriate response is to incorporate that knowledge, not abandon the planning process.

There is a fundamental difference between giving managers the authority to make operational decisions and leaving them to absorb the consequences of decisions made elsewhere.

In this case, the people securing the business continued securing it. The people responsible for delivering it were increasingly left to figure out how.

The Part Missing From the Presentation

I still remember that meeting of general managers and the catering sales manager's explanation of our responsibilities.

"I get the orders, you make them."

The statement was straightforward. It was also incomplete.

For too long, the responsibility for turning those orders into something the restaurant could actually deliver fell to managers and employees willing to do whatever was necessary to get the job done.

The order could be secured in minutes. Making good on the promise could consume an entire shift, sometimes several.

And when restaurant teams somehow managed to deliver what had been promised, their success concealed the very failures of planning and leadership that had made the work so difficult in the first place.