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What Is Hospitality?

What restaurant hospitality asks of workers, and what leaders owe the people asked to provide it.

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What is hospitality?

I thought of that question when I came across an old all-store service email. It urged workers to notice what guests needed before they asked, make handoffs personal, and follow up when something went wrong.

In my experience, nobody read those emails or paid much attention to them. The advice was sent everywhere. It did not seem to reach the people it was meant for.

I knew the executive who sent this one. On an unannounced visit to a restaurant where I worked, she spent time in the restaurant and spoke with me. She did not introduce herself to the crew or say she was evaluating the operation. She offered no feedback or debrief at the time. The following Tuesday, a report from the visit came through my boss, with the evaluator's identity withheld.

The email asked workers to make guests feel noticed. The visit left the people doing the work without a clear understanding of what was being assessed or a chance to respond.

That memory brought me back to Tejal Rao's 2021 New York Times essay, "What Is Hospitality? The Current Answer Doesn't Work." Rao questioned a model that asks workers to make diners feel cared for while overlooking the conditions they need to offer care.

The email's advice was not bad. Orders should be accurate. Guests should be welcomed. Problems should be addressed. But those are standards for service. Hospitality asks what the interaction feels like to the guest, and whether the people creating that feeling are treated with attention and respect, too.

A service email can tell people to anticipate needs. It cannot create the time, staffing, or support to meet them. Support means schedules that match the work, managers who step in when a shift is short, and feedback delivered directly while it can still

help. Every store got the same advice. None got an extra pair of hands.

Attention cannot be demanded in only one direction. A worker may make a diner feel welcome while absorbing exhaustion, disrespect, or pressure to remain pleasant at any cost. From the guest's side, the experience may look effortless. That does not mean it was.

Before sending another service email, executives might ask themselves: Am I providing the support that makes hospitality possible, or just the script?

So what is hospitality?

It is a welcome the whole operation helps make possible. It begins with a worker's attention to a guest, but it also depends on whether the team has room to offer that attention and whether the worker is treated with dignity, too.

The email was meant to remind people what to notice. It could not supply the time, trust, and support that let them respond. Hospitality is not a script delivered to every store. It is the experience people create together when the welcome offered to guests is matched by respect for the people who make it happen.