

What Makes a Great Restaurant GM?

The Leadership Blueprint Behind High-Performing Restaurants

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A great restaurant General Manager is not simply the person who runs the shift. They are the cultural anchor, the financial driver, the guest-experience architect, and the operational heartbeat of the brand. The best GMs don't just manage a restaurant—they operate a business. And in a labor-challenged, margin-squeezed environment, a strong GM is often the single most important differentiator between a thriving location and a struggling one.

Here's what truly makes a great restaurant GM.

1. They Lead From the Front—Every Shift, Every Day

Great GMs don't manage from the office. They're visible, accessible, and engaged. They greet guests, coach servers on the floor, jump on the expo line during rush, and build trust through consistent presence. Their leadership style shows employees exactly what "great" looks like.

Key behaviors:

- Models hospitality standards in real time
- Coaches in the moment rather than correcting later
- Keeps energy high and staff motivated through the busiest hours

2. They Create a Culture That People Want to Work In

Turnover is the silent killer of restaurant profitability. Exceptional GMs create environments where people feel supported, challenged, and valued. They understand that staff culture is not a "soft" skill—it's one of the most concrete drivers of performance and guest experience.

The best GMs:

- Treat every employee with dignity and respect
- Provide clear expectations and consistent follow-up
- Celebrate wins and coach deficiencies respectfully
- Build bench strength, not dependence

When people enjoy coming to work, they stay longer, serve better, and drive revenue.

3. They Know Their Numbers—Because Numbers Tell the Story

Restaurants run on thin margins, and great GMs know exactly where those margins come from. They are fluent in P&L statements, cost of goods, labor modeling, forecasting, scheduling efficiencies, and revenue management.

They balance hospitality with fiscal discipline.

Core financial strengths include:

- Scheduling to forecast, not to feelings
- Managing food cost through proper ordering, portioning, and waste control
- Tracking key metrics daily (sales, comps, labor %, check averages, voids, cash handling)
- Identifying and correcting variances before they become trends

A great GM treats the restaurant like they own it.

4. They Master Guest Experience at a Strategic Level

Hospitality is not just friendliness—it's an operational system. The strongest GMs understand that guest experience begins long before a table is seated and continues long after they leave.

They implement and manage systems that ensure consistency, including:

- Speed of service benchmarks
- Table touch standards
- Cleanliness and atmosphere routines
- Service-sequence training
- Recovery protocols when things go wrong

Most importantly, great GMs **listen**—to guests, to online reviews, and to their team—then use that data to improve.

5. They Train Relentlessly and Raise the Standard Daily

A restaurant is only as strong as its weakest system—and a system is only as strong as its least-trained employee. Elite GMs are not just managers; they are educators. They train, retrain, and continuously coach.

They:

- Onboard with purpose
- Deliver short, frequent training bursts
- Document performance consistently
- Promote talent from within
- Ensure every position has a competent backup

Because when training is strong, the restaurant becomes self-sustaining.

6. They Solve Problems Before They Become Problems

Great GMs are proactive, not reactive. They walk the building, spot issues early, and take ownership of every detail—from HVAC performance to sanitation to equipment PM schedules. Nothing is “someone else’s job.”

They maintain solid working relationships with corporate teams, vendors, suppliers, the health department, fire marshal, and facilities partners.

This proactive stance reduces emergencies, improves guest confidence, and protects profitability.

7. They Understand People—Because Restaurants Are a People Business

Strong emotional intelligence is non-negotiable. Great GMs can read a room, understand employee dynamics, defuse tension, and communicate clearly under pressure.

They excel at:

- Conflict resolution
- Staff motivation
- Delivering difficult conversations professionally
- Leading diverse teams
- Balancing empathy with accountability

A GM who understands people will outperform a GM who only understands process.

8. They Embrace Technology and Modern Tools

Today’s GMs use technology to make smarter decisions: POS analytics, labor forecasting platforms, kitchen display systems, inventory software, and digital training tools.

They understand that tech improves:

- Speed

- Accuracy
- Cost control
- Guest satisfaction
- Training efficiency
- Reporting and forecasting

They're always learning, always improving, always optimizing.

9. They Protect the Brand

Whether it's a single independent restaurant or a national chain, brand consistency is everything. A great GM understands the mission, tone, values, and visual standards—and ensures they're upheld.

They know that each shift is a representation of the brand's promise to its guests.

10. They Think Like Owners

The ultimate hallmark of a great GM: they behave as if the restaurant belongs to them.

They:

- Make decisions that prioritize long-term success
- Balance hospitality with profitability
- Hold themselves and their team accountable
- Take pride in every detail
- Build a culture of excellence

This mindset elevates performance across the board.

Conclusion: The GM Is the Most Important Position in the Building

A great GM is part coach, part CFO, part operator, part psychologist, and part brand ambassador. Their leadership touches every facet of the business—sales, labor, culture, guest satisfaction, maintenance, and long-term stability.

When you have a great GM, the restaurant becomes predictable, profitable, and scalable. When you don't, no amount of marketing, menu changes, or corporate support can overcome the weaknesses.

In today's restaurant environment, investing in strong GM leadership is not optional—it's the single best investment a restaurant can make.

