

Danny Meyer
Setting the table

“There are only so many notes in the scale from which all melodies and harmonies are created. The trick is to put those notes together in a way not heard before. For us, the ongoing challenge has been to combine the best elements of fine dining with accessibility – in other words, with open arms.”

“The core of ‘hospitality’ is to be on the guests’ side.”

“Hospitality exists when you believe the other person is on your side. The converse is just as true. Hospitality is present when something happens *for* you. It is absent when something happens *to* you. Those two simple prepositions – for and to – express it all.”

“I know that anyone who works for my company *chooses* to do so because of what we stand for. I believe that anyone who is qualified for a job in our company is also qualified for many other jobs at the same pay scale. It’s up to us to provide solid reasons for our employees to want to work for us, over and beyond their compensation.”

“in my obsession for big numbers, I’d created hideous logjams. But it was oddly exciting to manufacture challenges and then surmount them. ...I was developing what I would call an “athletic” approach to hospitality, sometimes playing offense, sometimes playing defense, but always wanting to find a way to win. On offense, we’d figure out creative ways to enhance an already good experience (extra desserts with inscriptions written in chocolate for birthdays; wine for regulars). Playing defense, we got better and better at overcoming our frequent mistakes or at defusing whatever situations the guests might be angry about. ...I was on their side. “I’d love to put your name at the top of our wait list for eight o’clock,” I would say. Or, “There are literally no tables at eight. Is there any way I could do this for you at eight-forty-five? – which I knew sounded a little earlier than “quarter of nine.” Or, “Can you give me a range that would work for you, so that I can *root* for a cancellation?” The point was to keep the dialogue open while sending the message: **I am your agent, not the gatekeeper!**”

“I knew that treating solo diners as royalty was both the right thing to do and smart business. ...Their visit has no ulterior motive (it involves no business, romance, or socializing). These guests simply want to do something nice for themselves, *chez nous*. Why wouldn’t we reward that?”

“The beautiful choreography of service is, at its best, an art form, a ballet. ...I appreciate the grace with which a table can be properly cleared. ...There’s aesthetic value in doing things the right way. But I respond best when the person doing those things realizes that the purpose of all this beauty at the table is to create pleasure for me. To go through the motions in a perfunctory or self-absorbed manner, no matter how expertly rendered, diminishes the beauty. It’s about soul – and service without soul, no matter how elegant, is quickly forgotten by the guest.”

“Service is the technical delivery of a product. Hospitality is how the delivery of that product makes its recipient *feel*. Service is a *monologue* – we decide how we want to do things and set our own standards for service. Hospitality, on the other hand, is a *dialogue*. To be on the guest’s side requires listening to that person with every sense, and following up with a thoughtful, gracious, appropriate response. It takes both great service and great hospitality to rise to the top.”

“I cringe when a waiter asks, “How is everything?” That’s an empty question that will get an empty response. Also, I can’t stand the use of *we* to mean *you*, as in, “How are we doing so far?” I abhor the question, “Are you still working on the lamb?” If the guest has been *working on* the lamb, it probably wasn’t very tender or very good in the first place. And if a guest says “Thank you” for something, the waiter should *not* answer, “No Problem.” Since when is it necessary to deny that delivering excellent service is a “problem?” A genuine “You’re welcome” is always the appropriate response.”

“Shared ownership develops when guests talk about a restaurant as if it’s *theirs*. They can’t wait to share it with friends, and what they’re really sharing, beyond the culinary experience, is the experience of feeling important and loved. That sense of affiliation builds trust and a sense of being accepted and appreciated, invariably leading to repeat business, a necessity for any company’s long-term survival.”

“ABCD – *always be collecting dots*. ...Dots are information. The more information you collect, the more frequently you can make meaningful connections that can make other people feel good and give you an edge in business. Using whatever information I’ve collected to gather guests together in a spirit of shared experience is what I call connecting the dots. If I don’t turn over the rocks, I won’t see the dots. If I don’t collect the dots, I can’t connect the dots. If I don’t know that someone works, say, for a magazine whose managing editor I happen to know, I’ve lost a chance to make a meaningful connection that could enhance our relationship with the guest and the guest’s relationship with us. The information is there. You just have to choose to look.”

“I know that popularity is not in and of itself a measure of excellence but it is one reliable measure of how many people you’re pleasing, and how well you’re pleasing them”

“I’m deeply grateful when regulars who dine with us three or four times a week think of our restaurant not just as another destination but also as their club – or better still, as an extension of their family and home.”

“Unlike a Broadway show, which most people will see just once no matter how much they’ve enjoyed it, a solid restaurant experience should make you want to return for more.”

“At its best, a restaurant should not let guests leave without feeling as though they’ve been satisfyingly hugged.”

“People talk about where and how they celebrate anniversaries, birthday, and holidays (“What

did you do for your birthday? Where did he take you for Valentine's Day?") and so those special occasions are especially rich opportunities to build word-of-mouth business."

"...there is simply no point for me – or anyone on my staff – to work hard every day for the purpose of offering guests an average experience. I want to hear: "We love your restaurant, we adore the food, but your people are what we treasure most about being here." ...I encourage each manager to take ten minutes a day to make these gestures that exceed expectations and take a special interest in our guests. That translates into 1,000 such gestures every year, multiplied by over 100 outstanding managers throughout our restaurants. For any business owner, that can add up to a lot of repeat business."

"If we see that guests qualify for VIP status for OpenTable, meaning that they've made a huge number of online reservations at all sorts of other restaurants, we know that we're welcoming people who frequently dine out at other fine restaurants. That's a valuable opportunity to turn proven restaurant aficionados into our own regulars."

"We have designed a shorthand system to give us a heads-up about a potentially difficult situation. It's another way we take a proactive, athletic approach to hospitality. If a reservationist has had to work especially hard to calm down or accommodate an irate caller, we may use the notation WFM ("welcome from manager")... ...When people let us know that they don't wish to be interrupted unnecessarily, the notation is "do not disturb" or "drop and go" – that is, deliver the food and leave them alone. Our job is not to impose our own needs on our guests: it's to be aware of their needs and to deliver the goods accordingly. In hospitality, one size fits one!"

"...everyone goes through life with an invisible sign hanging around his or her neck reading, "make me feel important." ...The most successful people in any business that depends on human relationships are the ones who know about that invisible sign and have the vision to see how brightly it is flashing. And the true champions know best how to embrace the human being wearing the sign."

"My ultimate mission for any new restaurant is always to begin with a subject I love, zero in on what I enjoy most about it, and then envision a new context for it. I take something that is already accessible (such as frozen custard) and try to make it better; or I take what's excellent (a selection of artisanal cheeses or a wine list) and try to present it in a more user-friendly context."

"I do not want to see a dish like tuna tartare (which became ubiquitous in New York during the 1990s) on any of our menus unless our chefs are doing something singularly excellent with it. That challenge led us to come up with an impressive signature dish for Eleven Madison Park: tuna tartare seared on one side. Served with sliced avocado and a radish salad, it looks and tastes different from any other version I've had in town, and – most important – it's addictively delicious. **"What makes ours different and special?" is the question we ask and try to answer every day, and not just with food.** It adds interest to your work, and it can give people a reason to do business with you, no matter what business you're in. Otherwise, who

really needs your product, and what value are you really adding or selling?"

"In a meeting of the entire staff of Gramercy Tavern, and with full agreement and support from Tom, I began to outline what I considered nonnegotiable about how we did business. Nothing would ever matter more to me than how we expressed hospitality to *on another*. (Who every wrote the rule that the customer is always first?) And then, in descending order, our next core values would be to extend gracious hospitality to our *guests*, our *community*, our *suppliers*, and finally our *investors*. I called that set of priorities enlightened hospitality. Every decision we made from that day forward would be evaluated according to enlightened hospitality. We would define our successes as well as our failures in terms of the degree to which we had championed, first one another and then our guests, community, suppliers, and investors."

-Eleven Madison Park had elected to start an off-site 'box-lunch' program –

"We had made the fundamental mistake by trying to extend an original brand without having first established the core brand. ...Was it a bistro or grand restaurant? Was it inexpensive or for special occasions? Was it French? Was it a place for sandwiches, potato chips, and cookies? Until we had answered those questions for ourselves, we couldn't avoid confusing our potential customers. **Know Thyself: Before you go to market, know what you are selling and to whom. It's a very rare business that can (or should) be all things to all people. Be the best you can be within a reasonably tight product focus.** That will help you to improve yourself and help your customers to know how and when to buy your product."

-re: blue smoke

"Many beloved barbecue joints around the country are on the wrong side of the tracks. And part of what people love about going to them is having to travel to a rural outpost or a down-and-out part of town to hunt down the ethereal smoked pork. The barbecue seems to taste better both because of what you have to do and because of where you have to go to get it. That's also why hot dogs taste better at the ball park and Vernaccia di San Gimignano tastes better in Tuscany. **Context is everything.**

"We understood that people don't go out just to eat; they also select restaurants in order to be part of a community experience."

-comparing business to a lightbulb attracting moths-

"It's remarkable to me how many businesses shine brightly when it comes to acing the tasks but emanate all the warmth of a cool fluorescent light. That explains how a flawless four-star restaurant can actually attract far fewer loyal fans than a two- or three-star place with soul. In business, I want to be overcome with moths. Our staff must be like a scintillating string of one-hundred-watt lightbulbs, whose product is the sum of 51 percent feeling and 49 percent task."

"When an employee does not work out, the problem more often stems from an attitude of "I won't" rather than "I can't." A high degree of *empathy* is crucial in delivering enlightened hospitality. Empathy is not just an awareness of what others are experiencing; it's being aware of, being sensitive to, and caring about how one's own behavior affects others. ...It may seem

implicit in the philosophy of enlightened hospitality that the employee is constantly setting aside personal needs and selflessly taking care of others. But the real secret of its success is to hire people to whom caring for others is, in fact, a selfish act. I call these people hospitalitarians. ...the more opportunities hospitalitarians have to care for other people, the better they feel.”

“Meeting with all our new hires – as I continue to do once every four weeks – often makes me think of the way champagne houses make nonvintage, or multivintage, champagne. All the major houses strive to produce a very good nonvintage champagne... ...wine makers can blend together various vintages until all the elements balance perfectly and they’ve achieved the same consistent flavor they had they year before. That’s called house style.”

The Salt Shaker Theory – offered by friend Pat Cetta

“Your staff and your guests are always moving your saltshaker off center. That’s their job. It is the job of life. It’s the law of entropy! Until you understand that, you’re going to get pissed every time someone moves the saltshaker off center. It is not your job to get upset. You just need to understand: that’s what they do. Your job is just to move the shaker back each time and let them know exactly what you stand for. **Let them know what excellence looks like to you.** And if you’re ever willing to let them decide where the center is, then I want you to give them the keys to the store. Just give away the fuckin’ restaurant!”

“Wherever your center lies, know it, name it, stick to it, and believe in it. Everyone who works with you will know what matters to you and will respect and appreciate your unwavering values. Your inner belief about business will guide you through the tough times. It’s good to be open to fresh approaches to solving problems. But, when you cede your core values to someone else, it’s time to quit.”

“Understanding the “saltshaker theory” has helped me develop and teach a managerial style I call *constant, gentle pressure*. It doesn’t take much to move our saltshaker off center. All it takes is for one guest to be late... ... (and) we may end up with a pileup at the front door – causing our standards to appear less than excellent. Our job is to adjust to circumstances, and keep the dance flowing with technical precision and artful grace.”

“I send my managers an unequivocal message: I’m going to be extremely specific as to where every component on that tabletop belongs. I anticipate that outside forces, including you, will always conspire to change the table setting. Every time that happens, I’m going to move everything right back to the way it should be. And so should you! That’s the *constant* aspect. I’ll never recenter the saltshaker in a way that denies you your dignity. That’s the *gentle* aspect. But standards are standards, and I’m constantly watching every table and pushing back on every saltshaker that’s moved, because excellent performance is paramount. That’s the *pressure*.”

“Ultimately, the most successful business is not the one that eliminates the most problems. It’s the one that becomes the most expert at finding imaginative solutions to address those problems. And lasting solutions rely on giving appropriate team members a voice, as well as responsibility for making decisions.”

“Communicating has as much to do with context as it does content. That’s called setting the table. Understanding *who* needs to know *what*, *when* people need to know it and *why*, and then presenting that information in an entirely comprehensible way is sine qua non for great leadership. Clear, timely communication is the key to applying constant, gentle pressure.”

“Lily Pad Theory”

“Team members (frogs) will generally go with the flow and be willing to hop over the ripples, so long as they know in advance that you are going to toss the rock, when you’ll be tossing it, how big it is, and – mostly – why you are choosing to toss it in the first place. The key is to anticipate the ripple effects of any decision before you implement it, gauging whom it will affect and to what degree. Poor communication... generally... involves taking away people’s feeling of control. Change only works when people believe it is happening for them, not to them. Good communication is always a factor of good hospitality.”

“I’m a bottom-up manager who subscribes to the concept of “servant leadership”...
...organizations are at their most effective when leaders encourage collaboration, trust, foresight, listening, and empowerment. In any hierarchy, it’s clear that the ultimate boss holds the most power. But a wonderful thing happens when you flip the traditional organizational chart upside down so that it looks like a V with the boss at the bottom. My job is to serve and support the next layer “above” me so that the people on that layer can then serve and support the next layer “above” them, and so on. Ultimately, our cooks, servers, reservationists, coat checkers, and dishwashers are then in the best possible position to serve our guests. A balanced combination of uncompromising standards and confidence-building reassurance send a very clear and consistent message to your team: “I believe in you and I want you to win as much as I want to win.” You cannot have a dynamic organization unless you are constantly encouraging people to improve, and believing that they can do it.”

“For most people it’s far more important to feel heard than to be agreed with.”

“Managers who only give lip service to an open-door policy effectively shut the door by being defensive, by not holding themselves accountable when they make a mistake, and mostly by not actively looking for ways to make their employees feel heard.”

Today dollars vs. tomorrow dollars...

Broken cork example – “I’m sorry I broke the cork. I assume the wine is still fine but if for any reason it’s not, please let me know and we’ll gladly replace the bottle for you.” If the wine is good, we’ll get our *today* dollars. If it’s not, we’re still in the running for *tomorrow* dollars, because we’ve established goodwill with our guest.” “There’s practically no downside to a hospitable, charitable assumption.”

“You do everything you possibly can afford to show your staff and guests that you care deeply about improving. That’s acting from a positive and hopeful place, rather than from fear that can ultimately be self-fulfilling. The mind-set, “We’re just hanging on” perpetuates scarcity.

Investing money, imagination, and hard work to create a mind-set of abundance achieves abundance.”

“Feeling seen and acknowledged is a powerful human need. ...The number one reason guests cite for wanting to return to a restaurant is that when they go there, they feel seen and recognized. Imagine if our hosts consistently conveyed, “I see you!” I’m fairly certain that’s precisely what most people want.”

“You must be self-aware enough to know what makes you tick. You have to understand your own strengths, weaknesses, and blind spots. You need to surround yourself with a team of people who will mirror your integrity but complement and compensate for your strengths and weaknesses.”

A leader can be charismatic and lack integrity. A leader can be charismatic and have no compassion or empathy. A great leader must repeatedly ask himself or herself this tough question: “*Why would anyone want to be led by me?*” And there better be a good number of compelling reasons.”

“So you made a mistake. You need to understand something important. And listen to me carefully: *The road to success is paved with mistakes well handled.*”

On mistakes:

- “ 1. Respond graciously, and do so at once. You know you’re going to resolve the mistake eventually. It’s always a lot less costly to resolve the matter at the outset.
2. Err on the side of generosity. Apologize and make sure the value of the redemption is worth more than the cost of the initial mistake.
3. Always write a great last chapter. People love to share stories of adversity. Use this powerful force to your advantage by writing the closing statement the way *you* want it told. Use all your imagination and creativity in thinking about your response.
4. Learn from your mistake. Use every new mistake as a teaching tool with your employees. Unless the mistake involved a lack of integrity, the person who made it has actually helped your team by providing you with new opportunities to improve.
5. Make new mistakes every day. Don’t waste time repeating the old ones.”

“I realized that a critically important role for me, as the leader of the company, was to define upfront what was nonnegotiable. That way, if employees were not comfortable, they could choose to walk.”

“Policies are nothing more than guidelines to be broken for the benefit of our guests. We’re here to give the guests what they want, period.”

“...one of the greatest hospitality phrases I’ve ever heard. “Say no more!” There’s always a solution if you’re open to finding one.”

“Hospitality starts with the genuine enjoyment of doing something well for the purpose of bringing pleasure to other people. Whether that’s an attitude, a behavior, or an innate trait, it should become a primary motivation for coming to work every day.”

“...employees who are the first point of contact with the customer...can come across either as agents or as gatekeepers. An agent makes things happen *for* others. A gatekeeper sets up barriers to keep people out. We’re looking for agents. And our staff members are responsible for monitoring their own performance: *In that transaction, did I present myself as an agent or a gatekeeper?* In the world of hospitality, there’s rarely anything in between.”

On Suppliers:

“This isn’t business as usual; most businesses ordinarily just go with the best supplier that offers the best price. Of course pricing is an important calculation; but for us, excellence, hospitality, and shared values must also be prominent factors in the selection process. It’s hard for me to imagine deriving so much pleasure from the restaurant business were it not for the important and enjoyable relationships we’ve had with our suppliers.”

- The “YES” Criteria For New Ventures –

1. The opportunity fits and enhances our company’s overall strategic goals and objectives.
2. The opportunity represents a chance to create a business venture that is perceived as groundbreaking, trailblazing, and fresh.
3. The timing is right for our company’s capacity to grow with excellence, especially in terms of our having enough key employees who are themselves interested and ready to grow.
4. We believe we have the capacity to be category leaders within whatever niche we are pursuing
5. We believe our existing businesses will benefit and improve by virtue of or notwithstanding our pursuing this new opportunity
6. We feel excited and passionate about this idea. Pursuing it will be an opportunity to learn, grow, and have fun!
7. We are excited about doing business in this community.
8. The context is the right fit. Our restaurant and our style of doing business will be in harmony with its location
9. An in-depth pro forma analysis convinces us that it is a wise and safe investment

“There have been a handful of difficult “nos” – projects that I thought would have been the right fit for our company but that presented themselves at the wrong time. Other assessments have led me to conclude it was the right time for a project, but the wrong fit.”

“One tuchas can’t dance at two weddings. It’s nice to be invited to a lot of parties. But as much as you may want to attend them all, it’s important to acknowledge that you can be in only one place at a time, and do one thing well. Doing two things like a half-wit never equals doing one thing like a whole wit”

“In hiring chefs, my goal is to do three things: develop a close, mutually trusting and respectful relationship; establish a shared vision of what the food should be; and encourage them to search

their own heart and soul for inspiration, urging them to go further than they've ever gone before. I am especially proud of the enduring bonds of shared success and loyalty that I have enjoyed with our chefs over the years."

The Modern – Alsatian bistro

-Baeckoffe "bakers oven" -Winstub -Mirabelle -eau-de-vie

"I'm convinced that a business cannot be more successful than the sum of the human relationships it has fostered and nurtured. By that measure, we are triumphant. It is in that spirit that I thanked the thousands of guests who have not only patronized our restaurants over these many years, but who have become part of our restaurant family."