

Staffing: The Highs & the Challenges



One of the most common problems facing hospitality leaders is staffing shortages. The inability to find and/or hire enough qualified staff to fill out a team is demoralising and places a significant amount of pressure on the team who is there.

We wanted to create two practical tools to help those facing this challenge.

- The first is; how do you continue to operate your business when looking at a long period of being short staffed? How do you think about managing workloads, the existing staff, and how to approach achieving profits in a sustainable way?
- The second challenge is; with staff becoming so hard to come by, there is real difficulty in the perceived balance of keeping them happy and demanding high standards of execution. We wanted to create a tool for empowering staff to seek continued improvement and enjoy the journey.

This is general guidance only.

Leading Through Short-Staffing

Periods of short-staffing is a reality in hospitality — whether from vacancies, illness, leave, or unexpected life events. This module helps leaders think clearly and strategically about how to adjust workloads, protect staff wellbeing, and maintain performance and profit. You'll walk away with practical options to stay true to your values while navigating leaner times.

Firstly, Acknowledge Reality

Anyone who has spent a significant amount of time in hospitality will have stories of pulling off the impossible, working the roles of three employees, across double-shifts, to cover sickness and the hero you felt like when the shift was over. This was a common occurrence and expectation in our industry in the past. What we often don't remember is the physical and emotional toll these types of shifts took on us if we had to do them day-after-day. The reality is, you can't sustain running at full tilt when half your team is missing - a tough pill to swallow for us proud hospo folks but none-the-less, still very true. Thinking about offering something short of your expectations can be difficult but there is often a significant difference between our expectations and the current capacity of a team.

There is a real skill and, unfortunately, art which can only come from experience, to knowing when to push your team and when to allow for breathing space. The goal of this tool is to allow you to think your options through and explore flexibility on your delivery but unwavering on the core values of your company and venue. It leverages a lot of the work already done in the module on Venue Values and Aspirations on your 'Most Valuable Guests'.

What Levers Can You Pull (and Which Should You Avoid)?

Go to your Unique Value and Aspirations Statement from the Venue Values and Aspirations Module. It reads something like:

Staffing: The Highs & The Challenges

"At [Venue Name], we are for [MVG], who are looking for [what they want]. We love to provide [what you provide] through [how you deliver it], so every guest leaves us feeling [emotional goal]."

The levers to pull and play within your business are the ones that do not reduce the value of what you provide to your 'Most Valuable Guests' - the things those guests value the most, the ones that have them leaving feeling the way you have designed your place for, are non-negotiables for you to maintain. Identify all the roles you currently have within your venue and for each role, write down AT LEAST one action that they perform that is non-negotiable for the value of your MVG's and AT LEAST one action that is a possible lever to play with in a way that is less labour intensive on your team.

Example; A small town cafe whose main customers are travellers, passing through. They are looking for food that fills them with energy to keep driving, a 30 minute rest from the road and an opportunity to stretch their legs. Every guest should leave full, relaxed and excited for the adventure ahead.

Role	Non-Negotiable	Lever to play with
Front of House	Tables cleaned and refreshed within 2mins of guests leaving	Table service
Kitchen Staff	Lunch Combos	Smaller savoury items

Ask:

"Given our current capacity, what can we still do exceptionally for our MVG's?" This keeps you connected to your **Venue Value and Aspirations Statement**.

Lead for the Long Game

In times of increased pressure, your team will be looking for greater support, and watching closely at how you behave, more than when things are easy. These moments either build trust or break it.

These are the specific moments that we have built Daily Rhythms [see the module on this] for as they work to help offer your team the psychological safety needed to rise to the challenge of being under staffed. Leaders that proactively create plans for difficult times (as per the Resilience Play Calls module), allow for concerns to be voiced and heard, enable safe learning practices, and communicate clearly and fairly, are more likely to develop resilient teams with lower exhaustion and turnover.

As your team are likely to face new challenges, at a pre-shift meeting ask your team where the tension is most likely to be felt and possible solutions with a play call to solve the issue when it arises. Present the call at the next possible opportunity the team is together and implement/practice it a few times. This team-empowered problem-solving is far more powerful as a unifying action than you, the leader, coming up with a solution alone.

Know your team is the voice of the venue

Your staff are walking advertisements for your leadership. Happy teams attract staff better than job ads. Build your internal loyalty like your company relies on it, because in many ways it does:

- Publicly recognise effort
- Flex where you can on hours and roles
- Be transparent about hiring efforts
- Create space for feedback and small wins
- Only hire people who strengthen your value promise.
- Always be recruiting, every staff and customer conversation is an opportunity to bring more people into your team.
- When was the last time you asked an employee: "Who's someone you know who would thrive in this culture?"



Remember

Being short-staffed is operational. Losing sight of your values is cultural. Stay flexible in what you do. Stay fierce in why you do it.

Holding Standards Without Burning Bridges

Short-staffing often creates tension between keeping staff happy and maintaining high service standards. This module helps leaders set clear, shared expectations and turn them into consistent, daily practices. The goal is a team that feels empowered, supported, and proud of the standards they uphold.

Since short-staffing is common, there is real difficulty for leaders in the perceived balance of keeping the staff you do have 'happy' and holding them to the high standards of customer service.

The purpose of this module is to help leaders build a foundation of standards that are clear, articulated and understood across entire teams. Beyond just having these standards, it will empower the leaders with the tools to turn them into consistent, actionable practices for teams, leading to fulfilment and a team of superstars.

Managing people can be incredibly challenging. As hospitality leaders, we aim to deliver high quality services consistently and through the work of humans. The challenge lies in humans being inconsistent by nature - we are all prone to making errors and fluctuations in feelings and motivation among many other things.

Adding pressure, intensity and high demand doesn't help the situation. Before we know it, most mornings we are dealing with an error made by a human and having to decide how we will react.

Given staff are hard to come by, we often find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, we need our team to improve. After all, skills can be refined and most error rates dropped significantly with a bit of hard work and a willingness to learn. But there is significant fear in the back of our minds, "What if I make them unhappy and they leave? I'd be more short staffed than before, it's just not worth saying anything".

Staffing: The Highs & The Challenges

We wanted to give hospitality leaders the knowledge and tools to maintain high standards, be confident in the asks of their staff and create an environment of growth and development towards a more consistent offering.

Start with the Standards

Having clear and articulated standards and targets is the first step for limiting human error in the service you are providing. For your team, it is essential they know, and have consistent access to, the expectations you have of them. Each member should know what success looks like for their role, they can't hit a target if they don't know what it is. The best way to do this is to create Role Descriptions.

If you do not have these standards yet, the way to build them (or align them with each other if you do) is to go to your Venue Value and Aspirations Module. Take the statement you have developed in there and answer the following question for every role:

- What are the specific elements of [what you provide] that this role is responsible for?
- What are the specific jobs or actions that they need to do in order for it to be given to your guests through [how you deliver it]?
 - It is important that some of these are tangible and measurable so team members can know for sure whether they have completed them or not. *Example: "We greet guests within 30 seconds because that moment sets the tone for everything else."*
- How will they get confirmation of their work being completed in the right way?
- What are the obvious ways in which this person can act that will prevent your [MVG's] leaving feeling [emotional goal]?
- How do they ask questions or seek help to improve?

Turn these answers into a structure that your team can understand and give them to each team member, make them accessible in a team-wide folder (take note to be aware of privacy if any answers are on an individual basis). As you do, make sure the team are aware that these guidelines are designed to support clarity, growth, and shared expectations. By doing this, you are providing every person within your venue with the expectations you have of them for how they operate at work. You are giving them the opportunity to know where to turn to improve (a safety net) and you are giving them the ability to know when they are doing their work correctly (something not always obvious in hospitality). Beyond these benefits for the team themselves, you are ensuring that every role within your venue is aligning itself with your ultimate goal as a venue.

Spot Repeated Gaps, Respond Consistently

When you find a team member not meeting the role the question to ask yourself is - "Is this a skill issue or a will issue?"

- If skill → train. Add into their role description, especially what to look for when it is successful, and support them in their development
- If will → discuss with clarity, not emotion. Confrontation is often mistaken with angry outbursts, this is not the intention. It means to face something head-on and directly, without emotional outbursts. Bring the conversation towards the expectations set out on the team as a whole and how their actions are impacting the vision of the venue and how guests leave feeling

Staffing: The Highs & The Challenges

Example confrontation line: *"I've noticed some of our guests missing out on the service we are aiming for as a team. Can we talk through the role document and about what's going on?"*

Once you confront an error, the Role Description continues to act as the pathway forward for the team member. Other leaders can also use it in the training phase to clearly understand what is expected to be done, allowing for clarity team wide.

Your team is one of your most valuable assets. With the right standards, structure, and support, they can thrive and add real value to your business. Without these, it becomes harder for them, and your business, to perform at their best.

