



The Art of Multi-Unit Foodservice Leadership

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They are hidden to the customer and invisible to most of their hourly staff. Yet they keenly shape and orchestrate the experience of both. Without them, VPs and CEOs would stagger and fall, but stockholders rarely know them by name. The unit managers know them, some more than others, for these invisible leaders were once managers too.

Like Batman, hidden in shadows from the customer and crew, but always alert, instinctive and ready to spring into action, the multi-unit manager or area director oversees and directs the success or failure of every restaurant chain (and multi-unit franchisee) in the world, a thousand times over, ten thousand times a day. Yet they work in near anonymity to both their guests and our industry (where are the Multi-unit Manager panels and awards?). Each day they walk a supervisory tightrope between producing results and successfully managing a Freudian Smorgasbord of personalities. I say: all hail the Hidden Warrior; let us now stop to praise the accomplishments and assess the challenges of the Multi-unit Manager (MUM).



Talk to Multi-unit leaders as much as I do as a speaker at restaurant manager conferences around the world, and a distinct persona emerges. They are fast-thinking, numbers-crunching, paper-pushing, service-driven mobile leaders with a brain and a Blackberry as weapons of choice. They influence and shape the experience of dozens of managers, thousands of team members and hundreds of thousands of customers, yet they're required to do it by indirect influence, not hands-on control, a fantastical skill usually reserved for wizards or Fortune 500 CEOs. They embrace technology, put a premium on soft skills, and mentor the standard-bearers of Generation Next. Most learn the hard way—trial by fire—because sadly most companies invest more time and money training their cooks, servers, and GMs than they do their MUMs. In short, Multi-Unit Managers are my heroes.

Multi-unit leadership can be as down to earth as Home Plate: everything running sharp, managers leading, team focused, nobody hurt, money in the tills and every customer leaves happy. Other days, you feel like an octopus, there's a lot of motion but you can't tell if it's going to be forward, backwards, sideways or out of control. It takes a certain personality to be comfortable with chaos, uncertainty and multi-directional demands, especially in a challenging economy and marketplace.

Our company, Sullivision.com, has embarked on a very insightful and comprehensive annual industry-wide survey of Multi-Unit Managers (MUMs) that we began in March 2005 and most recently concluded in July 2009. We also interviewed high-performing/award-winning General Managers and were able to

assess the types of leadership skills reflected at the unit level that point to success at the Multi-unit level as well. Here's a little of what we've learned from our research.

When you ask the MUMs what's keeping them awake at night, here's the Top 5 challenges they list:

1. The economy
2. Rising costs and growing same store sales
3. Time management; too much paperwork and data to manage
4. How to conduct high-impact unit visits that get measurable results
5. Lack of ongoing personal/professional development

What's wrong with this picture?

The last two on that list—# 4 and #5—are areas where every one reading this should see a clear strategic advantage for your company. Enhance your multi-unit leadership talent by investing in resources that help them learn and grow both personally and professionally. Automate systems that choke them with paper work instead of people work. It appears that we're not investing enough time and resources into the Multi-unit leader's learning needs, coaching and development, or giving them time to do the same for the GMs they supervise. Information is good, but transformation is better. Let's take a closer look at these challenges.



Paperwork is overtaking People Work. One thing we've heard over and over again is that Multi-Unit Managers feel that they have less and less time to spend in the units they supervise because of paper and administrative overload. The more time they spend out of the stores at meetings and on paperwork, the less growth, guidance and support the store managers get. Hence, both the internal and external customer's experience is lessened. Why does this happen? Whose to blame?

Time out? "It doesn't surprise me that Area Directors complain about the time they have available to spend in their stores," says Sam Rothschild, VP of Franchise Operations for Applebee's International. "Do the math: there's only 365 days in a year. When you subtract days off, holidays, travel days, and meeting days, you're left with about one or two days a month that's realistically available to Area Directors to do their most important job: meaningful store visits to individual units that help develop the skill sets of your General Managers". So here's the irony question of the month: are multi-unit leaders so busy doing their job (paper and reports) that they can't do their job (people and profits)? Our research suggests that high-performing MUMs take control of the things that take their time. They spend more time with people, less time with things, get the "big rocks" in place daily, and put all activities on a calendar, not a "to-do" list.



High Impact Unit Visits. High-performing MUMs spend at least ½ day per week in each of their stores. What are the characteristics of an effective store visit by a multi-unit manager? *First, remember that the purpose of all high-impact unit visits is developmental; you are visiting people, not “stores.”* Every store visit should have a specific purpose, whether it’s people, service, operations, sales, cost-control, training, simply reviewing previous period numbers, or some combination of the above. Each store manager’s experience, needs and operations are different, so each DM visit should be pre-planned with the necessary focus in mind. I couldn’t agree more. Our research suggests that “High-Impact Store Visits” involve over three dozen specific tactics, here’s a short list for Multi Unit Managers:

- ▶ Know first what your top performing stores and your bottom performing stores have in common.
- ▶ Determine what the focus of the visit is and how it differs from previous visits.
- ▶ Ask yourself: how should my team be acting differently as a result of my visit?
- ▶ Don’t just “inspect” and “correct,” get a sense of why the team is doing what they’re doing so that you’re assessing root causes and not merely treating symptoms.
- ▶ Reinforce (and model) brand standards and values.
- ▶ Assess the customer’s experience and how the manager performs when its busy—and also when its slow
- ▶ Suggest and detail in writing what adjustments need to be made and clearly communicate it to the store’s management team
- ▶ Set clear expectations, an action plan and time frames
- ▶ Anticipate predictable problems and show your GM how to solve them
- ▶ Help managers understand and direct the architecture of the Shift: know what to do before, during and after a profitable shift (see the DVD *The Shift: How to Plan It, Lead It, Make It Pay* at Sullivision.com)
- ▶ Sit down with the manager after the visit. Eliminate all distractions. Turn off everything that beeps. Ask the manager to critique the unit’s performance first. Listen carefully and take notes. Now clearly communicate what is being done well, what could be improved, and how—together—you will measure success before the next visit. Find out what resources they need from you.
- ▶ Leave the store with energy and positive-ness; don’t take it with you.
- ▶ Go to **Sullivision.com/multiu** and download the FREE High-Impact Restaurant Visit Template

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Free Online Leadership Assessment and E-Learning for Multi-unit leaders is available now at Sullivision.com/MultiU

