

Danny Meyer
Setting the Table

The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business

By 2006, twenty-one years in, Meyer had opened Union Square Cafe, Gramercy Tavern, Eleven Madison Park, Tabla, Blue Smoke, Shake Shack and The Modern, and closed none of them. His one idea: *"Business, like life, is all about how you make people feel. It's that simple, and it's that hard."*



SERVICE VS. HOSPITALITY

"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 set the standards. Hospitality *"is a dialogue"*: it means listening to a guest with every sense and responding with care.

"Hospitality is present when something happens for you. It is absent when something happens to you." And *"Hospitality is a team sport."*

"service without soul, no matter how elegant, is quickly forgotten by the guest."

ABCD *Always Be Collecting Dots*

Learn who guests are (where they're from, what they celebrate, what went wrong last time) and use it. A fly-fishing guide taught him to turn over rocks: there's always a story behind the story.

"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."

"In hospitality, one size fits one!" "Our job is to give people a story worth telling."

ENLIGHTENED HOSPITALITY

Named at Gramercy Tavern in 1995. The order:

1. OUR EMPLOYEES
2. OUR GUESTS
3. OUR COMMUNITY
4. OUR SUPPLIERS
5. OUR INVESTORS

Happy staff make happy guests: a *"virtuous cycle"*. *"(Who ever wrote the rule that the customer is always first?)"*

THE FIVE A'S *for mistakes*

- **Awareness.** *"If you're not aware, you're nowhere."*
- **Acknowledgement.** Say plainly what happened.
- **Apology.** *"I am so sorry this happened to you."* No alibis.
- **Action.** Say how you'll make amends, then do it.
- **Additional generosity.** A dessert, a glass of wine, sometimes the meal.

Then *"writing a great last chapter"*, because *"The road to success is paved with mistakes well handled."* (Stanley Marcus)

THE 51 PERCENT SOLUTION

49% TECHNICAL	51% EMOTIONAL

The five emotional skills he hires for:

Optimistic warmth · kindness, glass half full

Intelligence · insatiable curiosity

Work ethic · doing it as well as it can be done

Empathy · caring how your actions make others feel

Self-awareness and integrity · knowing what makes you tick; accountable

"What is impossible to teach is how to care deeply about setting the table beautifully."

CONSTANT, GENTLE PRESSURE

Pat Cetta's saltshaker: staff and guests keep nudging it off center, and a leader's job is to keep putting it back. **Constant:** every time. **Gentle:** with dignity. **Pressure:** standards are standards.

"Coaching is correction with dignity."

"Change works only when people believe it is happening for them, not to them."

New managers, he warns, get a megaphone, everyone's binoculars and *"fire,"* a power to use responsibly.

THE RESTAURANTS *each began by asking who ever wrote the rule...?*

1985 — UNION SQUARE CAFE
Lease on Brownies; just over $700,000. A two-star *Times* review lifted business 60%.

1994 — GRAMERCY TAVERN
With Tom Colicchio. Its rough start forced the rethink.

1998 — ELEVEN MADISON & TABLA
Two rooms, one landmark building; over $11 million.

2002 — BLUE SMOKE
Barbecue and the Jazz Standard; 60,000 miles of research.

2004 — SHAKE SHACK
Grew from a 2001 hot dog cart in Madison Square Park.

2004 — THE MODERN
At MoMA; 20,000 visitors on opening day.

2005 — HUDSON YARDS
Catering. And still: no restaurant ever closed.

USE IT MONDAY

- Ban "How is everything?" and "No problem." *"A genuine "You're welcome" is always the appropriate response."*
- Ten minutes a day for three gestures that exceed expectations.
- Hire with paid trial shifts; score the five skills 0 to 5.
- Reach an unhappy guest within twenty-four hours.
- *"catch people in the act of doing things right."*
- Ask an agent's question, not a gatekeeper's.

WHERE IT BEGAN

A St. Louis kid whose father's travel business went bankrupt twice, which left Meyer wary of growing too fast. A summer guiding his father's tours in Rome, his *"hospitality boot camp"*. A top salesman at $125,000 a year.

The night before the LSAT his uncle asked, *"Why don't you just open a restaurant?"* He sat the test and *"never bothered to apply to a single law school."*

Gramercy Tavern's shaky first year and the loss of premature twins in 1995 led him to write down what he believed. That became enlightened hospitality.

WHAT HE ADMITS

- Early on he overbooked out of an *"obsession for big numbers"*.
- On Gramercy Tavern's rocky start: *"my own leadership was to blame"*.
- He once refused to hire New Yorkers, which he now calls *"remarkably ignorant and narrow-minded"*.
- He avoided using authority because he wanted to be liked.
- The book is *"certainly not a how-to book"*: *"I've done no research, gathered no evidence, and interviewed no one else."*

"Hospitality exists when you believe the other person is on your side." — DANNY MEYER