
How to Lead Like a Top Chef



By Miguel Noguero (INSEAD EMCCC '16)

World-class chefs confront many leadership challenges shared by corporate leaders and entrepreneurs.

The restaurant industry confronts many of the leadership challenges that other industries, corporate leaders and entrepreneurs face. Chefs and chef-owners play a significant leadership role in their organisations through a variety of operational and social processes. Among these leaders, only an elite group of chefs achieve the recognition to be best-in-class, by operating with excellence, innovation and delivering exceptional customer experiences.

There is intense competition; they rely heavily on talent and innovation; and they need to operate with a high level of efficiency and quality of final products and customer services.

As part of the INSEAD Executive Master program in Consulting and Coaching for Change, I combined my passions and curiosity about organisational leadership behaviour and gastronomy and decided to talk with top chefs of best-in-class restaurants to discover: (1) What are the predominant leadership behaviours identified in a group of best-in-class leaders? (2) How do these elements contribute to organisational excellence?

The research focus group consisted of 23 top chefs, representing 12 nationalities, all ranked by recognised industry review organisations like the Michelin Guide or The World's 50 Best Restaurants List.

I conducted interviews with chefs at their restaurant sites in Spain, France, Singapore, Mexico and the United States, enhanced by a full customer experience and observation of their operations, working environment, client services and ambiance.

After analysing the raw data and following qualitative research methods, I identified 12 predominant competencies (narrowed down from 40 recognised emotion-based leadership constructs) that appeared consistently in at least 60 percent of the top chefs interviewed. Finally, I integrated these constructs into three Leadership Archetypes – Passionate Nonconformist, Determined Eagle Eye and Trusted Coach – the components of which appeared to have a positive impact on leadership effectiveness and organisational excellence.

Takeaways

"Understanding the role of emotion-based leadership behaviours is critical for leaders to cope with emerging and challenging business dynamics, and enable organisation alignment with their vision and goals."

"Successful leaders do well by leveraging a set of EQ capabilities, through the use of transformational leadership behaviours, therein creating emotion-eliciting actions that will allow them to manage the organisation's emotional context and achieve success."

Enabling excellence

Top restaurants' identities are substantially wedded to their chefs' in the areas of creativity, innovation and external image. However, the day-to-day customer experience outcome is delivered through a coordinated organisational effort of several individuals in the kitchen and the front-of-house who face many challenges in real time. In customer-facing operations, the connection between the organisation and the customer is crucial. Organisational excellence can be highly impacted by a combination of three main factors: leadership effectiveness, team effectiveness and workplace environment.

Leadership effectiveness occurs when the leader's emotional intelligence (EQ) is expressed in emotion-eliciting actions that can ultimately enable a positive workplace environment. This also has a mutual cause-and-effect relationship with the team's effectiveness.

Collective emotions ultimately determine the workplace environment, resulting in a team performing a variety of tasks that align with its goals, mission and purpose. It is not just about what gets done but also how the team performs those actions.

How to lead like a successful top chef

The leadership styles of top chefs can be broadly categorised using the following three archetypes. Which best describes the kind of leader you are, or want to become?

Passionate Nonconformist

They integrate enthusiasm and optimism with a clear vision and purpose, unleashing intrinsic motivation to generate constructive action towards achieving personal and organisational goals. An optimist believes in a positive outcome, while a Passionate Nonconformist has a burning desire to drive positive results. They rely on the emotion-based leadership constructs of Enthusiasm and Optimism, Innovation and Creativity, and Flexibility. Nonconformist leaders are constantly looking to do better. They have a clear purpose and continue to take their dreams to higher levels.

Determined Eagle Eye

They can maintain a broad view of their operations, but at the same time, rely on their self-determination and ability to look at the details, preventing, anticipating or acting quickly with resilience and in response to day-to-day

challenges. Their obsession with perfection drives them to fulfil their vision. They leverage the leadership constructs of Vision, Consistency with Ethics, Principles and Values (Walk-the-Talk) and Stress Tolerance. They lead with the precision and vision power of an “eagle eye” to see things objectively, the way they are, rather than the way they wish or fear them to be.

Trusted Coach

They integrate the leadership constructs of Interpersonal Relationship, Meaningful Work and Individual Consideration, including generous personal attention and mentoring across all levels of skill development, behaviour and style. They strive to create an open and sharing environment where individuals can express themselves freely, collaborate and learn from each other. They instil respect and trust onto their teams as key elements to eliciting hope, attachment and fun.

Leadership excellence you can feel

I could feel the positive emotions from the moment I walked into the restaurants run by these top chefs, and I continued to sense it during the whole service experience. Individuals were usually connected and focused with a single goal to provide an excellent customer experience. Like an orchestra, for which the timing and sequence are critical elements of the musical experience itself, many of these restaurants had a series of courses reaching the table one after another in perfect synchronisation. They were an authentic and natural form of expression and elegance. In some of the symphony movements, you can indeed observe innovation and creativity in action, expressed with elements of surprise that activate multiple senses – sight, smell, hearing and touch – and eventually gustatory memories.

These great organisations rely on the leadership of passionate, nonconformist and determined leaders who leverage their eagle eyes to support an obsession for detail, precision and perfection. They foster enhanced market recognition and valuable organisation identity that elicits a proud and active sense of belonging. Their vision is compelling, inspiring and evokes hope for a positive future.

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