

Cultural Experience

Choosing to visit and gain culture experience from an Italian restaurant became very interesting.

I met with Vittorio Minichiello (Victor) owner and surprisingly, he allowed me to enjoy one of his famous meals. I admit Sal provides excellent service and very good food. The culture was unique consisting mostly of Italian employees and only a few Americans, all of them were pleasant and happy. Victor has been in the restaurant business for more than twenty years. Being proud of his progress, he purchased Sal's from Salvatore. Victor began to gradually shift the culture of Sal. He kept his employees happy, by creating a family atmosphere.

Victor stated that Italians take pride in their success and had great work ethics. I asked Victor was hospitality and leadership an inherit trait in his family. Victor's reply was very interesting. He stated, "cooking may be, but not leadership". He stated he was around some very smart people at an early age. He knew he was capable, but need he needed coaching, mentoring, and developing. Victor started his cooking career at the age of sixteen. He desired to have his own restaurant. Nevertheless, he didn't start his restaurant until he was about thirty-five. "It's not the absence of leadership ability or potential that inhibits the development of more leaders; it's the persistence of the myth that leadership can't be learned" (Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, 2010, pg.121). Victor learn leadership from other restaurant owners and inspirational leaders that he had the honor to glean from.

Sal's have been voted as the Virginia Gazette's "Best in Williamsburg" for Best Italian Restaurant since 1996. Victor was raised on a farm in Mirabela Eclano, Italy. He studied food arts at the Culinary Institute of Summonte Italia. Victor learned multiple cultures by working in Europe, Paris, and Naples. Victor has a great concern for quality service, integrity, serving a tasty meal and having happy employees.

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All of Victor's employees had a pleasant attitude as they patiently waited on their customers. Unfortunately, this was during phase two of the reopening since the inauguration of COVID19. Victor has a high demand on sanitation. As I trained him through his kitchen, I was extremely surprised at how orderly his chefs were, and how organized the food closet was, as well as the refrigerator. He had two Italian chefs and two American chefs. The interaction between the chefs and the waitress was friendly and hospitable. As Victor and I walked through, I could see the smiles and feel the culture in the atmosphere. Victor stated, "our mission is to treat all our 'customers' as our guests and to make sure they leave the restaurant with a smile on their faces and a full stomach."

The artwork in the restaurant was very interesting. It represented the culture of Italy and provided a sense of feeling that you were in Italy. The menus were impressive and presented a beautiful picture of what your meal would look like. Victor allows his customer to request specialties and modification to their meal when desired. I asked Victor did he get any complaints from his customers concerning his service or the taste of food. He replied, "we don't get many complaints and we take complaints very serious. It is important to listen to our customers because it makes us better and they return." Victor feels that customers are like family and employees. You must have good people around you. Good people attract other good people. "You need to surround yourself with people who are going to offer you encouraging words when you try something new, understanding and patience when you fail, and helpful suggestions as you try to learn from mistakes" (Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, 2010, pg.121). Victor's success is partially accredited to the people that was fortunate to be in the company of as he learned his craft and mastered his business. He is having the influence on his staff. Victor stated he wants everyone to succeed,

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therefore he offers advice and consulting to others that desire to have their own restaurant one day. “Founders usually have a major impact on how the group initially defines and solves its external adaptation and internal integration problems. Because they had the original idea, they will typically have their own notion, based on their own cultural history and personality, of how to fulfill the idea” (Schein & Schein, 2017 pg. 130). Victor is a prime example of Schein’s perspective of culture being established by founders or owners. Victor has a major impact on the operation of the restaurant. He brings his culture and values to the employees and the working environment.

Values are important to Victor. His work ethic and personal morals motivates him from day to day. He promotes integrity, models leading by example, and is very clear on expectations. “What does all this mean? Essentially, clarity about personal values has the most significant impact on employees’ feelings about their work and what they’re doing in the workplace” (Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, 2010, pg.37). It is values, morals, ethics, and love for people that empowers me to overcome opposition such as the experience I had when my restaurant caught on fire. It was devastating, says Victor. However, I knew I had to face reality and move forward. “Whether on the front lines or in the executive suites, whether at the global or local levels, leaders see open doors while others see brick walls. Leaders seize the opportunities that hide inside adversities. They take the initiative to move things forward” (Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, 2010, pg.97). That devastating moment became an opportunity to remodel and make my vision clearer says Victor.

Victor mentality exemplifies forward thinking. His ability to resuscitate his vision required tenacity, fortitude, positive thinking, and motivation. This became a dark side for Victor. This was a moment for him to think about failure and what mistakes were made in the past. How could he utilize this time to do a self-evaluation? Could Victor look at this challenge and become

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better? These are questions that great leaders would ask and then be honest with themselves.

“Even in the face of obvious wrongdoing Nixon refused to admit any failures or accept any blame. He was a master of denial. Had he earned about his dark side and become aware of the shape it had taken, he could have doubtlessly avoided the humiliation of Watergate and possibly salvaged his presidency” (McIntosh & Rima, 2000, pg.104). Victor unlike Nixon discover some things he could do as a leader to move forward. As a leader, he viewed this moment as an opportunity to rebuild, restructure, and adjust the culture of his business. However, he realized that it starts with leadership.

To many, opposition means failure. Failure is a word that leaders doesn't like or desire to embrace. “None of these are dirty words to leaders. Rather, they are signs that you're doing something tough, exacting, and out-of-the-ordinary. That's why you need grit” (Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, 2010, pg.102). Kouzes and Posner states, when failure happens, you need grit. Grit is the tenacity to rebound. Former President Obama would call it “the audacity to hope.” Victor rebounded and took success to another level. He didn't allow previous challenges hinder his forward progress. He could have become angry and bitter; however, he chose to become better.

“Dealing with your past in an effort to gain freedom from the power of your dark side almost certainly will involve extending forgiveness in some form. Few things can control and cripple us in the present like unresolved conflicts and anger from the past” (McIntosh & Rima, 2000, pg.166). Victor admits the fire crippled his business for a brief period time; however, he was determined to move forward without resentment. He assumed the responsibility of leadership for the business and his family.

Life comes with challenges. “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world”

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(Steele, R. 2015 KJV John 16:33). Christ tells us to expect challenges. He set the example of how a leader should handle challenges. We are encouraged to be of good cheer because we will overcome challenges by keeping the faith and remaining optimistic. “It takes determination and strength to deal with the adversities of life and leadership. You can’t let the set-backs get you down or the roadblocks get in your way. You can’t become overly discouraged when things don’t go according to plan. You can’t give up when the resistance builds or when the competition gets stiff” (Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, 2010, pg.99).

Victor’s leadership styles remind me of a servant leader and transformational leader. His leadership agility is phenomenal. Attention is given to every aspect of the business as a leader. The Italian culture is associated with art, food, and music. On Friday evenings, you are able to enjoy great entertainment with Italian music. The culture gives you the feeling and sense of visiting Italy without leaving the United States. It is the method of cooking that makes the food taste great. The oil that is utilized is imported from Italy. The veal, beef, and chicken are free of antibiotics. The pasta that was served to me was mixed with Italian spaghetti sauce. Some items are locally supplied as Victor’s desire is to support local businesses.

Victor does not take credit for his accomplishments. He humbly acknowledges the members of his team giving them respect and a competitive salary. If problems arise, he expects the employees to be honest with him, promising to help as much as he possibly can. It is that type of mentality, competitive salary, and care that makes his employees want to come to work daily with excitement. Victor states, “model your expectations and they will reciprocate.” I think this statement is true for all leaders. Leaders should lead by example.

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References

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