

## ...on Transitions

**W**e all go through transitions in life. Most are for the good but are difficult nonetheless. Even the best of us resist change, and transitions require us to change our habits, our patterns, even the way we think and respond to various situations.

My transition from being “the boss” to being a good hospitality consultant was surprisingly difficult. Since the early 1980s, I’ve been “the boss,” the guy with the final answer and the one who got to set the direction. I worked as long and hard as anyone and was pretty uncompromising. It was “my way or the highway” for the better part of thirty-five years.

Marriage softened me up a little bit; having children, a lot more. Still, I was used to calling the shots and setting the agenda. When I made the transition to consulting a few years ago, I thought I would serve my clients best by treating their projects as if they were mine, and I tried to shape them to suit my image of their business. It made my first year more difficult and less successful than it might have otherwise been.

**1. I’ve learned a lot** in the subsequent couple of years and have managed the shift to being



a pretty good consultant (IMHO) and advisor. It took me a while to understand how to succeed in my new role, but here are some of the keys to my transition:

**2. I’ve come to**

**understand** that it’s not my restaurant, and, therefore, in order to do my job well, I need to understand my clients’ vision. If I do it right, I’ll help them achieve that vision. My most difficult transition lesson was that my opinion is secondary. If my clients want to open a restaurant called “Yaks and Yams” serving...well, I think you get it, then my job is to make sure that they execute it better than anywhere else. I need to help them ensure that the service, menu, décor, and ambiance match their vision.

**3. My most valuable asset** is that I’ve transitioned into a good listener (not something that those readers who worked with me years ago might have said about me). I’ve learned how to interpret the words and actions of my clients and can provide them tools, techniques, and systems to achieve their dreams. I’ve learned that listening is more important than speaking. Where once I would have jumped right to an answer, I now gather all the information I can in order to provide my client with a thoughtful and well-prepared plan for success.

**4. I’ve realized** that my job is not “to do” but rather to teach “how to do.” Sure, I still believe I can lay out a strategic floor



plan, “sit a dining room” with great finesse, and expedite with the best, but if I’m doing those kinds of tasks, it means that I’m not teaching my clients to do those tasks. The old saying “teach a man to fish...” comes to mind.

**5. I take the advice** I give seriously but not personally. In my first few assignments, if I didn’t get the response I expected for the advice I gave my clients, I was hurt and insulted. It took me a while to understand point number 1. So now I take it seriously and only take it personally if my client doesn’t succeed.

**6. Given all the above,** I also understand that I have an obligation to always speak the truth to my clients. If I believe that “Yaks and Yams” is a terrible idea, I need to tell them so. But even then, if they are committed to going through with their plan, I’ll help them see it through because my feeling is that “Yaks and Yams” is going to have a better chance

at success with my help than without it.

I am a very fortunate consultant. Several experienced consultants brought me in on their jobs early in my transition and showed me the ropes. (Thank you Bob Brown, Ben Hiatt, and Dan Mesches.) Now, I have terrific clients of my own who (mostly) listen to me and, even when they don’t, respect my opinion. I’m paid fairly for my work and always give more than I’m asked for. Most importantly, I get to work on exciting projects and use the skills developed over the entirety of my career to help people who appreciate those skills. And that’s a pretty special place to be.

---

**MICHAEL STERNBERG** is an award-winning expert in a wide array of foodservice venues, including restaurants, hotels, stadiums, arenas, and airports, with operations ranging from full-service to grab & go. He is CEO of Sternberg Hospitality, a full-service restaurant and hospitality consultancy, and a principal in Mokja Ventures, an investment fund for creative, scalable restaurant concepts. He can be reached at: michael@sternberghospitality.com or 703-298-2706.

