

Staff Onboarding and Training Plan

From offer letter to competent in thirty days - seven roles, printable sign-offs, and the systems that make training stick

What this is: a complete hiring-to-competent system for an independent restaurant. Pre-boarding and POS permission set-up, an hour-by-hour first day, thirty-day competency checklists with sign-off tables for servers, bartenders, hosts, line cooks, prep cooks, dishwashers and shift leads, a menu knowledge test template, written service standards and complaint-recovery scripts, a POS training module, cash and till discipline, policy acknowledgement forms, a 30/60/90 review template, and the habits that turn a training binder into a training culture. Who it is for: owners, general managers and chefs who are tired of training the same thing twice.

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Employment, health and safety, licensing and food-handler rules vary by province, state and municipality. Confirm every policy, posting and certification requirement with an adviser for your jurisdiction. This is operational guidance, not legal advice.

What bad onboarding actually costs you

Nobody can tell you what a departure costs in your restaurant, and anyone quoting you a number for it is selling something. What you can do is name the costs honestly, because once they are named they become manageable.

The visible costs

- **Recruiting again.** Posting, screening, interviewing, no-shows, and the manager hours those consume - hours taken from the floor.
- **Training again.** Paid orientation, paid shadow shifts, and a trainer who is being paid to train instead of to sell or to cook.
- **Under-productivity while learning.** A new server runs a smaller section and takes longer per table. A new line cook slows the whole pass.

The invisible costs, which are larger

- **The team absorbs the gap.** Your best people cover the shifts, work the hardest sections, and answer the new person's questions mid-rush. Turnover taxes the staff you least want to lose, which is how one departure becomes three.
- **Guests get an inconsistent experience.** Not a bad one necessarily - an inconsistent one, which is worse for repeat business than a consistently modest one.
- **Standards drift.** Every person trained by someone who was themselves trained badly is a copy of a copy. Two years of that and nobody in the building can say what the standard was.
- **Managers stop managing.** A manager in permanent recovery mode does no coaching, no menu work, no cost control. They only do triage.
- **Risk accumulates.** Untrained staff on allergens, alcohol service and cash handling is not a soft cost. It is the one that arrives all at once.

OPERATOR TIP

Track two numbers instead of guessing at a cost. First: what proportion of hires are still with you at ninety days. Second: how many shifts it takes before a new hire works a full section or a full station unaided. Both are free to measure, both respond quickly to a better onboarding process, and both tell you more about your operation than any industry average would.

The principle behind this whole document

Most restaurants confuse **orientation** with **training**. Orientation is paperwork, a tour and a handbook; it takes two hours and it teaches nobody how to do anything. Training is a sequence of specific, observable skills, each demonstrated, practised, and then signed off by a named person on a named date. This document is built entirely around the second thing. Every role below is broken into day 1, week 1 and weeks 2-4, with a sign-off table, because "they've been trained" is not a fact until somebody has written down what was trained and who verified it.

The thirty-day arc

Every role in this document follows the same shape. The content changes; the structure does not, which is what lets a manager run six different training plans at once without holding six different systems in their head.

Phase	Goal	What good looks like at the end
Before day 1	Nothing is a surprise	Paperwork and payroll done, POS user created with the right permissions, uniform issued, schedule confirmed, first-day time and door confirmed by message the day before.
Day 1	Belonging and safety	They know names, where things are, what the restaurant is trying to be, how to be safe, and what happens tomorrow. They do not run a section or a station.
Week 1	Supervised competence	They can perform the core loop of the job with someone beside them, and they have passed the menu knowledge test at the level their role requires.
Weeks 2-4	Unsupervised competence	They work a full section or station on a normal shift without help, handle the common exceptions, and know exactly when to escalate.
Day 30 / 60 / 90	Confirmed fit, both directions	A structured review where the manager gives specific feedback and the new hire is genuinely asked what is not working.

Pre-boarding checklist

Complete before the first shift. A new hire who spends their first hour waiting for a manager to find a POS login has already learned what this restaurant is like.

- ☐ Offer confirmed in writing: role, wage, tip policy, scheduled hours, start date.
- ☐ Employment paperwork completed and filed per your jurisdiction's requirements.
- ☐ Payroll set up: banking details, tax forms, pay cycle explained out loud.
- ☐ Emergency contact recorded and stored where a manager can reach it at 11 p.m.
- ☐ Food-handler certification verified, or the training booked with a due date.
- ☐ Alcohol-service certification verified where the role and jurisdiction require it.
- ☐ Allergen training scheduled before the first shift with guest contact.
- ☐ POS user created: correct role, correct permission set, unique PIN.
- ☐ PIN issued privately and never shared, written down or reused (see next page).
- ☐ Uniform issued and fit checked; footwear standard explained before day 1, not after.
- ☐ Locker, apron, name tag, wine key, pen, lighter, thermometer as the role requires.
- ☐ Keys, alarm code or door code issued only if the role requires them, and logged.
- ☐ Scheduling app account created and the shift-swap rules explained.
- ☐ Buddy assigned by name and told they have been assigned.
- ☐ Trainer scheduled - and their shift adjusted so training is their actual job.
- ☐ Day-1 agenda printed and on the manager's clipboard.
- ☐ Team told the new person's name and start date before they walk in.

POS access, permissions and the PIN

POS set-up is treated as an IT chore and it is actually a control. Who can void, who can comp, who can refund and who can open the drawer are the four decisions that determine whether your point of sale is a record of what happened or a record of what someone wanted you to see.

Permission	Server	Bartender	Shift lead	Manager	Why
Open and ring a check	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Baseline function of the role.
Modify an item before it fires	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Pre-fire changes cost nothing and speed service.
Void an item after it fires	No	No	Yes	Yes	A post-fire void destroys a record of food that was made. It needs a second person and a reason code.
Comp an item or a check	No	No	Limited, capped	Yes	A comp is a spending decision. Cap it by value and require a reason.
Apply a discount	Preset only	Preset only	Yes	Yes	Named, preset discounts are auditable; open-percentage discounts are not.
Process a refund	No	No	No	Yes	Refunds move money outward. Keep them with the smallest possible group.
Open the cash drawer with no sale	No	No	Yes	Yes	The classic no-sale drawer pop is the oldest till issue there is.
Re-open or reprint a closed check	No	No	Yes	Yes	Re-opening closed checks is how altered transactions happen.
View sales reports	Own only	Own only	Shift	Full	People should see their own numbers; not everyone needs the P&L.

PIN discipline - four rules, taught on day one

1. Every person has their own PIN and it is never shared, not once, not for a rush, not for a manager who is busy. A shared PIN makes every subsequent audit meaningless.
2. PINs are never written on a sticker under the terminal, on the wall, or in the group chat.
3. A manager authorising an override enters their own PIN themselves, at the terminal, at the moment. Handing over a manager PIN is the most common way independent restaurants lose control of their voids.
4. PINs are deactivated on the day someone leaves, before they leave the building - along with keys, alarm codes, scheduling app and delivery-platform tablets.

MANAGER CHECK

Once a month, pull voids, comps and discounts grouped by employee and look at the distribution rather than the total. Totals hide people; distributions expose them. One server with triple the comp rate of their peers is either badly trained, working a hard section, or stealing - and you cannot tell which until you ask.

Day one, hour by hour

A new hire decides how they feel about a job in the first two hours. Spend them deliberately. This agenda assumes a 10:00 start before a lunch service; shift the clock, keep the sequence.

Time	Block	Detail
10:00	Welcome, in person, by the manager	Not by whoever is nearest the door. Ten minutes, sitting down, coffee. Where you came from, why this restaurant exists, what we are trying to be good at.
10:15	The tour, in working order	Staff entrance, time clock, lockers, washrooms, break area, then the route food takes from receiving to walk-in to prep to line to pass to table to dish pit. Teaching the building as a flow beats teaching it as rooms.
10:35	Safety walk	Fire extinguishers and pull stations, exits, first-aid kit, eyewash, chemical storage, safety data sheets, slip and burn hot spots, how to report an injury, the illness policy and how to call in sick without fear.
10:55	Paperwork gaps and policy acknowledgements	Anything pre-boarding did not close. Harassment and violence policy, cash policy, phone policy, social media policy - each read, discussed briefly, and signed.
11:20	The menu, tasted	Not read. Taste at least five items, including the two biggest sellers and anything with a common allergen. Give the printed menu with the allergen matrix and set the date for the knowledge test.
12:00	Shadow the rush	Stand with the buddy, hands off, one job only: watch. Give them three questions to answer by the end - what did the busiest person do differently, where did the flow break, what surprised you.
14:00	Family meal with the team	Eat with people. This is a real training block, not a break. It is where names get learned and where staying past week two is decided.
14:30	POS orientation, hands on	Their own PIN, their own training check. Open, ring, modify, send, split, close. Ring a full fake table start to finish. See page opposite for the complete module.
15:15	Standards and expectations	Uniform and grooming, punctuality (what time do you actually need to be in the building), schedule and swap process, break rules, tip pool mechanics explained in full and in writing.
15:45	Close the day properly	Ask three questions: what surprised you, what is still confusing, what do you want to work on tomorrow. Confirm tomorrow's time, door and trainer. Write their week-1 plan on paper and hand it to them.

COMMON MISTAKE

Putting a new hire on the floor alone on day one because someone called in. It is understandable and it costs you the hire. If you genuinely cannot protect day one, move the start date rather than burning it.

Server - 30-day competency plan

The server plan is the longest because the role carries the most exceptions: allergens, alcohol, payment, complaints and the guest's entire impression of the restaurant.

Day 1 - can do with the trainer standing there

- ☐ Uniform, grooming and punctuality standard understood
- ☐ Floor plan, table numbers, seat numbers and section boundaries memorised
- ☐ Sidework stations, linen, glass and silver storage located
- ☐ POS: log in with own PIN, open a check, ring, send, close a card payment
- ☐ Five dishes tasted; the two top sellers described from memory
- ☐ Allergen escalation script rehearsed out loud with the trainer
- ☐ Fire exits, extinguishers, first aid and injury reporting shown

Week 1 - can do supervised, on a normal shift

- ☐ Greets, seats and takes a drink order within the standard time
- ☐ Enters modifiers, allergy flags and course timing correctly, every time
- ☐ Runs food for other sections and can do a full seat-position hand-off
- ☐ Describes every menu section without notes; passes the knowledge test
- ☐ Alcohol service: knows the legal refusal grounds and how to say no politely
- ☐ Handles the pre-authorisation, split, tip and receipt flow unaided
- ☐ Completes own sidework and gets it checked before leaving
- ☐ Runs a two-table section end to end with the trainer observing only

Weeks 2-4 - can do unaided, including the exceptions

- ☐ Works a full section on a normal-volume shift with no assistance
- ☐ Manages a three-course pace across four tables without losing timing
- ☐ Upsells naturally: a pairing, a starter, a dessert - offered, never pushed
- ☐ Handles a complaint with the LAST pattern and knows when to fetch a manager
- ☐ Handles a split cheque, a comp, a gift card and a declined card calmly
- ☐ Runs own cash-out and reconciles cash, card and tips without help
- ☐ Trains one small task for someone else - the fastest test of real competence

Sign-off

Skill / standard	Trained by	Date	Verified by
Floor plan, table and seat numbering			
POS: full order-to-payment cycle			
Menu knowledge test passed (score:)			
Allergen protocol and script			
Responsible alcohol service			
Complaint handling and escalation			
Cash-out and reconciliation			
Full section, unassisted			

Bartender - 30-day competency plan

The bar is where liability, inventory shrinkage and guest experience converge in one person's hands. Train the legal and the counting parts as hard as the cocktails.

Day 1 - can do with the trainer standing there

- ☐ Bar layout: wells, speed rail, back bar, glassware, ice and garnish stations
- ☐ Glassware standards by drink; polishing and handling by the base
- ☐ POS: open a tab, transfer a tab, close cash and card, pre-authorise a card
- ☐ Free-pour or jigger standard demonstrated and measured against the spec
- ☐ Beer: draught pour, foam control, keg change, line and tower cleaning schedule
- ☐ Alcohol law essentials: age check, intoxication signs, refusal, last call

Week 1 - can do supervised, on a normal shift

- ☐ Makes the ten highest-volume drinks to spec, timed, without the book
- ☐ Wine service: opens, presents, pours to the correct level, stores an open bottle
- ☐ Manages a service well for a full dinner, keeping up with server tickets
- ☐ Handles the tab lifecycle: opening on a card, transferring, closing, unclaimed tabs
- ☐ Cuts off an over-served guest using the trained script, and documents it
- ☐ Completes bar opening and closing checklists including dated garnish and juice

Weeks 2-4 - can do unaided, including the exceptions

- ☐ Runs the bar solo on a mid-volume shift with a full drink menu
- ☐ Executes the entire cocktail list to spec, including the two hardest builds
- ☐ Performs a bar count and can explain a variance in their own section
- ☐ Manages a rush of both bar guests and server tickets without losing either
- ☐ Handles a difficult or intoxicated guest and writes the incident up
- ☐ Places or drafts a bar order against par levels

Sign-off

Skill / standard	Trained by	Date	Verified by
Pour standard verified against spec			
Top ten drinks to spec, timed			
Wine service			
Responsible service, refusal and documentation			
Tab lifecycle in the POS			
Bar count and variance explanation			
Solo shift signed off			

Host - 30-day competency plan

The host controls the two things guests remember most sharply - the first thirty seconds and the wait - and controls kitchen pacing more than anyone except the expo.

Day 1 - can do with the trainer standing there

- ☐ Greeting standard: acknowledge within seconds, eye contact, name the wait honestly
- ☐ Floor plan, section rotation and which tables belong to which server
- ☐ Reservation system: seat, edit, cancel, note, mark a no-show
- ☐ Phone standard: answer by the third ring, the greeting, taking a reservation
- ☐ Where menus, high chairs, boosters, allergy menus and to-go bags live

Week 1 - can do supervised, on a normal shift

- ☐ Seats a full rotation evenly without overloading one server
- ☐ Quotes a wait time and updates waiting guests before they have to ask
- ☐ Takes a takeout or catering enquiry and captures it accurately
- ☐ Manages the door during a genuine rush without the queue losing its order
- ☐ Handles a walk-in when the book is full: options, honesty, an offer to text

Weeks 2-4 - can do unaided, including the exceptions

- ☐ Runs the door solo on the busiest service of the week
- ☐ Balances reservations, walk-ins and delivery pickups simultaneously
- ☐ Paces the kitchen deliberately: knows when to hold a seat rather than fill it
- ☐ Handles a reservation error or a long wait with a real recovery, not an apology
- ☐ Opens and closes the book, and hands over notes for the next shift

Sign-off

Skill / standard	Trained by	Date	Verified by
Greeting and wait-quote standard			
Reservation system, full cycle			
Phone standard			
Section rotation and kitchen pacing			
Solo door on peak service			

Line cook - 30-day competency plan

Train one station to genuine competence before starting the next. A cook who half-knows three stations is useless on a Friday; a cook who owns one is immediately valuable.

Day 1 - can do with the trainer standing there

- ☐ Kitchen layout, walk-in organisation, storage order, labelling standard
- ☐ Knife handling, cut-resistant glove use, burn and slip hazards
- ☐ Handwashing, glove changes, sanitiser buckets and cloth discipline
- ☐ Reads a ticket: covers, course, modifiers, allergy flags, fire and hold
- ☐ Assigned station's mise en place list, pan sizes and set-up diagram
- ☐ Probe use and calibration; where the line-check form lives

Week 1 - can do supervised, on a normal shift

- ☐ Sets up the assigned station to the diagram, unaided, within the time standard
- ☐ Cooks every item on that station to spec, temp and plate presentation
- ☐ Works the station on a mid-volume service with the trainer beside them
- ☐ Calls back the expo correctly and holds and fires on time
- ☐ Executes an allergen order with a full change of pan, utensils and gloves
- ☐ Breaks down, wraps, dates and cools the station's product correctly

Weeks 2-4 - can do unaided, including the exceptions

- ☐ Runs the station alone through a peak service without falling behind
- ☐ Recovers from a re-fire or a wrong ticket without stopping the pass
- ☐ Preps for the station from par levels rather than from a list handed to them
- ☐ Cross-trained onto a second station to week-1 standard
- ☐ Completes the opening line check for the station and logs the temperatures
- ☐ Identifies and reports equipment faults rather than working around them

Sign-off

Skill / standard	Trained by	Date	Verified by
Food safety, hygiene and knife safety			
Station set-up to diagram, timed			
All station items to spec and temperature			
Ticket reading, calls and timing			
Allergen procedure demonstrated			
Peak service solo on primary station			
Second station to week-1 standard			

Prep cook - 30-day competency plan

Prep is where food cost is decided. A prep cook who yields well and labels properly saves more money than most menu changes.

Day 1 - can do with the trainer standing there

- ☐ Recipe card format: yield, spec, method, shelf life, allergen flags
- ☐ Scale use, tare, unit conversions and why weighing beats volume
- ☐ Labelling standard: item, prep date and time, use-by, in permanent marker
- ☐ Storage order in the walk-in and FIFO rotation in practice
- ☐ Cooling rules and the equipment used to hit them (shallow pans, ice baths)
- ☐ Colour-coded boards and utensils, and the allergen separation rules

Week 1 - can do supervised, on a normal shift

- ☐ Executes five recipes to card, hitting the stated yield within tolerance
- ☐ Butchers or portions the assigned protein to spec with the yield recorded
- ☐ Cools cooked product correctly and logs both cooling stages
- ☐ Rotates the walk-in and reports product approaching its use-by date
- ☐ Uses trim and off-cuts as directed by the recipe book rather than binning them

Weeks 2-4 - can do unaided, including the exceptions

- ☐ Works the full prep list unaided and finishes before service
- ☐ Builds the prep list from par levels and a forecast, not from yesterday's list
- ☐ Consistently hits yield; can explain a variance when they miss one
- ☐ Receives a delivery: temps it, checks it, puts it away in the right order
- ☐ Flags shortages early enough for someone to do something about them

Sign-off

Skill / standard	Trained by	Date	Verified by
Recipe cards, scaling and yields			
Portioning and butchery to spec			
Cooling procedure and log			
Labelling and rotation			
Full prep list unaided			
Receiving and put-away			

Dishwasher - 30-day competency plan

The most under-trained role in most restaurants and the one that stops service fastest when it fails. Train it properly and treat it as the entry point to a kitchen career, because that is what it is.

Day 1 - can do with the trainer standing there

- ☐ Dish machine: start-up, chemical levels, tank fill, drain and screen cleaning
- ☐ Wash, rinse and sanitise sequence, and the three-compartment sink method
- ☐ Temperature or chemical verification and where it gets logged
- ☐ Scrape, rack and stack: what goes in which rack, what never goes in the machine
- ☐ Chemical safety: dilution, never mixing products, gloves and eye protection
- ☐ Where every clean item is returned to - the map, not the guess

Week 1 - can do supervised, on a normal shift

- ☐ Keeps up with a full dinner service without the line running out of pans
- ☐ Verifies and logs machine temperature or sanitiser concentration each shift
- ☐ Handles glassware, knives and delicate items correctly and safely
- ☐ Manages garbage, recycling and organics through service, not just at the end
- ☐ Completes the closing breakdown of the dish area to the checklist

Weeks 2-4 - can do unaided, including the exceptions

- ☐ Runs the pit solo on the busiest service without a backlog at the pass
- ☐ Prioritises correctly under pressure: what the line needs next comes first
- ☐ Performs the deep-clean tasks on the weekly schedule
- ☐ Assists with basic prep tasks when the pit is caught up
- ☐ Reports equipment problems with enough detail for a technician to act

Sign-off

Skill / standard	Trained by	Date	Verified by
Machine operation and chemical safety			
Sanitising verification and logging			
Service pace and prioritisation			
Closing breakdown to checklist			
Solo peak service			

Shift lead and manager - 30-day competency plan

Promoting your best server and hoping they work it out is the most common management-development strategy in the industry, and the reason so many good servers become unhappy managers. Train the job.

Day 1 - can do with the trainer standing there

- ☐ Opening and closing procedures end to end, including alarm and key handling
- ☐ POS manager functions: voids, comps, discounts, refunds, re-opens, reports
- ☐ Cash: float, drops, safe procedure, counting witnesses, deposit preparation
- ☐ Where every log, checklist and emergency contact lives
- ☐ Escalation: what they decide, what they call the owner about, at what hour

Week 1 - can do supervised, on a normal shift

- ☐ Runs a pre-shift line-up: numbers, specials, 86s, one focus, one piece of praise
- ☐ Completes the opening line check and the temperature log to standard
- ☐ Handles a guest complaint through to resolution and documents it
- ☐ Cuts labour in real time as volume drops, without being told to
- ☐ Reconciles the till and card batch and explains any variance
- ☐ Writes a legible shift report the next manager can actually use

Weeks 2-4 - can do unaided, including the exceptions

- ☐ Runs a full shift solo, open to close, on a busy day
- ☐ Coaches a team member on a specific behaviour and documents the conversation
- ☐ Handles a real incident: injury, refusal of service, an ill employee, a refund dispute
- ☐ Writes a schedule against a forecast and a labour target
- ☐ Runs a section or a station themselves when short - credibility depends on it
- ☐ Identifies one cost or flow problem, proposes a fix, and implements it

Sign-off

Skill / standard	Trained by	Date	Verified by
Open and close, unaided			
POS manager functions and authorisation policy			
Cash handling, reconciliation, deposit			
Pre-shift line-up delivered			
Complaint and incident handling			
Labour management in real time			
Coaching conversation documented			
Full shift solo			

What trainers get wrong, role by role

Six failure modes that recur in almost every restaurant. Each one is the difference between a plan that produced a signature and a plan that produced a competent employee. Read them before you run the checklists on the previous pages, and hand this page to whoever you have appointed as trainer.

SERVER - OPERATOR TIP

Have the new server write the shift's 86 list and specials on a card in their own handwriting before every shift for their first month. Writing it moves it from something they heard to something they know, and it kills the single most common new-server failure: selling a dish the kitchen ran out of at 5 p.m.

BARTENDER - MANAGER CHECK

Test the pour, do not assume it. Have every new bartender free-pour into a jigger five times on their first week and again in week four. A consistent quarter-ounce over on every pour is invisible on any single drink and is one of the largest controllable liquor-cost leaks in an independent bar.

HOST - OPERATOR TIP

Teach hosts to quote a wait longer than you expect and then beat it. A guest told twenty minutes and seated in fifteen starts the meal pleased. The same guest told ten and seated in fifteen starts it annoyed - identical operation, opposite outcome.

LINE COOK - MANAGER CHECK

The honest test of a line cook is not a quiet Tuesday. Do the sign-off on a Friday at 7:30 p.m. with the chef watching and not helping. If they can hold the station for forty-five minutes at peak, they are trained. If not, the training is not finished - which is information, not failure.

DISHWASHER - OPERATOR TIP

Give the dish station a written priority order - pans for the line, then glassware for the bar, then plates, then everything else - and post it on the wall. Almost every dish-pit crisis is a sequencing problem rather than a speed problem, and sequencing can be taught in five minutes.

SHIFT LEAD AND MANAGER - COMMON MISTAKE

Promoting to shift lead without ever removing anything from the person's plate. A shift lead still working a full section is a server with extra worries and no capacity to manage. Decide what they stop doing before you decide what they start doing.

Menu knowledge test - template

Photocopy, fill in with your own dishes, and give it at the end of week 1. Ten question types, closed book, marked by a manager and discussed the same day. Set a pass mark - a common standard is that anything to do with allergens must be answered perfectly, and everything else needs a strong overall score.

#	Question type	Question (fill in your own)	Answer
1	Dish description	Describe _____ to a guest in one sentence, naming the protein, the cooking method and two supporting components.	
2	Allergen identification	Which of the fourteen commonly declared allergens are in _____ as it is served?	
3	Allergen substitution	A guest with a _____ allergy wants _____. What can you offer, and what must you check first?	
4	Ingredient sourcing	Where does our _____ come from, and what is one thing that makes it worth its price?	
5	Prep time	How long does _____ take from fire to pass, and what do you tell a guest who is in a hurry?	
6	Upsell pairing	A guest orders _____. Name one starter, one drink and one dessert you would suggest, and say why.	
7	Price and value	What is the price of _____, and what is on the plate that justifies it?	
8	Dietary fit	Which three dishes would you offer a vegetarian guest, and which of them can be made vegan?	
9	Modification limits	Can _____ be made without _____? If not, what do you say?	
10	Recovery	A guest says their _____ is not what they expected. What are your first three sentences?	

Score: _____ / 10 Allergen questions correct: _____ / 3 Marked by: _____ Date: _____

MANAGER CHECK

Mark the test with the new hire sitting beside you, not in the office afterwards. Every wrong answer is a two-minute training moment while it is still fresh. A test returned by email teaches nothing and is quietly resented.

Service standards and complaint recovery

Standards only exist if they are specific enough to observe. "Provide great service" cannot be trained, corrected or signed off. The table below can be.

Touch point	The standard	What the trainer watches for
Arrival	Acknowledged within about 30 seconds of entering, even if the host is on the phone or seating another party	Eye contact and a nod count as acknowledgement. Silence does not.
Greeting at table	Within 1-2 minutes of being seated: name, water, drink order taken	Does the server introduce themselves and read the table's mood - celebration, business, first date, hurry?
Drinks delivered	Within about 5 minutes of ordering	Bar tickets fired in the right order; drinks not sat on the bar.
Order taken	Within about 5 minutes of drinks landing, unless the table signals otherwise	Allergy question asked proactively, seat positions recorded, courses timed.
Two-bite check	Between 1 and 2 minutes after food is delivered	Asked as an open question, not "everything ok?" while walking past.
Mid-meal	Drinks refilled before empty; plates cleared when all are finished	Nobody at the table is holding an empty glass while eating.
Dessert and coffee	Offered, not assumed - described, not listed	Menu presented or described, never "any dessert for anyone?"
Payment	Bill within about 2 minutes of being requested; payment processed at the table	Card terminal brought promptly; tip screen never narrated or hovered over.
Farewell	Every guest acknowledged on the way out, by name where known	Somebody says goodbye. In most restaurants, nobody does.

Adjust the timings to your concept - a tasting menu and a fast-casual counter have different clocks - but publish the numbers you choose, because a standard without a number is a preference.

LAST and LEARN - complaint recovery, with scripts

Two patterns, same spine. Use LAST for a guest complaint in the moment. Use LEARN when the failure is larger, when a manager is involved, or when the guest is genuinely upset.

LAST - Listen, Apologise, Solve, Thank

Step	What you do	What you actually say
Listen	Stop moving. Face the guest. Do not interrupt, do not explain, do not diagnose. Let them finish the whole sentence.	"I'm sorry - tell me exactly what happened." Then nothing until they stop.
Apologise	Apologise for their experience without arguing about the facts and without blaming the kitchen, the supplier or another staff member.	"I'm sorry. That's not what we intended and I understand why it's disappointing." Never "I'm sorry you feel that way."
Solve	Offer a specific fix, then ask if it works for them. Never ask an open question like "what would you like me to do?"	"I'd like to remake that for you right now, or take it off the bill and bring you something else - which would you prefer?"
Thank	Thank them for telling you, and mean it: a guest who complains is giving you a chance a silent guest does not.	"Thank you for telling me - it genuinely helps. Let me check back in a few minutes to make sure we got it right."

LEARN - Listen, Empathise, Apologise, React, Notify

Step	In practice
Listen	Same as above, but sit down or crouch if you can. Standing over an upset guest escalates them.
Empathise	Name the impact, not just the error: "You came out for your anniversary and we've made you wait forty minutes. I'd be frustrated too."
Apologise	Once, clearly, without conditions. Repeated apologising reads as panic and makes guests less confident, not more.
React	Act now and visibly. Speed matters more than size: a fast small gesture beats a slow generous one almost every time.
Notify	Tell the manager, write it in the log, and make sure the next shift knows if the guest is returning. A recovery nobody records is a recovery you cannot repeat.

Three rules that make recovery work

1. **The person who receives the complaint owns it until it is resolved.** Handing a guest off to a manager and walking away is how a small problem becomes a review.
2. **Fix the guest first, find the cause second.** Diagnosis in front of the table always sounds like an excuse, however true it is.
3. **Set a comp authority so the answer is instant.** Decide what a server may do without asking - typically a drink or a dessert - and what needs a manager. A server who must find a manager to fix a cold soup will simply hope the guest does not mention it again.

POS training module

This is the list a new hire must be able to do **unaided, on a live terminal, while someone watches and does not help**. Print it, tick it, sign it. "They've used a POS before" is not a qualification; every system handles splits, transfers and voids differently, and those are exactly the operations where mistakes cost money.

Task	Demonstrated	Performed unaided	Date	Verified by
Log in with own PIN; log out every single time they step away				
Open a check: covers, table, seat positions				
Ring an item to the correct seat and course				
Apply a modifier, a special request and an allergy flag				
Hold and fire a course; change the fire order mid-meal				
Add an item to a check that has already been sent				
Split a check by seat, and split an item across two guests				
Merge two checks and move a check to another table				
Transfer a check or a bar tab to another employee				
Void an item before it fires (and know it is not the same as a comp)				
Request a manager void after firing, with a reason code				
Apply a preset discount and state what it is for				
Take a cash payment, give change, and close the check				
Take a card payment at the table, including tip and receipt options				
Handle a declined card without embarrassing the guest				
Process a split payment: part cash, part card, two cards				
Sell and redeem a gift card; check a balance				
Take a to-go or phone order with a pickup time				
Re-print a receipt and locate a closed check				
Run their own cash-out report and reconcile it				

COMMON MISTAKE

Training the POS on a quiet terminal in the morning and never again. Book a second POS session in week three, at the end of a busy shift, and run the awkward cases: the eight-way split, the transferred tab, the guest who wants one item on a separate card. Those are the transactions that go wrong, and they never go wrong at 10 a.m.

Void, comp, discount, refund - the four words that must not blur

If a restaurant loses money quietly, it usually leaves its fingerprints here. Every member of staff who touches a terminal should be able to state these four definitions from memory.

Term	What it means	Effect	Who may authorise
Void	An item is removed from the check because it was never made, or was made in error and has not left the kitchen.	No sale, no cost - or a cost that becomes waste, which should be recorded as waste rather than vanishing.	Before firing: the server. After firing: a manager, with a reason code.
Comp	The item was made and given to the guest at no charge - recovery, hospitality, a mistake, a regular.	Full food cost incurred, zero revenue. It is a marketing or recovery expense and should be visible as one.	Manager, or a shift lead within a capped value, always with a reason.
Discount	The guest pays a reduced price - a promotion, a staff rate, a loyalty offer, an industry night.	Reduced revenue against full cost. Margin impact varies enormously by discount type.	Preset discounts only for staff. Open-percentage discounts should be manager-only.
Refund	Money already taken is returned to the guest after the check was closed.	Money leaves the business. It is the only one of the four that moves funds outward after settlement.	Manager only, documented, and reconciled against the processor's report.

COMMON MISTAKE

Letting comps be entered as voids because it is faster. A void says the food never existed; a comp says it existed and you gave it away. Book comps as voids and your food cost quietly rises with no explanation, your recovery spending becomes invisible, and - the real danger - a staff member ringing food, serving it, taking cash and voiding the check produces a till that balances perfectly. Untracked comps are where theft hides, and it hides in plain sight because the numbers all add up.

The controls that close the gap

- Every void, comp and discount requires a **reason code** from a short fixed list. Free-text reasons become blank reasons within a month.
- Post-fire voids require a **manager's own PIN**, entered by the manager.
- A **weekly report by employee**, reviewed and initialled - not a monthly total nobody opens.
- Comped items are also **recorded as waste or as recovery spend**, so food cost tells the truth.
- Refunds are **reconciled against the payment processor's report**, not just the POS, because those two can disagree.

Cash handling and till discipline

Cash volumes have fallen almost everywhere and cash controls have fallen faster. The restaurants that get hurt are usually the ones that stopped counting because "it's only a bit of cash now."

The non-negotiables, taught on day one

1. **One person per drawer per shift.** A shared drawer is an unattributable drawer, and an unattributable shortage is one nobody can be coached on.
2. **Count the float in and out, witnessed, and sign it.** Two signatures on the count sheet.
3. **Announce the note.** "Out of fifty" out loud, note left on the ledge until change is given. This ends the "I gave you a hundred" dispute permanently.
4. **Drop at a threshold, not at the end.** Set a maximum drawer amount and drop above it into the safe, logged, in a sealed envelope.
5. **The drawer opens for a transaction, never otherwise.** No-sale opens are logged and reviewed weekly.
6. **Cash-out is done by the employee and verified by a manager,** with tips declared per your jurisdiction's rules.
7. **Variances are recorded every time, including small ones.** A tolerance band is fine; hiding a two-dollar short is not, because the pattern is the signal, never the amount.

What a manager watches for

Pattern	What it may mean	What to do
One employee is consistently short by small amounts	Rushing, poor change technique, or skimming.	Retrain the counting method first and observe. If it persists after retraining, escalate formally.
Voids cluster on one person's shifts, after firing	Error rate, or ringing and voiding after taking cash.	Pull the itemised voids with times and compare to the kitchen tickets.
No-sale drawer opens outside transactions	Making change for other tills, or access without a sale.	Review weekly, ask each time, and make it clear the report is read.
Discounts spike on quiet shifts	Friends and family being served on the house.	A named discount list, a comp cap, and a monthly review by employee.
Card tips adjusted upward after close	Tip adjustment being misused.	Restrict post-close adjustment to managers and reconcile against the processor's batch.

MANAGER CHECK

Do not build your cash controls on trust or on suspicion. Build them so that an honest employee can prove they were honest. That is the framing to use when you train it, and it is also the truth: controls protect good staff from suspicion far more often than they catch anyone.

Safety, harassment and policy acknowledgement

Two things are true at once: these are legal obligations that vary by jurisdiction, and they are also the clearest signal a new employee gets about whether this is a serious workplace. Handing over a binder is not training. Twenty minutes of specific conversation is.

Covered on day one, signed the same day

Policy / training item	Explained by	Date	Employee signature
Health and safety orientation: hazards, reporting, right to refuse unsafe work			
Emergency procedures: fire, evacuation, medical, robbery, power failure			
First aid location, who is certified, injury reporting process			
Chemical safety and where safety data sheets are kept			
Slip, burn, cut and lifting hazards specific to this building			
Workplace harassment and violence policy, with named reporting routes			
Anti-discrimination and respectful workplace expectations			
Illness policy: symptoms that exclude from work, how to report			
Food safety expectations and certification requirements			
Responsible alcohol service policy (where applicable)			
Cash handling, void, comp and discount policy			
Phone, social media and guest privacy policy			
Tip pool or tip-out structure, in writing, with the actual percentages			
Employee handbook received and questions answered			

OPERATOR TIP

For the harassment policy specifically, name at least two people a complaint can go to, and make one of them not the direct manager. A policy whose only route is "tell your supervisor" fails in exactly the situation it exists for.

Why you document training - beyond the tick

- **It is the evidence of due diligence.** If something goes wrong - an injury, an allergen incident, an over-service claim - the question asked is what training was provided and when. A signed, dated record answers it; memory does not.
- **It makes performance management fair and possible.** You cannot hold someone to a standard you cannot show you taught them. A sign-off sheet turns "you should know this" into "we trained this on the 14th, let's work out what went wrong."
- **It protects the employee too.** A documented record is portable proof of competence and is often the basis for a promotion conversation.
- **It survives turnover in management.** When the manager who trained everyone leaves, the file is the only thing left.

30 / 60 / 90 day review template

Fifteen minutes, scheduled, sitting down, off the floor. The same three reviews for every role. The point is not the rating - it is that the conversation happens before a small problem becomes a resignation.

Ratings

1 = not yet meeting the standard · 2 = developing, needs support · 3 = meets the standard · 4 = exceeds and helps others

Area	Day 30	Day 60	Day 90	Evidence / specific example
Reliability: attendance and punctuality				
Technical skill for the role				
Speed and consistency under pressure				
Product and menu knowledge				
Food safety and hygiene discipline				
Guest interaction (or internal service, BOH)				
Teamwork, communication and response to feedback				
Systems and POS accuracy				
Cleanliness and standards of their area				
Initiative beyond the assigned task				

Manager section

Two specific things this person does well (name the shift and the moment):

One thing to improve before the next review, and the support being offered:

Employee section - asked, then listened to in silence

- What part of the job is harder than you expected?
- What is still confusing, or what do you do without fully understanding why?
- Is there anything you were promised that has not happened?
- Who has been most helpful to you here, and who should I thank?
- What would make your shifts run better, and where do you want to be in six months?

Outcome: Continue / Extend training (targets:) / End employment Next review date: _____

Employee signature: _____ Manager signature: _____

Building a training culture that outlasts you

A training system is a document. A training culture is what happens when the person who wrote the document is not in the building. The difference is usually five or six habits, all of them cheap.

The buddy system

Assign every new hire a named buddy for their first month - not their manager, and not necessarily the most senior person. Buddies answer the questions people are embarrassed to ask a manager, which is most of the important ones. Tell the buddy they have been chosen and why, give them the new hire's week-1 plan, and recognise the work: a small stipend, a preferred shift, or public credit. Being asked to train is a promotion signal, and treating it as one changes who wants it.

Shadow shifts, done properly

- **Give the shadow a job.** Watching with no task is exhausting and teaches little. "Watch how she handles the four tables that arrive together, and tell me afterwards what she did first" produces real learning.
- **Shadow in both directions.** Have servers shadow the line for one service and cooks shadow the pass. Almost every FOH-BOH conflict is a knowledge gap about what the other side is physically doing.
- **Debrief within the hour.** Ten minutes, three questions. A shadow shift with no debrief is a paid observation with no transfer.

The pre-shift line-up

Five minutes, every shift, same structure, run by the shift lead. It is the single most reliable mechanism for keeping standards from drifting, and most independents skip it because it feels like it costs five minutes.

Segment	Time	Content
Numbers	30 sec	Covers booked, last night's sales, today's target, any large parties.
86s and specials	90 sec	What is off, what is on, tasted if possible - and written down by each person, not just heard.
One focus	60 sec	A single behaviour for tonight: the two-bite check, the dessert offer, ticket times under a target. One, not five.
One piece of praise	30 sec	Name a person and a specific thing they did last shift. Specific praise is the cheapest retention tool in the building.
Questions	60 sec	Genuinely asked, genuinely waited for.

Retention practices that cost almost nothing

- **Publish the schedule as far ahead as you can, and stop changing it.** Predictability is worth more to most hospitality staff than a small raise, and some jurisdictions now regulate scheduling notice - check yours.
- **Have a written path.** Dishwasher to prep to line, host to server to lead. Write the skills each step requires and post it. People leave far less often when they can see the next rung.
- **Do stay interviews, not just exit interviews.** Ask a good employee at six months what would make them leave. The answer is almost always fixable and almost never discovered at the exit interview, which is too late by definition.
- **Feed people properly.** Family meal is not a cost line, it is a retention line.
- **Fix the equipment.** Nothing tells a cook their work does not matter like a broken low-boy that has been "getting looked at" for three months.
- **Handle the first mistake well.** How a new hire's first real error is treated is what everyone else in the building learns about you - and they will hear about it within the hour.

OPERATOR TIP

Run this whole plan on yourself once. Take the shift lead checklist and honestly sign off which items you could demonstrate today. Most owners find two or three they have never actually been taught either - which is usually the reason those same items never get trained downward.