

Reducing the Grind & Improving Life! A regenerative approach to employment for the Canadian Restaurant Industry.

Bruce McAdams, September 2022

For our Leadership and Experiential Learning course this semester I've created a framework that I refer to as a 'regenerative approach to employment in the Canadian restaurant industry.' A key goal of this course is for you as students to understand how to create and maximize internal service quality, also referred to as the employee experience. In this framework the focus is on regeneration, the rehabilitation and enhancement of the system we currently operate in.

Having recently completed a sabbatical, I spent much of that time listening, reading, researching, and discussing the labour issues facing the Canadian restaurant industry. I spent time visiting and studying restaurants that have things figured out, and others that are struggling. I had discussions with all types of industry stakeholders, from groups representing restaurant workers, to CEOs of some of our country's largest restaurant companies.

What I'm presenting here is a personal synthesis of the inputs I've just mentioned combined with my previous work and academic experiences. Along the way I went down many 'rabbit holes', investigating all sorts of things. In the end, a few of those rabbit holes, namely regenerative agriculture, humanistic management, positive psychology, the Greek virtue of *Philotimo*, and Herzberg's Two Factor Theory played the most significant roles in the finalizing of my thoughts. You may recognize elements of the aforementioned as you read through this document.

Why a framework?

While I've created this framework to aid discussion with students, I increasingly think there is an application for this approach for leaders currently working in foodservice in Canada and hence will be sharing it with interested foodservice operators. In my discussions I have sensed a need for solutions from the front-line restaurant leaders I've been listening to. Living with the challenges of being short staffed, continuously hearing about the reasons for the shortages, I'm hoping this document may provide some direction, a starting point that may lead to meaningful change.

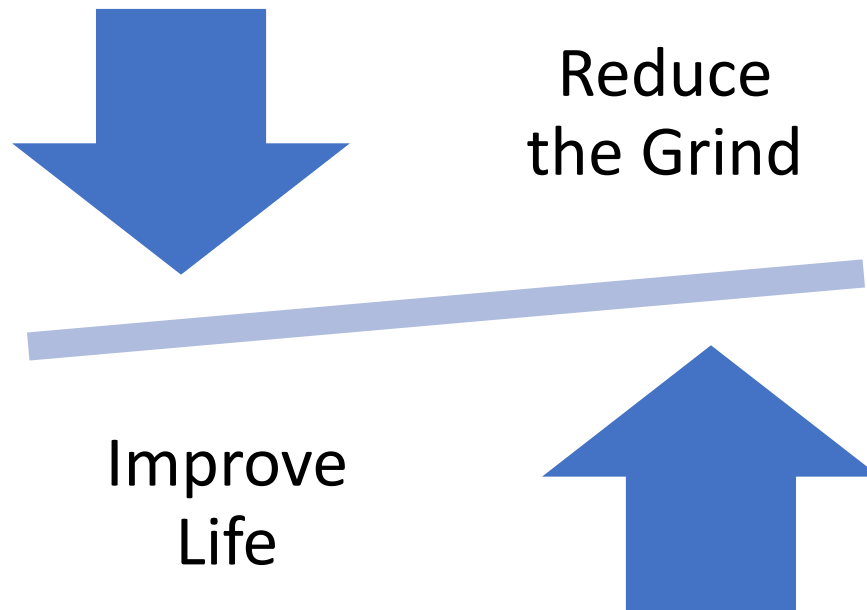
What I'm presenting is a two-factor approach to help create healthier work environments and stronger relationships with their employees. I believe this approach can help produce restaurants where all will flourish and help stem the exodus of people leaving our restaurants and our industry. I consider this model a 'regenerative approach' to leading a restaurant team, one that renews and restores positive outcomes for both employees and employers.

The two factors

At its core, this approach identifies 'two factors' that need attention for regenerative employment outcomes to exist. I've labelled the two-factors, *reducing the grind*, and *improving life*. A common response when speaking to people working in our industry, or to those who have recently left the industry is something they refer to as '*the grind*.' This phenomenon applies to both staff and management and is a result of the intensity of the physical and mental stresses that are faced daily when producing restaurant experiences. Reducing the grind is the first factor because I believe that these are the reasons why people will leave a restaurant. In this document I have presented four categories of emphasis for reducing *the grind*; physical stress, mental stress, work-life balance and leadership support. I've broken down each of these into sub-categories and provided specific examples to understand the actions that may need to be addressed depending on the restaurant and individual. What is needed is to be addressing, and working on the categories of *the grind*, those that are impacting your employees. The expectation should not be to solve all the issues of *the grind*, this would be impossible given the operating environment of restaurants. What can be done, is to make sure these issues are being acknowledged, are being addressed, and action being taken to improve them where possible.

The second factor is *improving life*, this is the factor that will make people want to stay at a restaurant but can only exist if efforts to reduce *the grind* are taking place. Improving the life of employees will look different to each person. For some it is about improving their financial security, to others it's about learning new things. Work has traditionally been one of the main factors to improve one's life, we just need to realize this, think differently, and alter our approach from the traditional transactional employer-employee relationship. This document presents the six categories that restaurant work most often improves employees' lives: potential earnings, job security, benefits, self-development, social experience, and advancement. Leaders need to understand how we can improve the life of each of our employees and take action to do so.

Figure 1. Reducing the Grind While Working to Improve Life



Leadership that cares

I've provided general areas to consider for each factor along with some examples on actions that can be taken in these areas. While my goal is to provide a road map to improvement, it should look differently for all restaurant organizations. Different leadership approaches will warrant different methods, and I believe that leaders should create their own path using the two-factor regenerative approach as a guide. It is important to note that this approach has been created for use by operational leaders in restaurants. Leaders determine process and behavior and this document hopes to guide leaders to focus on tactics to reducing *the grind* for employees and *improving their lives*.

As often as the idea of *the grind* comes up in conversations with restaurant workers, another commonality is the desire for someone to care about them at work. While 'someone who cares' has been included in this model under leadership support, the thinking is that by working on reducing the grind, and improving life, a restaurant leader is showing the ultimate amount of care for their employee.

An individual approach

This model is not a 'one size fits' all approach, it can't be as every restaurant and worker is different. Each employee will have different thresholds, some may have more issues with the mental stresses as opposed to the physical. Others will need more leadership support and less focus on work-life balance because they are starting their 'career', or don't have a young family. Leaders need to listen and have different paths for reducing *the grind* for each employee.

Step one: Reduce *the grind*

This chart categorizes the four major areas that make up *the grind*. I've broken each into sub-categories and provided examples for each. As this is a guide, examples can be added to, or changed based on the context of the restaurant. A reminder again, the expectation is not that the leader works on all areas mentioned but targets the ones they can control based again on the individual need of the worker.

Table 1. The Four 'Grind' Factors

| | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Physical Stress | Length of shift | Targeted out times No 'close-opens' |
| | Breaks | Follow ESA Family meals |
| | Physical environment | Spotless staff areas Incorporate staff welfare in operational design Temperature control |
| 2. Mental Stress | Emotional labour | 'Firing' customers Written and communicated policies about acceptable behavior (guests/employees) |
| | Mental health training and support | Leadership and employee training MH Strategy and MH First Aid in place Mental health checks |
| | Pay | A living wage: "making ends meet" |
| 3. Work Life Balance | Schedules | On call shifts Split shifts Posted two weeks in advance Weekend 'off' policy |
| | Down time | Consecutive days off Reducing operating hours Closing for holidays Closing on holidays |
| 4. Leadership Support | Organized and efficient operation | Clear expectations Eliminate 'say-do' gap Hope and Optimism Highly trained leaders 'One house' |
| | Someone who cares | Listening, not talking |
| | Equity, Diversity, Inclusion | 'Dignity and respect' |

Step two: *Improve life*

Though it sounds ambitious and idealistic, improving the life of those that work for us is not a far-fetched concept. Work as we know it usually improves our life and what determines this improvement can look very different for each person. For some it can be financial security while for others it's about giving one meaning and purpose.

As in reducing *the grind*, the *improving life* categories introduced here will not all be important to all people. Some people may be motivated just to make money, others will want to gain skills and knowledge. It is again in the leader's best interest to listen and find out what is important to each employee, and act on this knowledge individually.

Several of the factors are based on compensation, while others based on learning and development. This makes sense as the single parent working as a food production worker will most likely have different motivations and needs than a recent hospitality graduate starting a new career as a manager.

As mentioned earlier, the two factors need to be considered for each employee simultaneously. I have found that if you don't try and reduce *the grind*, people will be 'thinking of leaving.' Conversely, if you take care of the *improving life* factors for individuals, they have reason to and will 'plan on staying.'

Table 2. Six Ways to 'Improve Life'

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Potential earnings | Some people want to make money |
| Job Security | Transparency and communication |
| Benefits | Health, dental, vision, EAP |
| Self-development | Skill and knowledge acquisition |
| Social : 'Enjoyable work environment' | Strong and positive relationships |
| Advancement | Growth within organization |

Reference of terms

Decent work is employment that "respects the fundamental rights of the human person as well as the rights of workers in terms of conditions of work safety and remuneration. ... respect for the physical and

mental integrity of the worker in the exercise of his/her employment. It is a concept presented by the United Nations as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG).

Emotional labour is the management of one's emotions in order to present oneself and interact with other people in a certain way while doing a job.

Flourish. Grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as the result of a particularly congenial environment.

Humanistic management is a distinct perspective on management in which people matter. Ever heard of human resources, human capital, humans as most important assets? All these terms denote people as a means to the end of some organizational purpose, say productivity or shareholder value. None of these terms indicate the intrinsic value of human beings as humans first and foremost. That inherent value, humanistic management practitioners label dignity.

'One House' is a concept based on breaking down walls and building stronger relationships between the front and back of house of restaurants. Historically a divide has existed between these two groups that often has negative impacts on various aspects of the restaurant in an organizational context. One house puts in place policies and practices to bring the two groups together.

Philotimo. A Greek virtue that means to respect and help others, not in expectation of reward but because you have a duty to do the right thing

Regenerative agriculture. A system of farming principles and practices that seeks to rehabilitate and enhance the entire ecosystem

Additional Thoughts!

I'll introduce another idea I call "How we approach our workforce." Self-explanatory, this chart is my thinking on how change is occurring, and is required amongst the leadership and organizational competencies of restaurants looking to flourish in the new economy

| | Past | Current | Needed |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Leadership approach | Transactional | Culture building | Stewardship |
| Organizational Vision | Business Growth | Organizational success | Diversity/Equity/Inclusion |
| Employee Expectations | Pay your dues | Work life balance | To flourish |
| Pay | Minimum wage | Competitive wage | Living wage |
| HR's Role | Training | Growth and Development | Improve life |
| The Rules | Policies | Company Values | <i>'Philotimo'</i> |
| The work | A Job | Meaningful Work | Decent work |
| Labour strategy | Recruiting | Retention | Dignity at work, dignity in work |
| Productivity | Exploitive | Engagement | Psychological safety |