

## CASE STUDY <<<

# MEAT THE COMPANY

WITH AN HR POLICY THAT INVOLVES JAMMING TOGETHER, CULTURE APPRECIATION, AN ABOVE-INDUSTRY PAY SCALE, PRACTICALLY NO EMPLOYEE CHURN, AND WAITERS WHO ARE BEING GROOMED INTO MANAGERS – RESTAURANT CHAIN THE MEAT CO HAS A UNIQUE MANAGEMENT STYLE THAT CAUGHT KETAKI BANGA'S ATTENTION



Writing for a magazine that aims to highlight business best practices in the region, I inevitably spend much time and effort scouting for interesting case studies. Imagine my delight when one landed right in my platter – figuratively speaking. A casual weekend outing at a popular steakhouse and, suddenly, we had a story!

The Meat Co is part of an international group of restaurants run by the FoodFund Management Company (FFMC). Established in 2000, it was the vision of two South African restaurateurs, Bradley Michael and Costa Tomazos.

Marianna Couvaras, Human Resources Development Manager, talks about how, many years prior to that, Tomazos ran another steakhouse chain in SA. “He was employing African people even during the time of apartheid when that was not allowed. He would sneak them in the back door and, over the years, did a lot to develop them. He felt if his staff reached

the stage where they could leave to start their own business, it meant he'd achieved something.”

Mona Ibrahim, Marketing Manager, explains how this philosophy is followed even today across all their restaurants, including Ribs and Rumps, another steakhouse chain. “We are all about people. We get up everyday thinking how we can develop our people more.”

### So how do they do it?

Marianna elaborates: “Basically, we believe we are a people business. We happen to serve meat and steak and food, but our core product and biggest asset are our people, and our vision is to develop them to provide a superior customer experience.”

They have a small training team – three people to be precise. But they amplify the impact by focussing on training the trainers. This is incorporated into every manager's role; while 30% of their job is to focus on operations, 70% of what they have to do is develop people. “So every person's



Dancing at the opening of Ribs and Rumps, Dubai Mall



Staff waiters go out of their way to perform African songs during the opening of Meat Co, Abu Dhabi



Culture appreciation sessions allow the staff to better appreciate each other's backgrounds. Pictured here is the team enjoying Zulu dance



accountability and responsibility is to develop themselves and others," she adds.

What about their induction programme? "When someone joins the company, they go through a cultural understanding exercise that encourages connecting with the team, and also helps them understand what Dubai is all about," answers Marianna. Besides that, they go through product knowledge training, waiter service training, bar training, and so on.

She adds, "We have different training programmes at every level. These range from leadership programmes, computer training, psychological training - which provides insights into the way people behave, how to respond to their needs, how to identify different personality types, how to deal with each other better, and so on. It helps get a better knowledge of yourself and how that affects others around you in your personal and professional life."

Mona reiterates: "Anyone can teach how to set a table or make a salad, but you can't copy the magic and essence of a business, your intellectual capital, how you deal with your customers, the way you make them feel. That's our competitive advantage."

We talk about how, particularly in the hospitality industry, very few companies are people driven. What you see are a lot of overworked, underpaid, inadequately trained staff, and that reflects in their job satisfaction and service level as well.

Quick to point out how they differ, Mona informs: "Just the other week, Marianna met up a transcendental meditation teacher to incorporate meditation into our training to help the staff focus better."

It is interesting speaking to the two managers. While Mona is high energy and very passionately articulate, Marianna is calm, quiet, almost shy, but equally focussed about what needs to be done. They seem well-balanced as a team.

They have one training session per week per store, and daily on-the-floor coaching. "So we don't always sit in classrooms and train, we are very hands on as well. We have kitchen motivational sessions, pre-shift training, which are little meetings before the service starts for the evening, jam sessions and so on," divulges Marianna.

Jam sessions? Sounds intriguing! It turns out that before each shift, everyone gets

**Anyone can teach how to set a table or make a salad, but you can't copy the magic and essence of a business, your intellectual capital, how you deal with your customers, the way you make them feel**

## MANAGEMENT

together and they just sing, dance and jam on the drums. I asked around later, and the staff were unanimous about it not being a formality; they love these sessions.

Mona explains how it builds up their energy and motivation: "Our staff members love to sing and dance; many of them come from a performance background. So when we dance, there's energy and this great amazing positive feeling, and we start the shift with this frame of mind. That energy is transmitted into our service and customers. We found that when we do pre-shift jamming, our service is much better, the vibe is far more alive."

She elaborates on another pre-shift activity: "Culture appreciation is the essence of our restaurant, which is from South Africa. We celebrate the rainbow nation - people coming from different backgrounds, faiths and cultures. In order for us to work together, we need to bridge any sort of judgements or prejudices, and we do that by obliterating ignorance. So we have special sessions where members of our staff teach others about their culture - how they think, dress, their food. They even cook special dishes, they dance, wear traditional outfits, and this happens across all of our branches.

"Everyone is interested to know about each other and where they come from. They ask a lot of questions and it becomes an open discussion. Everybody walks away learning something more about their colleagues. People are more humanised because they are no longer just employees, but someone with a life story."

Marianna adds, "Our teamwork has really improved because of this. We are more integrated, there's a better connection within the team and people respect each other a lot more. Part of our work culture is to respect every single individual, who they are, where they come from. We are very focussed on that. So if it's someone's birthday we'll make a big fuss about it and sing for them the same way we'd sing for our customers."

### Staying power

When asked about their employee turnover, both Mona and Marianna proudly state that people hardly ever leave and if any do, it's mostly due to personal reasons.

## MANAGEMENT



(l to r) Gracious Sikhosana, Marianna Couvaras, Jeff Dube

I spoke with Jeff Dube from South Africa, who's been with the company for over 25 years. He's now been made the first official Meat Co Worldwide Ambassador. "And I'll be here for another 25 years," Jeff states. "People stay much longer than they had ever anticipated."

His sentiments are echoed by training manager Gracious Sikhosana: "Since our launch here, we've managed to keep the staff we started with and develop them from stage zero upwards; some of them are floor managers now." According to him the management really means it when they claim that people are their most important asset: "We always put people first, so we assess anything that's to be implemented – Is it good for our people? Is it good for our company? If it's good for one and not the other, then we need to look into it again."

What other perks do they provide? Marianna reveals that they pay about 30% above industry standard. "It's our policy because we get better quality people," she explains.

What about perks for non managers? "While this is not necessarily a perk according to us, but here in the industry not many companies provide decent living arrangements," answers Marianna. "For our junior staff, we sleep two a room and our accommodation is of a good standard in an

international city. Every manager has their own accommodation."

### Pay it forward

Other incentives include ample opportunities for career development. "While finding the right person is important, we don't just employ, we develop them and their skills," says Marianna. "We believe that someone who's worked here for a while will be a better manager than somebody who doesn't understand our culture and the way we operate. Our first priority is to develop our staff from within and then, if we need to, we recruit from outside. We have a huge pool of talented individuals across the world, so we advertise internally if a position comes up and try and get people to cross-pollinate amongst the various country branches. We also offer incentive tours so employees can experience how our branches in other countries operate."

Gracious cites his own example: "I started in South Africa as a waiter and then was transferred to Dubai as a head waiter. Now I've been promoted to the post of training manager."

Mona adds, "We mentor people if they are interested in another job role within the company. We also offer them the opportunity to be trained, over and above what they do, if they want to move from a waiter's job

**We mentor people if they are interested in another job role within the company. We also offer them the opportunity to be trained, over and above what they do, if they want to move from a waiter's job role to, say, PR and Marketing**

role to, say, PR and Marketing, which I handle. Currently, I'm training Jochelyn in Abu Dhabi, Malebo in Downtown Burj, and Janice and Joanne in Madinat. We take them through the paces – what is marketing, how do we brand The Meat Co, how to implement our loyalty programmes, and so on. We've also identified people in Ribs and Rumps; there's Buela, who is currently a waitress and will now be rolling out the strategy for our loyalty programme in Dubai Mall. All these people are floor managers or waiters who are being groomed for other roles. We train them for free, as opposed to them paying to learn these skills outside. We watch them grow to the point when they can start training others who want to learn."

Marianna adds how she has taken on Jeff and Gracious and groomed them to handle staff training, so while she is busy strategising on the next step, they help execute current policies for her.

### Looking ahead

"Our vision is to be the best steakhouse in the world," states Marianna, "and our HR department has now become one of the core components of our business. We are very close knit; we're not just colleagues, we're like family."

Mona adds, "We practice 'an attitude of gratitude' towards our staff. We are human beings first and foremost and we celebrate that."

But how are they handling the slowed economy when plenty of well-known names in the hospitality business have had to downsize? "We haven't retrenched and we won't be," Marianna is emphatic. "Our way to tackle the situation is through measures like improving our menu and adding more value to our food; we are actually getting smarter in the way we serve our guests."

Mona agrees: "We're doing the opposite of what most other companies have done. They are reducing their costs by downsizing and their portions are dropping, but we are still expanding and opening up more branches. We are focussed and passionate about developing our people. Basically, we ask ourselves, 'What can we do to add value to the experience?' We are not coming from a position of fear, but from a position of strength, confidence and positivity." ■