



Handle with care: 'Stop being obsessed about training people you can't train. Training refines talent; it doesn't define it,' says Chef Megel PHOTO: STOCKXPRT

Service sector doing a decent job

Culture and philosophy not built overnight, but strong leadership will help: forum

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SINGAPORE should give its service sector time to mature, given that the French took two centuries to transform from a culture of servants to one of service professionals, says the executive director of an academy for the culinary arts and food and beverage (F&B) service.

Chef Christophe Megel of the At-Sunrice GlobalChef Academy said: "We should stop beating ourselves up so hard because I think overall, we do quite a decent job in Singapore. And when you look at the history and the amount of growth we've had, that doesn't happen by accident."

He was speaking at a recent industry forum organised by the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) at the Singapore Management University.

The latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) scores for the food & beverage and tourism sectors released at the event appeared to back up his assessment – the scores are at their highest

since the index was first compiled in 2007.

"Culture is not built overnight," said Chef Megel, who added that bringing service standards to the next level was not just about culture, but also about articulating a "philosophy of service".

"Culture is the environment, philosophy is the guiding principle of how to behave in this environment. When people don't have clear philosophy, the decision-making process can be bizarre.

"But when the philosophy is clear and aligned with the company's culture, when people have to make a decision on the job, they know what to do."

Another panellist at the forum, group chief executive and managing director of Timbre Group Edward Chia, agreed, but pointed to several challenges that F&B and other service providers here face.

Apart from a highly competitive and unforgiving landscape – evidenced by the frequency with which new restaurants pop up and shut down – industry players rely heavily on a steady stream of foreigners to fill the many service positions created with each new F&B outlet, he said.

"In each crew, you see three or four nationalities, and culture is very much down to the individual's life experiences and national culture too. One challenge is being able to really understand each other's culture and then deliver a single experience for our customers – that is tough," Mr Chia added.

Timbre Group, which he founded, runs several live-music restaurants and bars, music festivals, a pizza restaurant and delivery service and other music-related businesses.

What it comes down to then, is strong leadership.

Chef Megel said: "In the journey to establishing a great service culture and philosophy in Europe, leadership was always very strong. Leaders were the lighthouses of those restaurants and hotels – and still are today."

To Mr Chia, service goes beyond understanding the needs of customers to also understanding his employees. He said: "Are we fulfilling their basic needs? They need to be happy with their basic pay package, they need to be happy with their career progression, they need to be given opportunities to learn

what they are passionate about learning."

He sees hope in the fact that there are people entering the service line who want to build a career out of it. "It's a tough job, and if they don't have the passion for the job, they will not stay," he said.

While good service sector leaders recognise the importance of training, there are limits to the difference it can make, said Chef Megel.

"Sometimes we're very stubborn about this, but training is not applicable all the time. Stop being obsessed about training people you can't train. Training refines talent; it doesn't define it."

He said that just as he once harboured dreams of playing the saxophone, only to discover he lacked an awareness of rhythm, there are people entering the service line with ill-suited demeanour or personalities.

Marcus Lee, the academic director at ISES, agreed: "This is very true. There should be self-selection in the people who show up to work in the service industries. Not everyone should be working in the service industry, not everyone can."