

TRYING TO MEET (AND CHANGE) THE DEMANDS OF THE MODERN
WORLD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AN INNOVATIVE
FAST-FOOD RESTAURANT

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This is an ethnographic account of a growing quick-service restaurant group. In the case study presented here, one is able to witness the implementation of an integrated production strategy on the part of the organization, in an effort to achieve efficiency and mission-based goals that were established during their founding. The mission-based goal of connecting staff members through an integrated production model, through techniques similar to increased skill variety, task significance, task identity, autonomy, and feedback can qualify as a new form of efficient fast-food production. However, conflicting perceptions about natural hierarchy, the criteria for promotion, and hiring strategies can run counter to the productive efficiency benefits that come from the methods of work redesign that are showcased in this thesis.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth Warburton completed a B.A. in Political Science – Comparative Politics at the University of California, San Diego in 2003. Additional study took place at the London School of Economics and Political Science where she satisfied the requirements for an MSc in Politics of the World Economy in 2004.

This thesis is dedicated to my father
who always knew that the most useful information
is often found in the most unlikely places.

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PREFACE

The current study is born out of an innate interest to understand the connection between micro-level interactions and macro-level structures within an economic system. My early interest was in the varieties of market logic and the effects on, or inspiration from, the corresponding organization of society. The subject matter that caught my attention was economic development (Schumpeter [1954] 1963; Schumpeter [1942] 1976; Polanyi [1944] 2001). Entrepreneurial behavior within the context of market realities as a dynamic force in the story of economic development, and the supportive or suppressing role of governmental, cultural or religious institutions on this process was what I wished most to study. The possibilities for study seemed wide in the field of economic sociology (Swedberg 2004); and written works by Clifford Geertz, William Easterly, and Julia Elyachar provided a cornerstone for me in terms of the type of work I wished to produce (Geertz 1978, Easterly 2002, Elyachar 2005). All I needed to find was a case study of my own to study the connections that existed between the everyday life of economic players and the institutional or policy contexts that determined possible flows of their economic creativity and action.

Fast forward many years later and I will be the first to attest to the following fact: the difficulties inherent to expressing one's interest in a particular subject is usually an issue of the breadth of the subject one has chosen to pursue. Without the capacity to carry on a study of international proportions I did what most folks do when they come home empty handed; I looked in my own backyard. As a result, I directed my attention away from the realm of international economic development policy and focused instead on the influence of ideas around the division of labor on the life of an American quick-service restaurant.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine an American quick-service restaurant group and present the findings as a case study of work redesign relative to established industry standards. Quick-service, synonymous with fast-food, is a well-known and robust industry in the United States. McDonald's and Burger King top the list as the nation's largest fast-food companies (Oches 2011) and are iconic, when it comes to both sides of the public debates about the state of American fast-food and consumer behavior (Love 1995, Schlosser 2002, Tuttle 2009). As with many public debates, it is difficult to say why things are the way they are, or from where change will stem. Is the current state of the industry the result of rational economic choices of owners (and consumers), based on market conditions? Is change desired, and if so is it really due to a collective acknowledgement of broader social concerns? Whatever one's focus there is evidence of change in the fast food industry, and that evidence makes the topic of organizations who provide convenience eating a relevant topic for everyone from consumers to management scholars. Businesses within the industry are beginning to restructure and they are vocalizing the need for alternatives.

The majority of change within the industry over the last several decades has been in distribution practices and sourcing strategies. A recognized sub-category of the fast-food industry is the 'better-burger' chain, characterized by simpler menus and the focus on freshness of ingredients relative to their more well-known competitors (Wolin 2011). However, the most innovative sourcing has come from other types of fast-food companies (non-burger restaurants) who have made it their mission to change the shape of America's fast-food supply chain. Chipotle (a company-owned Mexican food chain with 1084 locations in the United States in 2009) is unique in the industry for their effort to source naturally raised beef, chicken, and pork,

and for serving dairy products that are free of synthetic hormones (Oches 2011). This sourcing strategy has had a significant effect in signaling a change to suppliers about consumer choice, and creates new opportunities for farmers and suppliers willing to meet the growing need for inputs managed in a sustainable way (Bloomberg 2010).

This thesis provides the opportunity to observe a similar attempt to change how fast-food is organized. The owner of Life Alive, Ms. Heidi Feinstein¹, was inspired to bring organic vegetarian fare to the world of fast-food. However, beyond affecting the supply chain for organic ingredients, Ms. Feinstein also wanted to design an internal work environment that would address the negative attributes of working on a fast-paced food service assembly-line.² For example, one of the goals of the organization is to create a work environment that values input from employees, empowering them to take an active role in defining their daily work lives. Fostering such an approach delivered an expectation, Ms. Feinstein hoped, for long-term commitments from employees relative to industry standards. She believed that triggering a more personal, significant investment on the part of employees would support the organization's overriding mission (discussed in greater detail later on) and lead to more robust business. Overall, she felt that the internal, cultural structure of the restaurant's original cafe-style location in Lowell, Massachusetts should inspire the high-efficiency location in Cambridge, Massachusetts eight years later. The following describes the differences between the two locations in order to set the stage for the study itself.

The company itself was first established in 2004, in Lowell, MA as *Life Alive: Urban Oasis and Organic Cafe*. Tucked away in the small downtown section of a historically significant, yet retired, industrial mill town, the restaurant provides a haven for natural food

¹ Permission granted to use actual names of the restaurant and owner.

² Negative attributes have been reported to include loss of meaning in work and emotional detachment from tasks, among others (Leidner 1993, Newman 1999, Ritzer 2000).

enthusiasts. Besides meals and non-alcoholic drinks this location has a small retail area selling health and home merchandise. This location seats approximately 35 people and has a significant "takeaway" clientele. The format is a low-key cafe that has witnessed a gradual growth in business overtime. First employing one other person in addition to the owner, Lowell now has a staff of 11, of which two to five work simultaneously at any given time depending on the flow of service and required tasks. The clientele is diverse in terms of age, gender, profession, and to a certain degree race. The restaurant also has a significant amount of repeat business.

Table 1.1 General Statistics by Location³

	Lowell	Cambridge
Number of Managers	2	3
Number of Staff	9	35
Square Footage of Seating Area	650 sqft.	1550 sqft.
Square Footage of Food Prep Area	350 sqft.	950 sqft.
Hours Open to Public	10am - 8pm	8am - 10pm
Hours with Staff Onsite	7:30am - 9:30am	6:30am - 12:30am
Average Daily Revenue	\$1,700	\$8,500
Average # of Customers per Day	179	708
Average Number of items prepared per Hour, at Peak Hours	47	123

Central Square in Cambridge, MA, the second location of the Life Alive restaurant group, is a contrast. Central Square sits between the wealth-laden Harvard Square and technology dominated Kendall Square, home of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At this location Life Alive serves meals, non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages, but in contrast to Lowell they do not feature a significant amount of retail items. The Cambridge location seats 70 people, and also has a robust “takeaway” clientele. The clientele is mixed, but with the numbers of people

³ Sourced directly from the company’s records. Averages represent two weeks worth of data, one week from November 7-13, 2011 and one week from February 6-12, 2012.

that stream in, it is difficult for staff members to report consistently on any trends (i.e. repeat clientele, estimates of demographic information, etc).

Figure 1.1 Employee Hierarchy and Average Number of Staff by Location (2011)

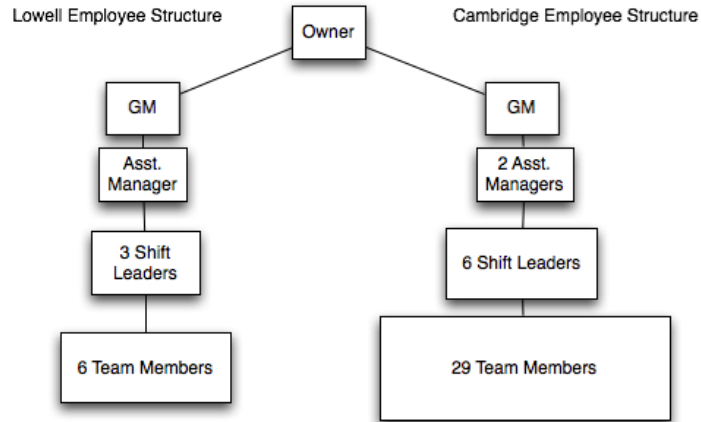
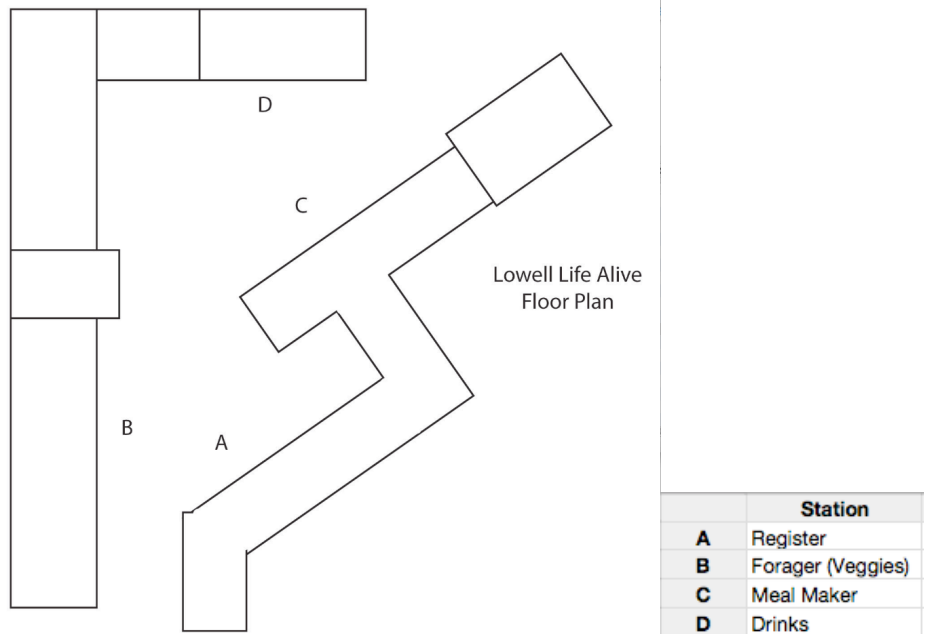
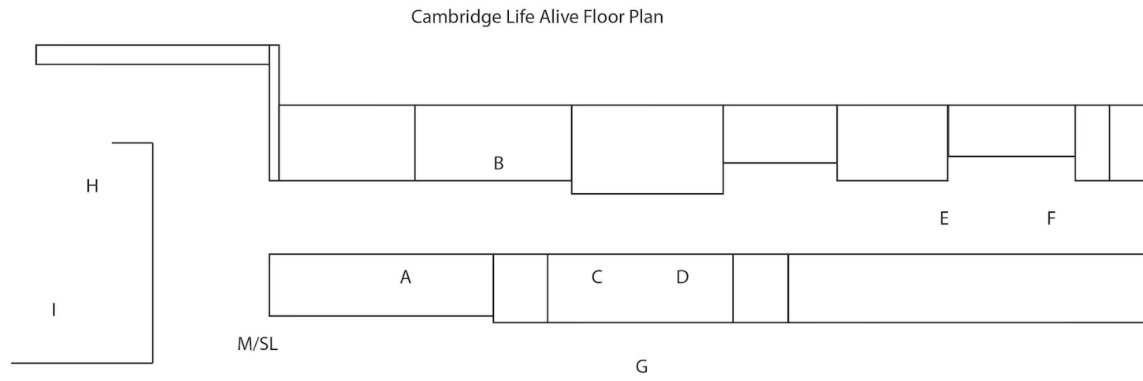


Figure 1.2 Lowell Floor Plan with Station Key



Scale: |----- 5 ft. -----|

Figure 1.3 Cambridge Floor Plan with Station Key



	Station		Station
A	Register	F	Drinks
B	Forager (Veggies)	G	Runner
C	Meal Maker 2	H	Dishwasher
D	Meal Maker 1	I	Prep Person
E	Drinks & Salads	M/SL	Managing Staff

The intention behind each location is clear from interviews with the owner, Ms. Feinstein. She opened Lowell as a place that offers organic food in an easy to customize rice bowl in a community that has less exposure to this type of diet (Lips 2012). In this sense the restaurant carries with it an educational component; and it is not an accident that her first location opened in a historically industrial blue-collar town. Service at this location is casual. Customers order at the counter and take their meal to a table or to-go, but speed is less of a focus in Lowell than at her second location in Cambridge. She wants her customers to relax and learn about what eating organic food on a regular basis can do for their health. Many customers make claim to stories about how their weight changed once they began eating at the restaurant regularly. These people found that their health issues became moderated by diet; and there is

evidence of conversion rates of friends and coworkers, based on the groups of people that come in together during the day.

After operating in one location as a café for several years, the owner researched and invested in a second style of her concept: a high-efficiency model. She settled on a suitable location in a busy urban neighborhood, and set her sights on building a restaurant that could be easily converted into a national chain. Ms. Feinstein, quoted in a Boston food magazine, explains:

“I believe we could be the next McDonald’s,’ she says. ‘This is quick service, with love. The Goddess [the creamy and greens-packed signature dish] is our BigMac” (Pyenson 2011).

The magazine contributor continues, adding her own commentary:

“...maybe—if Big Macs had carrots, beets, broccoli, dark greens and tofu over short-grain brown rice, topped with ginger Nama Shoyu sauce” (Pyenson 2011).

Besides the innovative type of food that makes up the owner’s version of the quick-service meal, she was also intent on significantly disrupting the organizational form that implicitly comes along with a high-efficiency approach. While her restaurant consultants (whom she had hired to assist in the expansion) made strong recommendations about sourcing strategies and employee training programs, Ms. Feinstein did her best to structure her second restaurant in a way that emulated her values. For example, outsourcing for pre-prepped ingredients is common in high-efficiency business plans, yet Ms. Feinstein insisted that as much prep as possible be conducted in-house. Her consultants also recommended that she moderate the number of primary ingredients that were ‘required’ to be organic, to achieve her mission. Yet she insisted on getting as close to 100% organic as the market would allow. They also advised her to

take a low-investment approach to her staff. On this point I quote an interview with her consultant: “In fast food service you’re lucky to have employees that stay longer than three to four months. There isn’t a need to have a long-term horizon when looking at how to structure your training program. Keep it simple. Keep it affordable.” While Ms. Feinstein would agree with the approach of keeping it simple and affordable, she definitely saw a calling to create a supportive work environment that lead to long-term commitments by staff members.

EFFICIENCY IN PRODUCTION

The development of the modern fast-food industry seems to have been greatly affected by ideas in efficient manufacturing and assembly. For example, one highly influential system of efficient production is Taylorism, a form of production concepts and industry practices that were championed by Frederick Winslow Taylor beginning in the 1880s. The key principles were five-fold: maximum fragmentation of the production process; the divorce of planning from doing; the divorce of ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ labor; the minimization of skill requirements and job learning time; and the reduction of time spent on material handling (e.g. Littler 1978). What is most distinctive about this system, in its application, was the detailed time-studies that were done to be able to quantify and track worker’s time spent on specific tasks. Taylor’s system included the practice of utilizing a stop-watch to produce incremental statistics on how long certain tasks took for a competent worker to complete. The motivations for adopting this system, if tasks and management were broken down accordingly, were directly linked to expectations around increased output (e.g. U.S. House Hearing 1912). Ideas and practices inspired by Taylor’s approach influenced the organization of production, which tended to generate management teams that assumed that the role of the worker should be a passive one. The efficiency methods

employed were seen as rational means to increase industrial production that would allow workers' wages to align with a job well done (e.g. Kanigel 1997).

During the rest of the century the service sector in the United States grew substantially. It has been claimed that the rise of the fast-food restaurant can be viewed as evidence of society's turn toward maximum efficiency in eating outside of the household (Ritzer 2000). Efficiency, calculability, predictability, control, and culture are the five processes that are articulated in terms of the "McDonaldization" of modern food service, according to Ritzer. From the perspective of the restaurant worker, efficiency focuses on the minimization of time dedicated to produce a consumable product; calculability promotes assessing speed over quality in terms of the work that employees do; predictability leads to the use of technology that makes employee tasks highly repetitive; control emphasizes the reliance on technology over human action; and the culture of such a system produces a homogenization as consumer and workplace patterns are unified.

There is a well established literature that backs up these concerns to a degree, at least in terms of the effects of the fast-food work environment on employees. Incorporating technology on the line in a restaurant kitchen allows for specific standardization, resulting in food that is intensely predictable. The organization of food processing outside of local facilities, and employees' tasks within local facilities, is structured intentionally to achieve this goal (Ho 1995). Ethnographic accounts record a feeling of absence of creativity on the job, where reports of minutely detailed directions on how to handle the food left little room for a feeling of human ingenuity (e.g. Reiter 1992, Leidner 1993). The environment of standard fast food work reinforces a lack of interaction and social affiliation during work hours, which limits workers' social experience and, therefore, limits greater material and social rewards to workers overall

(Hodson 2004). In addition, interactions with customers are often scripted to prepare service workers for the quick handling of customers and customer questions. While this approach often allows workers to move through the day quickly, without expending much emotional energy, some workers acknowledge that this leaves them feeling disconnected from those they are meant to be serving (Seymour 2000).

These highly rationalized work environments, both historically in manufacturing and later in service, are associated with the term ‘mass production.’ Taylorism, as described in preceding paragraphs, is a classic example of a system generating mass produced output. To that end, it is successful. However, the documentation of workers’ frustrations with the Taylor model have been documented, the first major vocalizations of the system’s negative consequences occurring at the Watertown Arsenal in Watertown, MA in 1911. A worker, about to be studied using the stop-watch method, refused to participate. A notable strike occurred and triggered a reassessment of the purpose of employing such a system (Aitken 1985). This event explains the adjustments and ideologies that scholars and practitioners were put forward to improve on Taylor’s methods. As a result, much academic and lay research up to the present day have been devoted to examining alternative systems, in numerous sectors.

The area of research labeled as “work redesign” brings to light many of the challenges that Ms. Feinstein felt she was facing upon opening her high-efficiency location. Work redesign theories are focused on the variety of elements that increase job quality and increase productivity. Alterations to specific jobs or systems of jobs aim at improving the experience of work, and can modify the experience of work at three different levels: psychological, mid-level, or systems level (Hackman 1980). One example of work redesign can address the psychological effect of assembly line production, which stems from the repetitive nature of the work.

Activation theory posits that varying or irregular patterns of tasks help workers to be more alert and activated on the job (Scott 1966). An applied technique is to introduce job rotation or job enlargement. Job rotation rotates workers on different shifts or different days of the week, incorporating variety on a timeline (Hackman 1980). Job enlargement introduces variety by introducing a wider set of tasks that the individual can choose from and is responsible for, thereby stimulating workers' interest and engagement in their tasks through greater complexity (Conant and Kilbridge 1965).

Job characteristics theory is a mid-level theory that addresses the components of a particular job, in an attempt to identify what leads to greater work motivation, satisfaction, and performance. Five core dimensions of work are suggested: variety, autonomy, task identity, task significance, and task feedback. In this vein, practitioners seek to design work responsibilities that resonate with these characteristics, with the expectation that this leads to higher job satisfaction, higher motivation, and higher effectiveness on the job (e.g. Porter, Lawler, and Hackman 1975, Hackman and Oldham 1980). Restructuring work around the idea that these traits lead to worker productivity takes the focus off of production in a strict sense, and focuses on optimizing the work environment for both workers and managers (Sashkin 1982). Social and psychological factors are considered side-by-side efficiency factors. Structuring the workplace based on the combination of these factors have been shown to lead to optimal performance versus maximizing the efficiency of technical systems alone (Miller 1975).

The owner of Life Alive took on her challenge of opening a restaurant with fast-food aspirations along with the stated intent to redesign internal organizational practices that were taken as a given by industry experts. Borrowing from job characteristics theory we can take a closer look at the case study at hand, and suggest that the owner of Life Alive built a fast-food

work environment, so that workers were more likely to reap the benefits of a redesigned work space. Specifically, it can be observed that Ms. Feinstein built in aspects of task significance, job variety, and autonomy (Kulik, Hackman, and Oldham 1987). Overall, Ms. Feinstein desired a committed, long-term staff that would feel empowered to learn and innovate on daily operations. If structured properly she felt that her staff members would feel that they regularly contribute to the overall business goal and to the improvement of customers' health through profitable enterprise. She purposefully attempted to structure a workplace reality which would require the staff to see their individual tasks as part of a whole in order to attain these outcomes. In this way, *task significance* allows the workers to feel that their job contributes to a larger goal; and in doing so the workers feel motivated to extend their influence behind the line and work together as a team, to produce the end product efficiently. Ms. Feinstein also felt that the experience of diversity on the job would trigger staff members' curiosity and sense of growth, leading to a sense of self-responsibility in terms of further training, knowledge and advancement. *Skill variety*, according to job characteristics theory, refers to the diversity of skills and activities that are used to complete a job. In generating a type of skill variety on the job, Ms. Feinstein developed a culture of information sharing and growth, the effects of which could be felt on a daily basis by the staff members. Finally, Ms. Feinstein felt that employee feedback about what works and what doesn't, would allow for the most efficient practices to trickle-up to the organizational level, and would be applied to future locations as the business continued to expand. The direction of feedback from the workroom floor to management allowed for a degree of *autonomy* in the job, allowing employees to experiment and share new ways of doing tasks in order to promote the most effective way of doing the work.

It is helpful to utilize the idea of ‘integrated’ versus ‘segregated’ work when analyzing activities that go on in a food service environment. The idea is simple: in any line of production there is a certain order of steps that workers must carry out individually and collectively to meet the group's stated production goals. The degree of integration or segregation of those tasks depends on how much overlap there exists between each worker's assigned responsibilities and the overall realm of required tasks. The degree of integration or segregation can also be viewed as the degree that workers interact directly with each other when completing their individual tasks. These terms are useful for identifying the degree to which a line of production may follow a more traditional Taylorist model or more recent ideas, such as lean manufacturing, work redesign, job rotation, or other socio-technical innovations (e.g. Hackman and Oldham 1980, Conant and Kilbridge 1965, Axtell and Parker 2003, Eriksson and Ortega 2006, Ortega 2001, Trist 1980). While I have chosen to focus on job characteristics theory, the variety of approaches to work redesign has allowed applied researchers to map out work processes and assess the degree to which integration or segregation exists in other industries, with what consequences (Molleman and Knippenberg 1995).

Whether in fast-food or conventional kitchens, the subject under examination is the roles and responsibilities that are involved in the transformation of material inputs into a final product for consumption. To some degree this makes observation and attempted measurement of degrees of overlap relatively straightforward.⁴ Roles and responsibilities are identified (who's who, and who makes what), and actions are pursued independently or in collaboration to complete the product. As an inquiring observer one watches for shared sets of tasks, the boundaries between individual tasks, the jurisdiction over sets of tasks, and jurisdiction of production zones; not to

⁴ This is stated in implied relation to information-based production, where intellectual, creative, or thought-based collaboration is difficult to observe and track, as in the case of marketing, research, policy, for example.

mention the complex ways in which these may or may not be negotiated, prior to or during the production process.

In a segregated work environment the task of coordination traditionally falls on managers, who act as the overseeing force that guides the pieces of production toward an end result, rather than on the workers themselves. This tradition stems from systems like Taylorism which view the role of the worker as a passive one, generating management teams who were solely responsible for determining the tasks that workers were required to perform (Littler 1978). In the fast food industry it has been documented that technological innovations have segregated workers from each other and from the source of food itself (e.g. Leidner 1993, Ritzer 2000, Carroll and Torfason 2005). The overriding question is what effect does an integrated production system have on a fast-food service environment. Translated into the language of the specific restaurant under examination, the question is: what does an integrated experience mean in a food service environment, since feeling “connected” is a critical component of the “mission” of the organization.⁵ As such, the ability for Life Alive to provide a case of what an integrated fast-food working environment looks like is the major contribution of this thesis. From this perspective, the following hypothesis will be explored: the less there is of *shared* or *overlapping* responsibilities, then fewer interactions will exist between social actors, and this results in a more segregated work environment. When tasks are segregated between individuals, there is less need for peer-to-peer coordination. This characteristic of a workplace environment affects many things: how training programs are structured, how employees learn new skills, and employees’ understanding of the criteria for advancement. It is shown through interviews and direct observation that job characteristics, such as task significance, skill variety, and autonomy can

⁵ The mission statement is presented the *Case Study* section

help to encourage a naturally integrated production system via the internal motivation of employees to promote the system in their own interest.

A final interpretation of Ms. Feinstein's instincts about how to organize her organization relative to the literature, can be found in her faith that the pattern of micro-level social interactions between employees is the key to creating a foundation for the devised structure of the working environment. Patterns of micro-level interactions can determine the way tangible information is passed on in a specific social environment. This passing of information plays a role in shaping the perception that the social actors have of any overriding social hierarchy, the distribution of benefits, or the set of behaviors that lead to legitimate engagement with, or outright deviance within, a particular system. Early network studies tracked and used this type of information to understand individual motivations for action and to generate explanations of wide macro-level outcomes (e.g. Gould 2003, Granovetter 1973). These micro-interactions are documented as being quite profound in small group systems when properly assessed (Homans 1991). What is particularly interesting is how this type of perspective allows us to acknowledge how the emotions of workers with regards to work support or detract from higher organizational objectives (e.g. Collins 1990, Williams and Bendelow 1998).

Overall, the sociological literature provides a good argument to consider the value of observing an integrated work process in a fast-food environment, taking into consideration the micro-interactions of employees. The positive or negative experiences of staff related to issues such as task significance, job variety and autonomy, combine together and have an effect the stability of the organization as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

The case study in this thesis will explore the degree to which the intentional overlap of organized tasks between workers is effective, given the mission of the organization Life Alive. A map of the production floor will be provided to show the degree of integration that exists between workers, relative to what is found in standard fast-food restaurants, according to the existing literature. Since Life Alive is a single restaurant group, the subject will be treated as a unique case study and will take the form of an organizational ethnography.

Ethnography tends to uncover general ways people are organized and general ways of thinking about their lives. In organizational ethnography, the subject becomes more specific: the focus is on the ways people coalesce around goal-oriented activities; and on the rules, strategies, and meanings that operate within that system (e.g. Sierk 2003). It is noted that traditional ethnography tends to find the researcher exploring foreign cultures, whereas practitioners of organizational ethnography tends to study individuals like themselves (Anderson 2006). Therefore the key set of decisions for the ethnographer exploring phenomenon in their 'home territory' includes how to select the data; how to delimit the context or universe they are studying; and how to understand the relationship between the data and the purpose for which they are gathered; and finally their significance, and how to test that scientifically (Rosen 1991).

The organization under investigation in this thesis allows for a clear line to be drawn between the outside world and inside world. All methods were pursued on Life Alive property and with actors directly engaged in the organization: the restaurant staff, the owner, or the consultants directly invested in the development of the business. Supplementary interviews were conducted with six other individuals to provide context about other restaurant industry practices. The tools I chose to use include participant observation, open interviews, and direct observation.

Each of those were employed with an awareness about the challenges inherent in maintaining an objective perspective, while engaging with the subjective experience of the problem (Bourdieu 1977, Lee 1989, Weiss 1994, Cambell and Gregor 2004).

Observation and interviews took place over a 12 month period between May 2011 and May 2012. Participant observation was possible through my status as a part-time employee at the restaurant. I filled the role of a shift leader, a mid-level position one step below manager and one step above team member. This put me in a position to quickly learn every station in the restaurant. I was also able to sit in on management meetings, which provided insight into their thinking; and I was also a known resource for team members when they needed clarification about company policies or procedures, but did not want to go straight to management until they had more information. I was originally hired in August of 2010, though the formal study of the organization did not commence until May of 2011. During the 12-month period included in this study (May 2011 to May 2012) I was on staff as an employee for a total of 1,023 hours. 196 of those hours were at the Lowell location, while 827 were at the Cambridge location.

Interviews were conducted with staff members that had worked at the restaurant for longer than three months. The breakdown of interviews is as follows:

Category	# of Subjects Interviewed	# interviewed in Cambridge	# interviewed in Lowell	Total # of Interviews
Owner	1	-	-	3
Managers	5	3	2	7
Shift Leaders	3	3		4
Team Members	11	8	3	18
Consultant	1	-	-	1

Individual open interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 120 minutes, depending on the degree to which the individual was inspired to speak. Each subject was asked to talk about their

experience at Life Alive: what made their shifts feel fluid or stressful; what problems they struggled with, and if they were successful in finding solutions; whether their experience compared or contrasted to previous restaurant work in any way, etc. Participants for interviews were collected through regular email to those eligible on the staff listserv, describing the exercise as a case study on business innovation and I would schedule a time to meet with those willing to participate. In total, 33 interviews were conducted with 21 subjects. All interviews with Life Alive staff, including the owner, were digitally recorded.

Supplementary interviews include one previous staff member of McDonald's, two managers of a coffee retail chain, one assistant manager of a café specializing in organic food, one conventional restaurant chef, and one conventional restaurant worker with waitstaff experience. Supplementary interviews were not recorded, and the issues they spoke of were documented by note-taking. These participants escape the randomness criteria required for unbiased research, as supplementary interviews were more often initiated by the participant. They would contact me by phone, or they would agree to be interviewed upon our first meeting and their interest in the subject matter. Any direct quotes were checked in a follow-up with the interviewee for accuracy.

Two alternative data collection exercises took place during several weeks in February, March, and April of 2012 at both locations. The first was a participatory exercise. After five different busy lunch periods staff members were given print-outs similar to the floor plans presented in Figures 1.2 and 1.3. Willing team members and shift leaders would each take a crayon and draw circles representing the 'realm' that they took responsibility for during that particular shift. Collected together, laid side by side, participating staff members would take a moment to heckle each other and debate about 'who took care of what' in the different situations

they faced. This exercise was an attempt to record, and combined the results of subjective experience to elicit observable debate among staff members. It was also fun for the staff members themselves to vocalize their experience, since everyone was aware of how much improvisation was relied upon by the team. At the end of each ‘debriefing session,’ which lasted 5-10 minutes depending on how much debate was involved, a consensus would be agreed upon, and I would take notes on the variety of factors that made people act in a variety of ways, towards each other and towards their assigned tasks. The data generated from this exercise are presented in Figures 1.4 through 1.9 and provide evidence that an integrated model in a fast-food context is possible.

The second set of data gathered was direct observation of lunch and dinner shifts at the Cambridge location. I organized a ‘tally sheet’ with the columns subdivided into five minute intervals over a two-hour period. I chose five employees to observe, corresponding to positions A, B, C, D and E on the Cambridge floor plan (Fig 1.3). At the beginning of a two-hour period I started with the employee at position A and observed their actions for five minutes, then observed the employee at position B for five minutes, and so forth, taking a five minute break every 25 minutes. During these periods of observation I would jot down a tally mark any time the employee under observation stepped outside the realm of standard tasks for that position. I conducted this exercise for five lunch periods and five dinner periods on five different weekdays. Due to scheduling conflicts and the constraints of public transportation, the Lowell location was not included in this round of data collection. However, this does not necessarily detract from the data’s value. The general idea is that micro-patterns of interaction matter in the maintenance of hierarchy in an integrated system. It is my expectation that this can be tested by observing the

tendency of overlap between staff members of varying skill level. The details and results of all of these exercises are presented below.

CASE STUDY

Discovering the Business Mission & Challenge

I met Ms. Feinstein, the owner and operator, during a sidewalk interview about a month before she anticipated opening her doors in late July of 2010. I had contacted her regarding a part-time position, and was interested in working at a local food service establishment. Newspaper and copies of the restaurants menu were plastered on the inside of the wide arched windows, obliterating the views of the extensive renovations going on within. Upon closer inspection it appeared that the operation was going to offer a full menu of warm meals, wraps, salads, as well as fresh juices.

We sat outside the restaurant's front doors on a stoop at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Inman Street. What had started as a conversation about my ability to work part-time in a high-volume food service position, soon turned into a discussion about organizational growth, human development and adherence to a founding mission. It was during this discussion that I discovered her past as a business person, her intentions, and the hopes she had for her budding enterprise.

Her primary concern during this conversation was to maintaining the company's values as the company expanded. There were key innovations that she wished to carry over from her Lowell location to the high-efficiency environment in Cambridge, such as maintaining the affordability of her products in light of the high quality ingredients she sourced, and engaging her staff and customers about their role in the production process in the wider food industry. Her

assumption was that a corporate restaurant model would sacrifice these kinds of core tenants on which she built her business. Her primary question was: how do you grow into a high efficiency model and still maintain your core values?

When it came to sourcing, for example, the first pressure she felt from industry experts was to source lower quality and, therefore, less costly ingredients. The second was to segregate and automate tasks to relieve management of the burden and costs of training staff. Instead Ms. Feinstein wanted to promote a model where input costs would remain high, and the higher cost would be relieved by a well-trained, low-turnover staff. The low turnover of staff would be achieved by cultivating a team-minded approach, rather than an individual-minded approach, and in a way that would value learning. Lower costs would be achieved through higher skilled workers and empathic cooperation, which in an integrated production system would require fewer workers.⁷

What was written on the wall of her restaurant, as well as advertised on her website, reads:

Our Reason for Being:
To make healthy eating possible in a busy world,
To awaken and feed people's senses, thoughts, and spirits,
To help people discover their own natural vitality,
To empower people to take responsibility for their own health,
To contribute to and promote holistic sustainability,
To foster a vital community, (*)
To inspire connection, (*)
To spread love and pleasure.

For the purpose of this inquiry the portions of the mission that are most interesting from a food industry and business development perspective have been starred. The questions I am interested in, based on these statements, can be translated as: How has the owner structured employment

⁷ The owner's language corresponds to the distinction between integrated production ('team-minded') and segregated production ('individual-minded') discussed in earlier sections.

and the work experience of the staff, to ensure that concepts like "community" and "connection" are maintained? To what degree does the staff themselves experience this? And does it matter?

This thesis explores these questions and examines whether these organizational structures and techniques, as intended, would survive alongside organizational goals of speed and efficiency. In a position I held within the organization allowed me to observe the preparation and the opening of the restaurant, and observe the changes to the organizational tactics which were tested to achieve these goals. This provides a unique case study in a real-world attempt at organizational change.

Language and a Culture of Collective Innovation

One observation that was apparent about the organization from the beginning, was the alternative use of language to motivate and encourage staff members about their work and about the mission. Cambridge's staff orientation, which occurred two weeks before the location's opening day, was rife with description about empathy and understanding towards each other as workers, and how working in partnership was the key component to success as an organization. People were encouraged to "focus efficiently on required tasks, but to do so with 'eyes open' to everything else going on around you [the staff member]."⁸ Additionally, the owner expected all staff members along the entire assembly line to be open to customer interaction, and to not automatically defer customer interactions to the staff at the registers. While this may be standard restaurant worker etiquette at most restaurant establishments, this point is made since it differs from the accounts of the realities of fast-food work in Leidner's 1993 ethnography *Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life* and other reports that are

⁸ Ms. Feinstein is quoted based on her discussion with staff during orientation

showcased in subsequent paragraphs. Ms. Feinstein’s approach was an intentional attempt to lay the groundwork for the broad perspective that staff members were expected to take in order to meet the organization’s mission of connection and community.

This approach to language and the articulation of staff members’ roles within the restaurant is rooted in the organizational culture of the Lowell location. The power of language and how it influences staff members to “see” what needs to be done, is most pronounced during periods of training. In Lowell new staff members would be introduced to their first station in terms that did not limit their scope solely to the station in front of them. For example, rather than simply point out technical requirements of the station, perceptual suggestions would be made to establish an understanding of the ‘flow’ of people and material. From witnessing several training sessions in Lowell, an introductory dialogue might start with this:

“Your main job is to fill the baskets with vegetables as the orders come in. The tickets come up here [on the left] and you move down the line [from left to right] and add the ingredients. When you’re done, you place the basket on the counter behind you, and the Maestro⁹ takes it from there.”

In most restaurant training environments the conversation would stop there, and the trainee would focus on this set of tasks alone. Instead, at Life Alive the dialogue would continue to include additional information such as:

“When the steamer door is open, don’t let it disrupt your own flow. In fact, if you are able to stop for a moment and take meals out of the steamer, especially when we’re really busy, it would help out the Maestro⁸ a bunch... but that will depend on what else you have going on.”

⁹ ‘Maestro’ is the nickname for the station that requires the most skill, labeled as stations C and D in the Cambridge floor plan, and station C in Lowell’s floor plan.

Or:

“If you see out of the corner of your eye that the register has a long line, but the phone is also ringing... and if you have a reasonable stopping point take a moment and answer the phone. If you’re not feeling under pressure, you can help take the pressure off of them, if they’re in a bind. And they’ll keep an eye on you too and do the same for you.”

The manager at Lowell viewed this approach as important to how the organization operates.

“We all can get overwhelmed sometimes. And if we promote a culture of keeping an eye out and helping each other out, then we’ll all be better off.” New staff members who came into the organization and interpreted this culture negatively amused her:

“There’s this immediate feeling they get, like, ‘Oh no, someone helped me – it must mean I’m not doing my job!’ and they get really nervous or frustrated that they weren’t left alone to struggle. But it’s just not the culture we operate under. If someone helps you it is because they could help while doing their own thing. It entered into their flow and they took a brief moment to do something for you. It’s what makes this place tick smoothly.”

This is why training was so important: it got the staff started on the right foot. Similar to any job, training specific responsibilities was important, as long as it was coupled with language that established the foundation for a team-oriented perspective. Whether new staff knew it or not, employees were being trained to think beyond the boundaries of their station from the very beginning. The emphasis is on developing a broad view of the operation, and planting a seed of understanding and cooperation amongst staff at an early stage in their period of employment.

This approach is not unique to Life Alive. Based on interviews with staff members who reflected on past restaurant experiences, adopting a language based on empathic understanding of tasks and relationships between staff members is a managerial choice. One interviewee had extensive experience working for Starbucks in two different locations, under two different managers. While both stores are a part of the same corporate organization, an organization

which has well-established guidelines on internal training and protocol around interactions between staff, each manager utilized a significantly different language on a daily basis. In his words:

“This one manager just, like, didn’t relate to staff well at all. It was that she was always on the look out. Like if something went wrong it was automatically because someone wasn’t doing their job, and she’d have staff face off with each other, you know, like manipulate the situation to find out who; she was always suspicious.... But the other manager, man, she was awesome. She really cared about everyone feeling like they were part of a team; she was really encouraging. And if something went wrong she’d just work to solve the problem, ‘nuff said.”

When asked if he felt this made a difference in his feeling or connection to his work, he agreed, saying that the second manager made it easier for the team to work together to avoid the problem in the future.

What is critical to Life Alive, though, is this: through the cultivation of a positive environment the organization strives to develop an open environment where any employee can participate in generating efficiency and mission-oriented innovations. After a period of training, staff and management continue in an open dialogue. “I did this to help when it got busy, was that helpful?” or “I used this spoon rather than the other one, and it seemed to work better.” These are statements and questions that occur regularly in the Lowell location, and have turned the café’s organization into a living organism. Change is constant, and is prompted by the mix of personalities, the strengths and weaknesses of staff as the group changes, and the needs of the restaurant during more busy or less busy times.

Integrated Production Processes

At its origin Life Alive has always valued a culture of integrated tasks or task-sharing amongst staff members. This means that an employee is not only responsible for a unique set of tasks, they are also responsible for a range of tasks that may or may not fall under their jurisdiction on a given day. This is what I will refer to as an integrated work environment.

The concept of an integrated work environment is not unique in the restaurant industry. In fact, most high-end commercial restaurant kitchens draw on this model, and the reason is simple. “You need to have staff that can work fluidly together in the kitchen. You can’t work in isolation and expect all the pieces to come together. Everyone is working together,” explains a long-term Boston area restaurant chef who is unaffiliated with Life Alive. “Sure, some nights run like clock-work and everyone can just tend to their stations and that’s that. But usually something’s going to go wrong. Something’s not going to work right. And you need a well connected staff who are connected on an intuitive level, so they can adjust quickly to cover the gaps until things can get back to normal.” In an emergency situation - and they are common - the trick is for kitchen staff to adjust quickly to cover gaps in the production process, while maintaining the appearance of normal production on the customer side.

Standard quick-service restaurants operate under a different logic, what I will call a segregated model of production. Segregating tasks and incorporating technology that helps to standardize those tasks, allows a food service organization to achieve greater levels of speed and efficiency. Experience from the ground confirms that segregation is the norm. “There are detailed directions for how to toast buns, how to take the sandwich meat from the Henny Penny with tongs, and how to make up, wrap, and cut the sandwich” (Reiter 1992:102). An interview with a past McDonald’s worker, who lives in the Cambridge area, confirmed that these details

feel automated in execution: “Did you know that it only takes six seconds to cook a hamburger [at McDonalds]? That’s all I would do. Take a patty from the storage container, open the lid to the grill, place the patty on the grill, close the lid for three seconds, open the lid, flip the patty, cook it for another three seconds, and then pass it on.” In the history of fast-food this type of approach to food handling has become a standard point of reference for fast-food restaurants. Technology-enabled, efficient cooking methods and the development of pre-processed products for ease of delivery and in-house production has become the norm (Love 1995).

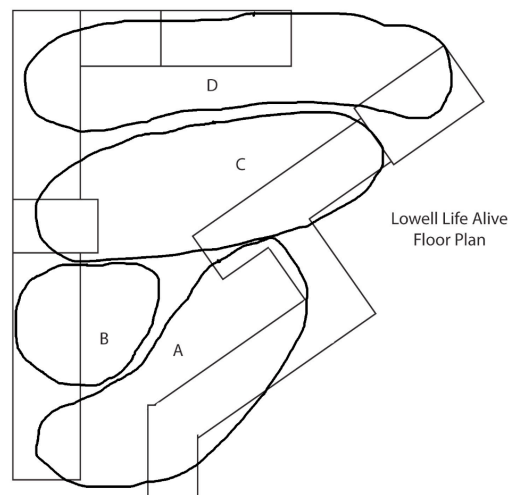
This production process also reinforces the simplified task structure of modern fast-food restaurants. For example, one staff member of Life Alive had previous work experience at a McDonald’s in New York State. She was employed for a total of three years as a part-time employee. When asked what stations she worked she responded, “I only worked the register. That’s all they needed me for. There wasn’t any learning on other stations. I mean, it was all pretty basic stuff. There just wasn’t any need for it.” She continued, “Well, actually, sometimes, when it got really really busy I would bag fries sometimes. But other than that, I was just always on the register.” When asked if she preferred it that way or if she would have liked to do other things, she replied, “I mean, it wasn’t a bad thing. It would get boring sometimes... I mean, maybe it would have been nice to learn the grill, but then I can see how it’d just be more of the same.” In the language of the relevant literature, this can be viewed as lack of motivation in a standardized environment that is difficult to address via redesign techniques such as job rotation. When jobs are minimized in terms of skills executed, rotating staff among different positions will fail to provide a solution to lack of interest on the job (Hackman 1980).

Life Alive wanted to structure work at Cambridge so as to avoid cultivating this attitude amongst their staff members. “I never want this to just ‘be a job’ to my team members,” Ms.

Feinstein said. “It is important that there is always something to learn. There are always ways to develop new insights and new skills. That is why training at Lowell would take almost a full-year. I wanted each of my staff to really understand every aspect of the business so that they felt empowered to make the right decisions, to jump in where there was a need, and to understand how the whole team is connected to the meal.” The solution she suggested was to expand the amount of skills for discernment within the position itself.

In Lowell, this approach developed organically. With a small staff and the need to coordinate breaks during the shorter work day it became necessary that a majority of the staff members were trained on several stations. In addition, the responsibilities involved with each station changed according to the immediate needs of service and the skill level of those who are staffed. To illustrate, below are a number of diagrams to show how the realm of tasks changed at Lowell depending on circumstances. The way the floorplans correspond to the assigned positions has been described in earlier paragraphs (page 4-6).

Figure 1.4 Realm of responsibilities under Regular circumstances¹⁰



¹⁰ A represents the register. B represents the “forager” or vegetables. C represents the meal maker. D represents drinks.

Figure 1.5 Realm of responsibilities when Employee A is on break

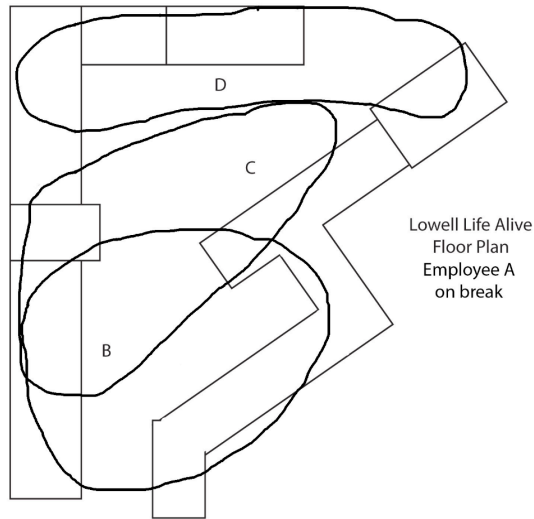
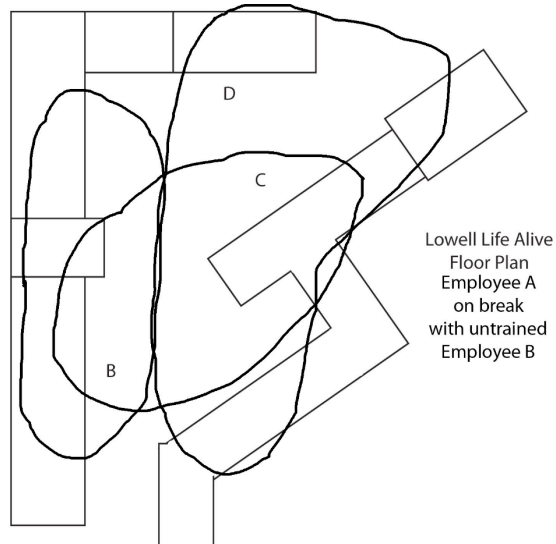


Figure 1.6 Realm of responsibilities when Employee A is on break, but B hasn't been trained on register...



Breaks or transitions between service periods are the most common circumstances that force a repositioning of staff and a change to the jurisdiction of tasks. However, this reshuffling can and does occur for a whole universe of reasons, and sometimes without notice, requiring the

staff to be immediately responsive to changes in workflow, so that the customer's perception of service remains uninterrupted.¹¹ The result of such a model, and the corresponding expectations is 1). a staff that is empathetic to the tasks of others, 2). a staff that is empathetic to the whole realm of tasks that fit together to make the restaurant work, and 3). a staff that feels skilled. The effect on *new* staff is also relevant since there is an immediate understanding that there is much to learn, and becoming a working part of the team is actually what is at stake.

These three outcomes were important to carry over to the high-efficiency model, in order to uphold the organization's dedication to employee well-being.¹² The Cambridge location was expected to be much busier and would require double the staff to operate at maximum capacity. Initial training let employees focus on one station at a time, similar to the training in Lowell, but the expectation was that all employees would be motivated to learn more. Like Lowell, the hope was that staff members in Cambridge would also be capable of fulfilling multiple roles with ease in the high-efficiency space.

However, the owner's restaurant consultants advised that adherence to the organization's mission in this way would be too costly. "The quick-service industry has too much turnover. If you don't keep things simple and easy to learn, you spend too much money on training. You'll never see a return on that investment because employees come and go too quickly," was the advice Ms. Feinstein received. Regardless, she decided to maintain the integrated model she developed in Lowell to the best of her ability, in the hope of developing a well-trained staff that would work as a unified team to get the product to the customer.

Her instincts also went one step further. She believed that a highly-integrated staff would actually reduce the cost of operations. She believed that one could do more with less staff,

¹¹ Reasons can include: a customer spill in the restaurant, an issue with a delivery, an employee feeling unwell, an employee needing to leave the restaurant to pick up supplies, or an employee leaving early due to lack of business, just to name a few.

¹² With regards to employees the mission is to "foster a vital community" and to "inspire connection."

because they would be highly tuned to the needs of the business as well as the needs of their co-workers. In a sense, she wanted to dig into staff members' intrinsic motivation to go above and beyond their assigned tasks, thereby accomplishing more as an individual placed within a team. If they were treated as a replaceable part of the production process she felt that intrinsic motivation would decrease and turnover would be higher.

Within the first year of business, the fluid boundaries between stations at Cambridge were similar to those in Lowell. Below are examples of the changes in jurisdiction that would take place during a standard meal period.

Figure 1.7 Realm of responsibilities under conditions of normal service

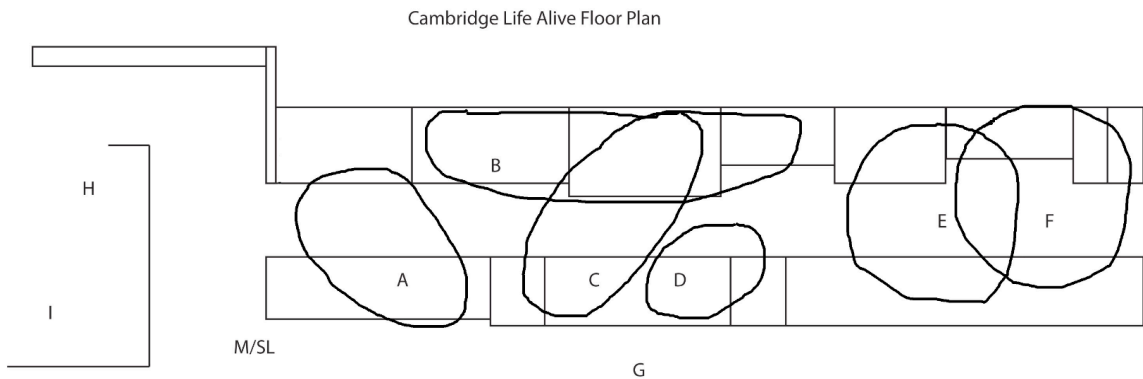


Figure 1.8 Realm of responsibilities with a Less Experienced Team Member at Position B

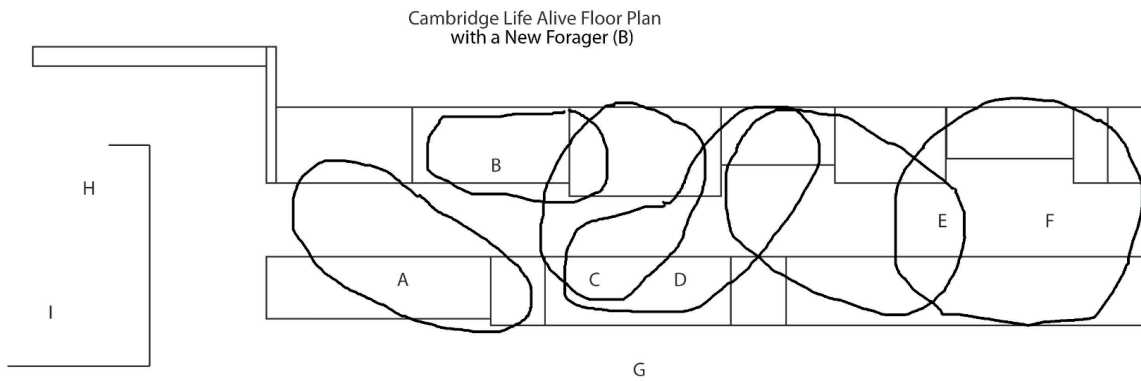
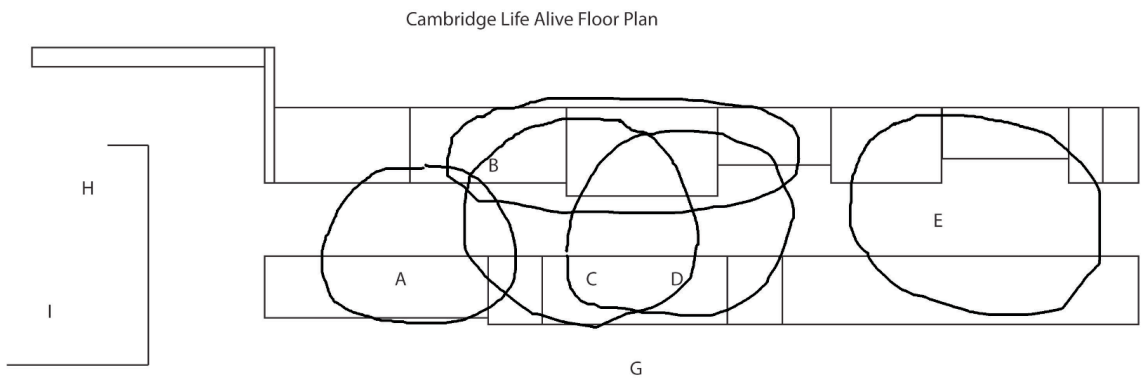


Figure 1.9 Realm of responsibilities with an unexpected (momentary) absence at Position F



The diagrams presented here display a certain approach to service that was undertaken at Life Alive. The idea of “flow” underpinned the expectations about how a busy shift should operate. For example, while tasks were under the jurisdiction of individual team members, there was an expectation that the lines of jurisdiction have the possibility of fluctuating multiple times during a service period. Not only was this a possibility, it was often understood to be the reality. A long-term Cambridge team member describes her experience:

“It gets crazy in here. Seriously. You’ve got a brand new Forager [position B], you’re running out of broccoli, the drink person is underwater¹³ because the drink assist hasn’t shown up on time; and you’re stuck in the middle of it doing what you can *and* trying to fill in the gaps.”

When asked if the chaos that she describes is satisfying or dissatisfying, she says:

“Yeah, in the end it’s pretty awesome. I mean, you feel like an octopus, reaching in five different directions, and customers keep streaming in... but in the end, it feels pretty great.”

This sentiment resonates with many staff members. There’s a dynamic feeling that occurs within the individual: a feeling that the context could change at any moment, and that you have personally equipped yourself to succeed.

Another team member discusses what it felt like to begin as a new employee in this environment, and how he was surprised by his growing awareness of what he was capable of:

“When I first started I was always on drinks. And it’s its own little spot, right. I mean, when you’re on drinks, you’re pretty much just making drinks all the time. And it was cool; I was happy with it. But, I mean, you know there’s all these things that I can do to help someone out if they’re in the weeds. And before I could do that I had no idea how much I was in my own little world.”

I asked him if this ability to help others on the side influenced how he views his role at the restaurant. For example, did he continue to think of himself as solely a ‘drink person?’ He responded:

“Definitely not. There’s a lot of stuff I know. And yeah! As I learn other stations, the more I learn the more I feel like I really know what’s going on.”

A similar sentiment was expressed in different ways in a majority of interviews with long-term staff members. The blurring of lines between stations motivated staff members to learn how to help one another, and at least two-thirds of the interviewees testified that the blurred boundary

¹³ Read: really busy, almost too busy.

led to an active interest among staff members to learn new stations, for which they had no prior knowledge.¹⁴ Most importantly, during certain times of the year when a disproportionate number of new team members would join the restaurant, it became imperative from staff members' perspectives to have at the very least one, if not two, regular team members on shift who knew every station, in addition to the shift leader or manager on duty. This was required so that the lines of jurisdiction could shift effectively at any moment during service.

When I discussed this phenomenon with the general manager of Cambridge, he agreed:

“The difference between a great shift and a shitty shift is who you’ve got on the team. When you’ve got a few people that just gel together, you know you’re not going to have any problems: meals get out fast, people are having fun, even if we are banging out meals like it’s no one’s business, we nail it. But man, if the team isn’t tight, it’s tough. Even with some of our expert staff, if they don’t work well together, if someone’s not at their normal level of energy, you all of a sudden have a 20 minute wait for meals, [and] service turns into a total disaster.”

With regard to hiring new managers for future locations, I asked what the expectations of the general manager were for being able to teach how to manage a very human-centric production environment. He responded:

“You have to hire managers that know how to read people. That, coupled with the expectation that they have reasonable timeframes for how much of a chance they’ll give employees to ‘get’ it. For example, if a service period shows a bunch of red and purple [10-20 minutes meal times] then they need to do a bunch of things: [look at] who was on staff, how were people feeling? If everyone’s feeling fine, then look back and see how often each person has worked that station or shift. If it’s a person’s first week foraging that shift, then okay; we’ll work with them for another week. But if the service is blown again, the same day, for the same shift, then you need to make immediate changes to the schedule. Perhaps the person on forager is a better people person. Maybe they shouldn’t be foraging at all. Let’s get them on register and see if they shine.

¹⁴ The other third of long-term staff interviewed on this question could empathize with the effects of this experience, but either were constrained to a specific station due to scheduling needs or worked fewer than 15 hours per week, so seeking out variation in tasks was not pursued.

This makes a difference to the customer over time. To them [over time] it might feel the same, but to us there is constant reshuffling going on.”

The ability of Life Alive to structure the production line to achieve the results that it does on intrinsic motivation, and in cultivating teamwork, is remarkable in its own right. Staff members have recognized the value in the system, respond well to the shifting expectations, and it is generally recognized that without overlapping sets of tasks, the restaurant would require one to two additional staff members per shift if segregated tasks existed. The mechanisms that underpin the development of such a system are the display of skill variety, task significance, and the valuation of individual experimentation understood here to correspond to the concept of autonomy on the line.

Information Sharing in a High Efficiency Space

The execution of skill variety is particularly important for motivating team members to increase their skill set. Based on experience in Lowell, Ms. Feinstin felt that knowledge is best passed on via face-to-face communication amongst networks of staff members. Her belief was that face-to-face communication acts as a mechanism for more frequent information sharing, enabling the staff to provide input and allowing daily practices to change in more predictable ways.

This culture has been difficult to transfer to a larger and more busy version of the restaurant, because a majority of innovations occur in micro-interactions which require informal face-to-face communication. Initially, Cambridge relied on a similar structure as Lowell and informal face-to-face communication was seen as the key to developing staff members and innovating for efficiency. However, with so many more people and more hours during the

service period, repetition of information became taxing. There was also no guarantee that all staff would receive the message, which would cause ‘experiments’ on the line to flip flop erratically between new practices and old practices. For much of Cambridge’s history the solution to this problem was a bi-monthly email from management to the staff about specific issues or clarifications about tactics on the line. This strategy coupled with face-to-face communication during service was seen as meeting the objectives of generating efficient practices *and* of developing a sense of connection between staff members in support of the company’s growth.

Based on my direct observation during a total of ten busy meal periods in Cambridge, the following basic insight was confirmed: shift leaders who are staffed on the line are more likely to cross role boundaries more frequently than regular team members. It could be simple to refute the effect of this fact by putting too much attention on the fact that an equal portion of shift leaders and non-shift leaders interacted zero times during the observed five-minute interval. However, I would argue that information is more effectively passed on word-of-mouth through regular reinforcement. This means that shift leaders were more likely to interact two, four or five times during the five-minute period of observation, which in turn means that their assistance to others was more regular and more likely to stick in the minds of the other staff members receiving their assistance. For example, of all non-shift leaders under observation, these staff members were likely to assist across standard lines of station jurisdiction at a maximum of five times 1% of the time, whereas 13% of shift leader observations resulted in maximum assistance. When combined non-shift leaders were willing or able to assist across station boundaries two or more times during 24% of all observations, while shift leaders were willing or able to assist two or more times during 40% of all observations.

Figure 1.7 Non-Shift Leader Tendencies to Cross Station Boundaries

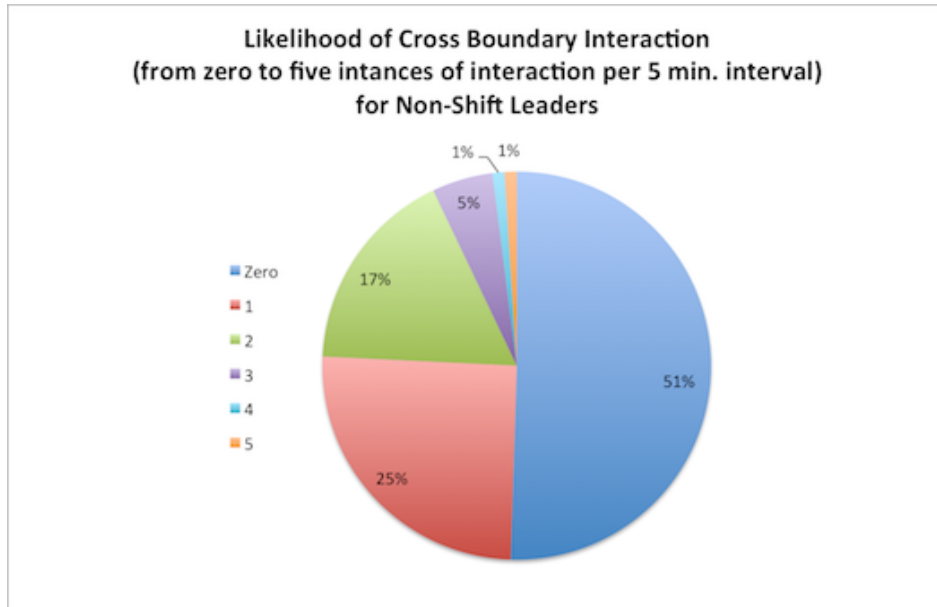
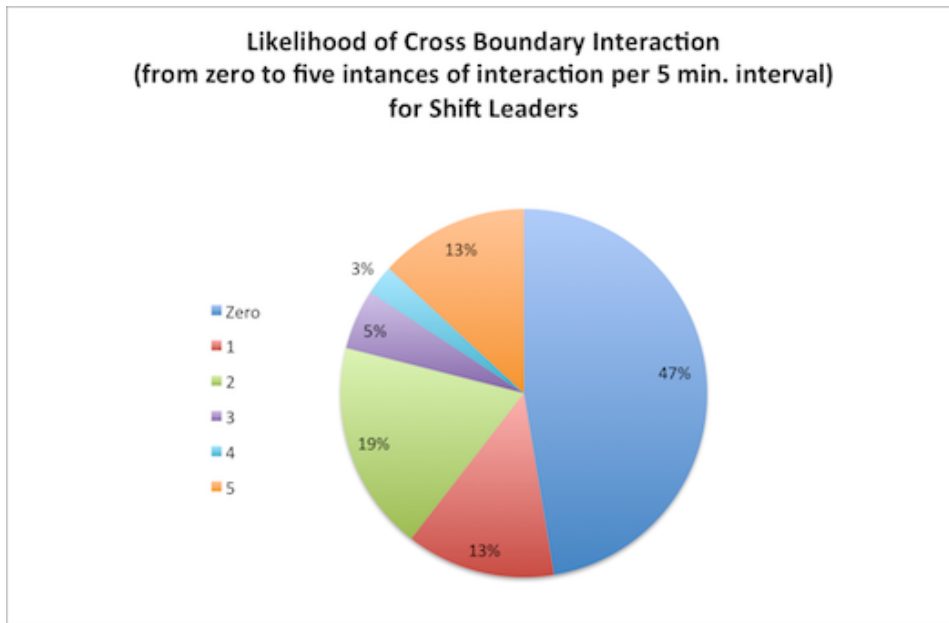


Figure 1.8 Shift Leader Tendencies to Cross Station Boundaries



Interviews with shift leaders confirmed that they actively talk about what they are doing. They saw this as a method of spreading information and best practices to newer staff members during

service itself. While staff members ‘appear’ to be equals - everyone is working on the line as team members – a hierarchy is present, and is fulfilling its purpose: to train employees of lesser status and spread information throughout the site.

CHALLENGES OF AN INTEGRATED PRODUCTION PROCESS

However, there are significant obstacles that the Cambridge restaurant has faced during its first year of operation related to this innovative system. As waves of new employees have come and gone issues around role expectations and challenges to the informal learning process have surfaced. Additionally, management’s process for determining who is promoted (either with extra pay or with increased responsibility) has caused uncertainty with regards to the legitimacy of the hierarchy between team members and shift leaders. Finally, management has changed its hiring tactics to reduce the time spent on training, something that poses challenges in terms of fulfilling the organization’s mission if these practices are to be carried into the restaurant’s future expansion.

Role Expectations, Learning and Flexibility

The system of overlapping tasks worked smoothly during the Cambridge restaurant’s first six months. The staff had trained together for several weeks before opening, and with 23 of the 26 staff members new to the organization at the time, there was a significant amount of cooperation in developing and negotiating the shared realms of responsibility. The uncertainty about where lines between the workers should be drawn made staff members conscious of their own weaknesses, as well as the weaknesses of other team members. The result was conscious action by the team to cover gaps in confidence or skill, in the interest of providing quick and

reliable service. The environment of uncertainty and co-creation essentially developed a culture that mirrored Lowell's practice of shifting boundaries and task sharing.

Once this culture had been established and the conscious motivation began to fade into the background, new employees adjusted to the structure in similar ways. A new staff member would be given a base level of required tasks, but with language that would make it clear that his or her vision needed to extend beyond his or her own tasks within a short period of time. During this period of learning experienced staff members would take on more responsibilities during a service period, till the new staff member's confidence-level allowed them to take on a bigger portion of the shared work.

But the mechanism for autonomy began to take its toll on such a large staff as negotiations of task boundaries persisted overtime between experienced staff members and newer staff members. Two different team members reported on the minor conflicts that would occur on the floor which wasted time and energy of the team; time and energy that needed to be devoted to service itself.

For example, and paraphrasing a story told by a Cambridge team member who had been with the company for six-months and already knew five of the six stations, a dishwasher might be annoyed that a runner would fail to bring back bins of steamer baskets which accumulate underneath the front-of-house preparation station. The dishwasher would use casual yet strongly suggestive words asking for help, in the hope of influencing the runner to take responsibility for the task. The runner, however, knows that technically this task is the dishwasher's sole responsibility. The runner is aware that the dishwasher's perspective is clouded by recent shifts where this same runner 'helped out' by taking this task over. However, they also know that recent shifts to the boundary of jurisdiction were due to specific circumstances that allowed the

runner to assist beyond their specific role. As a result, a tug-of-war begins between the two staff members in order to renegotiate the standard boundary between these two workstations.

Another long-term Cambridge staff member, who was trained on all stations, describes another incident. Her frustration came from the lack of time she feels she has to explain and manage the innovations of newer team members who do not understand why certain practices developed over others. She explains in detail:

“It’s just really tough to be really busy on the drink station; you’ve got four smoothies going, two teas, and a bunch of juices lined up, and then the runner suddenly brings up a bunch of dirty tea pots and leaves them in your sink. This happened to me just the other day. The runner and dishwasher [together] decided it made more sense to leave the tea pots to clean with me, since they don’t go through the dishwasher [machine] and I have a sink. But c’mon! Do you really think I have the time to deal with that with all the orders that are up? I mean, there’s a reason we do it this way [regarding the tea pots getting rinsed in back]. But neither of them have ever worked drinks, so to them it doesn’t seem like a big deal.”

She goes on to say that it took two or three shifts to have the newer team members cease and desist. Why was this such a distracting interaction, i.e. why wasn’t the issue delegated to a manager? First, the culture of innovation and input from the interactions of all staff members is a priority from the point of view of the owner. Second, ‘standard’ practices at the restaurant were discovered in a similar fashion, through negotiations between regular team members as the restaurant was opening and as team members experimented with variations on task assignment.

Similar scenarios were reported by other employees behind the line, usually by a more experienced team member. These scenarios act as a source of tension, but are frequently reported in Lowell as well. They were described as ‘recurring issues’ throughout the years in Lowell, and they were not expected to cease in the future. The ability for Lowell to manage these negotiations, however, came from the proximity of newer staff members to the source of

the decision when the boundary lines were drawn. The current manager in Lowell, who had been on staff for six years, said that “when new staff have a new idea, chances are that, unless it’s *really* new, we’ve tried it before. But there are enough of us that have been here for such a long time; so it’s easy to nip it in the bud early on. There’s always someone nearby who can explain why it might be a good idea, but it didn’t work for such-and-such a reason.” In other words, the staff member had a higher probability of working side-by-side with a manager or shift leader who knew the source of the reasoning. Or, they had a higher probability of working side-by-side with another team member who was present when the role expectation was assigned. In addition, there was a beneficial learning experience in the conversation itself about why the practice was implemented, and why the new suggestion would not be adopted.

In a larger organization like Cambridge, the ability for anyone to know directly ‘the reason’ certain practices are the way they are is difficult. The decision does not always come from the top-down in this organization, and there are many more people involved in how the specific organizational practice was shaped over time. In addition, there is less patience to take the time to explain the history of the practice, with some staff members reporting that sometimes it is easier to say “that’s just the way we do it.” The speed of service at Cambridge therefore undercuts the culture of information sharing and innovation that is supposed to occur from the bottom-up, hindering staff members’ sense of autonomy.

Experienced staff members feel that the momentary skirmishes that occur during service are easier to smooth over when people have in-depth experience of different stations and different roles. The desired effect is not to eliminate the renegotiation of role expectations entirely, but to filter out costly negotiations and to find a way to encourage creative negotiations that contribute to efficiency, rather than detract from efficiency.

Hierarchy and Tension

The effect of all-encompassing role expectations at Life Alive has been thoroughly described throughout this thesis. One key effect that has yet to be articulated has been a flattened hierarchy within the organization, both in Lowell and for a period of time in Cambridge. Based on conversations with the owner, this was an important effect of these practices on the structure of the organization, which she believed had to be maintained in order to develop the type of corporate culture she wanted to see in the future as more locations opened up. However, within a flattened hierarchy there are also issues that arise in terms of individual perspective and understandings regarding employees' relations to each other.

This issue was recognized early on at the Lowell location, before the opening of the larger and much busier Cambridge location. The manager of Lowell remarked that "tension becomes an issue because, essentially, everyone knows everyone else's job. The differences between managers, shift leaders, and everyone else becomes hard to articulate. And you know, because, there are definitely differences, but it's just tough for some people to perceive and work with it." In Lowell the tensions were worked out through face-to-face communication and negotiation, similar to the interactions described in earlier sections. Interpersonal relations were tighter and more frequent at Lowell, thereby allowing differences of opinion and perspective to be sorted out over time, in the process creating important learning opportunities for everyone involved.

In Cambridge, the differences in perspective were much more difficult to integrate. There was less ability for management to deal with differences of perspective due to constraints on time and the number of perspectives involved. This became an issue over time as management began to make unilateral decisions without employee input. As mentioned before, a culture of input and collective problem solving had been cultivated, which promoted information sharing

amongst the staff at all levels. While productive in some areas of the restaurant's operations and development, this collective practice seemed to clash with a traditional top-down management culture where management decisions are accepted without any explanation why decisions are made. Unfortunately, the Cambridge group was too large for informal, one-on-one communication to address all issues and secure a smooth flow of service; so the management adopted a more standard approaches to hiring and promotion.

A critical example of management's change in behavior is in the organization's process for promotion. For most of the organization's history promotion was based on the 'holistic' perspective that staff members took towards their work.¹⁵ Experience was measured by the length of time employed and in the variety of skills and experience one had of different stations. Therefore, a staff member's execution of skill variety behind the line, his or her sense of task significance, and his or her history of effective input for innovation were viewed positively for promotion. Likewise, in most large organizations in the customer service industry straightforward policies and structured reviews are used to generate a paper trail that can provide objective evidence for why some employees advance more rapidly than others.¹⁶ These methods can increase individual motivation to improve and learn. These are examples of mechanisms that help to solidify a hierarchy, but also represented mechanisms of which the owner of Life Alive was fearful. She explained her resistance to creating systems of objective evidence by saying, "It is important that we treat our team members like human beings, capable of blossoming in their own way. The last thing I want is to treat our people like cattle, or numbers; people that we're just funneling through the system."

¹⁵ The terminology quoted is based off interviews with the owner and general managers.

¹⁶ Based on interviews with two managers of coffee service chains that classify in the industry as quick-service establishments.

However, when objective evidence in the form of a paper trail is not available, as was the case with Life Alive, it can cause doubt and confusion for how an individual views advancement, especially if the internal culture suggests that all-encompassing knowledge of the restaurant's operations is considered to be of the highest value. At Life Alive, a staff member, who was approached for promotion, but then was overlooked in favor of another staff member, describes his feelings:

“It’s just really frustrating, because I can’t feel like I can be heard [in terms of my value] without pointing out certain people and saying ‘Look, I’ve been here longer than them,’ or ‘I know all the stations – I mean, he doesn’t even know how to Maestro.’¹⁷ It makes me feel like I’m being petty or something. And I try to get my head around it, but I just don’t understand what it takes to get the pay I think I deserve [relative to others].”

As a result, capable and dedicated workers began to doubt their development and the enlarged role they could fill in the future. The reason team members with experience within the restaurant were being overlooked was due to a management decision related to hiring.

In the beginning, since an overwhelming majority of staff members were brand new, shift leaders were chosen for their “mind-set” - meaning: did they exude the ideals of the company’s mission - and whether they had some sort of related experience. The latter meant previous work in any high-paced environment, food service or otherwise. Over the first half-year of operation it was assumed that all shift leaders would become proficient at all roles. Through focused experience this also became the reality. One team member was asked about her interest in being promoted in month four of operation, and her reply was, “I’m interested, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable being promoted without learning everything there is to know.”

¹⁷ ‘Maestro’ is the nickname for the station that requires the most skill, labeled as stations C and D in the Cambridge floor plan, and station C in Lowell’s floor plan.

The number of shift leaders was stable for many months, with the assumption being amongst regular staff members that learning ‘more’ was an important goal in-and-of itself, but that it was also a basis for the natural hierarchy that was supposed to develop in the group. However, due to sudden gaps in staffing and changes in management, this natural promotional model was disrupted. First, since the Life Alive Cambridge training program lacked structured and straightforward policies for performance reviews, it was difficult to track which staff were ready for promotion. Second, the influx of brand new staff members put a toll on the informal system of information sharing and individual development. At the beginning it was important to the owner to hire people that understood the mission. However, this strategy began to cause friction within the organization. Those who were hired due to their ‘big picture’ outlook in terms of teamwork, nutrition, and health, tended to struggle with the speed that the efficiency goals required. Likewise, those who were highly skilled in interpersonal communication often lacked the technical ability to move material quickly. Finding the right balance of technical skill and mission orientation in individual hires proved to be difficult in order to keep pace with the demands of service. As a result, the pressures of efficiency pushed the organization to solely consider applicants with previous restaurant experience. The idea behind this strategy was that a new staff member with significant restaurant experience would be able to assimilate quickly to the efficiency needs of the restaurant given their experience, and the mission orientation could play a secondary role.

Previous experience within the industry, however, does not a perfect employee make. While these choices were made to overcome the inefficiencies of training for this fast-paced restaurant, there was significant pushback from a number of employees with previous experience from more segregated restaurant environments. For example, frustrations arose over Life Alive’s

‘vague’ role expectations, annoyance developed over the language since effective communication behind the line had to be ‘re-learned,’ to adjust to the mind-set of other employees, etc. Losing staff due to their incomprehension of the system became a common issue. In general, not all experienced service workers can survive a new system, so the set of team-members who thrive is self-selected to a degree.

Another strategy that changed was the owner’s expectations of the knowledge pool that each employee should strive to develop. As described in previous sections, the original expectation in Lowell and then in Cambridge was that employees should be hired with long-term training in mind, that they should learn all aspects of the business. Even if they did not stay through an entire one-year period or beyond, starting from this assumption seemed to cultivate a higher probability that staff would stay for the long term.¹⁸

Nine months into the high-efficiency operation, however, the owner changed her view on the value of expecting staff to learn as much as possible. While learning all stations developed empathy and long-term commitment amongst staff at both locations, the higher turnover experienced in Cambridge, coupled with the faster pace of service, left less room for flexibility and patience in training staff on stations in which they had little natural talent. She now said:

“I always thought it was best if everyone knew each station. We would invest so much time developing each person, in both their strengths and their weaknesses. But now, I’ve begun to see that, if someone is really strong in one area, perhaps that is [the area] where they should be. How useful is it, really, to force them to be somewhere where they don’t feel like they’re thriving. We each have our role to play, so perhaps that’s the way we should train our staff.”

¹⁸ When the current general manager of Cambridge was first hired in Lowell as a regular staff member, he reported that a majority of the seven person staff at that time had been employed between one and four years.

This sentiment was reflected in the altered criteria for promotion. Promotion in Cambridge became based on the ability to handle busy work in general, and less on the time and effort spent on expanding one's capabilities within the organization itself.

Shortly after the change in staffing strategy at the Cambridge location, management promoted four new team members as shift leaders. Each of these employees had been with the organization for two months or less; and each one had previous experience in a quick-service restaurant setting. However, each of these employees had on average only experience on two stations out of a total of six. At the same time, three staff members who had been with the organization for more than 12 months and who had extended experience on all six stations, were overlooked for promotion. When interviewed, the three staff members were not resentful about the decision that was made, but they did find the outcome of the strategy burdensome given their role in the restaurant:

“To have service run smoothly you need two people at least on staff who know all the stations. It makes breaks run well, and it helps in case something goes wrong and you need to move people around to cover all the bases. It's kind of annoying when your shift leader can't step in because they've never operated the station. So here you are, a regular team member, and you find that you're needing to shift around since you're the one that knows everything, and people are coming up to you to ask all the questions. Even the shift leader is asking you questions.”

With regards to the internal culture of information sharing and learning, filling the role as an all-knowing resource was not the problem; it was that the burden of information was not distributed evenly. In other words, the informal hierarchy did not match the formal hierarchy.

Changes in management also reflected a similar mismatch between informal and formal hierarchies. In two separate instances an individual would be promoted as manager to back-of-house given their quick assimilation to efficiency and order. However, their understanding of the

mission of the organization was either lacking or deemed insignificant (as one new hire put it “all that fluffy stuff”). In the first instance, a staff member skilled in back of house operations felt that her personal task load went far beyond what should have been a shared jurisdiction, simply because the manager did not take the time to internalize the division of labor that had developed before his time of employment at the restaurant. In the second instance, the manager expressed disregard for the empathic community culture, and often talked down to workers as well as produce suppliers because it was what he had experienced in other restaurants as being most productive.

In general, it was found that several workers with previous restaurant experience were unable to assimilate to the culture; and patterns of behavior would develop into attitudes that the owner had originally been trying to avoid. Ten months into the restaurant’s operation an individual was hired to only work at the prep station. Based on his past experience (12 years in restaurants) and his desire to only work in the back of house, the general manager was enthusiastic about the opportunity to have a focused prep staff and pleased to limit the amount of training the new team member required relative to others. This person had no interest in working any other position, and described the approach to his job in the following terms: “Look, I’ve worked in this industry enough. The way to succeed is to just put your head down and don’t ask any questions. Do you work, and get out of there [at the end of the shift].” His position at Life Alive was similar to the back-of-house manager described above. Their mutual attitudes towards the work, which they had adopted during their careers in the restaurant industry, reinforced each other and worked directly against the organization’s mission. These attitudes built a barrier for other team members willing to learn prep skills. A hostile emotional environment minimized the skill sharing that flourished in other areas of the restaurant.

At the time when my primary data collection was coming to an end, during the second year of operation at the Cambridge location, it was clear to me that the combination of the natural spread of information, coupled with weekly emails from management, were not satisfying staff members needs. Tensions developed amongst staff regarding the lack-of-clarity over management decision-making, the source of which has been presented in earlier sections. A movement mobilized amongst staff to meet outside of working hours to communicate more clearly their frustrations and points of tension, how information could move more fluidly throughout such a large staff, and how opportunities to contribute to the growth of the organization could be realized. They wanted more face-to-face communication with each other, staff member to staff member, in order to clarify on-going issues and generate solutions. At the time of writing in July 2012 staff members have remained frustrated that the mission does not line up with their expectations, specifically in regards to feeling prepared to exercise their autonomy on the line, in feeling confident that their voice is heard in the organization's feedback loop, and in feeling that training programs do not keep pace with the amount of knowledge that the organization asks its staff to internalize.

DISCUSSION

In the case study presented here, there have been constant adjustments to internal strategies in order to achieve the range of efficiency and mission-based goals that the organization set out to achieve since its founding. The mission-based goal of connecting staff members through an integrated production model, through techniques similar to increased skill variety, task significance, task identity, autonomy, and feedback do qualify as a new form of efficient fast-food production. However, conflicting perceptions about natural hierarchy, the

criteria for promotion, and hiring strategies can – and did - run counter to the productive emotions that come from the methods of work redesign that are showcased in this study.

While this is a thesis about a new organizational form in the quick-service food industry, it is important that a value-based judgment between integrated and segregated models is not being made. The purpose of this thesis is to articulate different tactics for organizing labor in a specific environment. There are multiple ways to achieve organizational ends, and this is why case studies are a rich source of information: the details of context and effort can be examined, and ideas about what is observed can be taken away.

In general, the point is that the decision to enter into a market to offer goods and services brings with it the main questions of "how" - how does one do it? The entrepreneur is empowered to make decisions about how supplies are sourced, how workflows are structured, and how distribution is handled. Like a Lego kit, the decisions made in terms of each piece will affect the shape and contours of what is built. As in the case of severe isomorphism, organizations pick the same size blocks as their competitors (not to mention similar colors!), and suddenly the market is inundated with identical models (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In the case of fast-food and quick-service restaurants there appears to be a decade long effort on the part of several chains to disrupt the established organizational form and try to innovate in order to fulfill non-financial objectives (e.g. Chipotle's efforts to source naturally raised meats). The purpose of this thesis is to articulate different choices, or building blocks, that one entrepreneur made in the interest of workers and consumer who experience quick-service food production in the United States. Life Alive put its efforts into transforming workers 'connection' to the production process: intentionally providing an environment in which workers could see their role as part of a whole; structuring tasks so that workers were motivated to execute their skills according to their

discretion; and to feel a sense of investment in the future of the company by contributing with new innovations. The patterns of micro-interactions that were developed for the line made this strategy meaningful and was of critical importance to the owner at the beginning of this experiment. However, in the midst of its second year of operation it is precisely this goal that is proving to be one of the biggest challenges as the organization continues to grow.

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