



# Cooperative Grocer

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## Developing Nirvana *A Parable of Supervision*

By Allen Seidner

"These customers are driving me crazy!" Nirvana Moon exclaimed as she burst through the swinging doors into the kitchen. The lunch rush was finally winding down and I was surprised to hear the young counter staff member so affected by the customers who just weeks before she seemed to adore.

"They're so impatient, and they take it out on me!" she announced, panning her address part way around the room until her eyes met mine. She immediately inferred from my expression that I'd prefer she bring the remainder of the conversation directly to me. "This woman asked me for some EuroSlaw. And when I explained to her that we don't make it anymore, she got all upset and walked away!"

"Well, what exactly did she say, Nirvana?" I asked. I tried to disguise my disappointment in the fact that one of my recent star hires was sounding like some of the less patient service staff she was hired to replace. In the first few minutes of my interview with Nirvana three months ago I had remembered why, even in this tight labor market, it's so important to wait for the right applicant. Even before she finished her five days of training, she'd shown an exceptional aptitude for juggling the myriad responsibilities of the service counter, and she consistently sported the patient and efficient service attitude that pleases customers.

"She asked why we never had it and that she had it here a couple months ago and hasn't seen it since."

"I see," I replied. "Well, here's the deal: You might have chosen to page me or Chef Hans and we could have told you that we only made that dish one time because we got an amazing deal on endive and radicchio. Since both of those ingredients aren't in our regular repertoire, and are usually too expensive for us, we can't always have EuroSlaw. As it happened, we made it with the same dressing that we use for the Sicilian Broccoli Slaw, and it was a great one-time treat! Did you perhaps point out, Nirvana, that we always have Sicilian Broccoli Slaw in the prepack deli case?"

She calmed down, with growing awareness that there actually were alternatives to how she handled the situation. It was almost as if I could see on her face the understanding that the upset she was experiencing was not only unnecessary, but also very much of her own doing. So I let the moment sink in before inviting her to take a walk around the block. We told the counter staff we'd be gone briefly and went to get our coats.

"I'm sorry. You know, this all might not be such a big deal if she hadn't come right after this other woman who was upset because Oliver couldn't make her a breakfast burrito, you know, because it was after 11:30 cutoff. And she just went on and..." I interrupted, while zipping my jacket: "What time was it? And did we still have scrambled eggs in the warmer?"

"It was just past noon and yes, we had eggs. And I know what you're thinking," she said. "If it's easy to make a customer happy, tell them you're breaking a rule so they won't

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expect policies to get broken all the time. And then make them happy, right?" She asked this rhetorically, and she knew I'd appreciate that she not only understood the value of priorities and policies -- but also when to bend them. "Precisely," I smiled.

"And I probably would have made it for the woman, but I only learned about this after she'd left Oliver and came to me. By then, she just wanted a Bolinas Turkey Deluxe, and I was happy to just get her food and move her along. I mean, it's not as if I have any say over Oliver, and I didn't want to make him look bad."

Walking through the busy stockroom area we meandered among newly delivered pallets and case stacks along a narrow path. Once outside we instinctively walked away from the customer entrance and toward the recycling bins behind the building. I allowed myself to appreciate the winter sun's warmth bursting through the strangling chill before I broke the otherwise comfortable silence. "What's really going on, Nirvana? Not one month ago you were having a great time in your new job. What's up?"

"Maybe these shifts are too long. I don't know if human beings were cut out to make other human beings happy for eight straight hours, you know?" she mused. "Yeah, I've thought about that," I said. "But are you taking your breaks, Nirvana? You get a half hour meal plus two short breaks. I know counter service life can't be perfectly orchestrated, but if you were able to spread out your three breaks, you'd end up with four little shifts of under two hours each."

"Duh! Yeah, that would probably make a big difference. I never take all of my breaks. There just isn't time." As soon as Nirvana mentioned time, I remembered the stockpile of

tasks and reports waiting in my office, and the hours it would take to finish them in order to get out of work before dusk. Just as quickly, the wind blustered and I brought my focus back to Nirvana. "I want you to make the time for your breaks, Nirvana. I want you to be happy and successful here for a long time, so burning you out isn't in my interest." Her face sported a smile and indicated she understood that her troubles -- at least as they relate to work -- matter to me. We agreed the staff schedule indeed allows for everyone to have proper breaks while still providing good customer service.

"So somebody's gotta start organizing this break thing early in the shift then, right?" she asked. It seemed the more she was involved in the problem solving process, the more absorbed and excited she was about her work.

"How'd you like to start training for shift coordinator, Nirvana?" Despite her age and brief tenure, it dawned on me that Nirvana knew the department very well and was more qualified than many. Until now, I hadn't thought she'd be ready for additional challenges so soon. And now I was essentially certain that if I didn't find some productive way to continually challenge her, I would most certainly lose her.

"Wow. Um, I never thought about it. I'm probably not ready for all that responsibility," she said. "Nonsense," I quipped. "Everyone knows you're a fast learner and good at your job. People enjoy working with you and I think they'll really appreciate having someone like you helping to organize and make the most of the shifts you work."

"What if I start off by just making sure that when I'm working, we have a plan for everyone's breaks happening so that we can each give great service -- and we'll take it from there?" she offered. From inside the store I heard myself paged over the intercom. The guilt from not doing that paperwork was becoming more powerful.

"What if I remind you that no one gets their head chewed off for making a mistake or a bad judgment call around here. And that with some training and some patience, you keep in mind that I am totally confident that you will be a great shift coordinator?" I asked, hearing another intercom page from inside. "Think about it and get back to me before I make the next schedule, OK?"

"I'll do it!" Nirvana smiled. And I smiled. And as I turned to start walking back inside, the shame I felt in not finishing my paperwork was washed away by the more powerful understanding that in keeping my young star motivated and challenged, I had just shared the most productive and important 20 minutes of my entire workday.