

Investigating Restaurant Climate and Verbal Aggressiveness as Antecedents of Employee
Retention in The Restaurant Industry.

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Abstract

This proposal is focused on the deterring effects of employee turnover that exist in businesses and job sectors across the world. Moreover, the restaurant sector has been chosen because in the bulk of research that exists, it is among the most intense and least explored. The proposal begins in exploring a great breadth of research that all concluded costly concerns centered around gridlock, motivation, climate, communication, and more. These findings came from information science careers, universities, technology institutes, hospitality industries, caregivers, subordinate staff, and supervisory staff. It became very clear that climate in job sectors other than the restaurant industry were of concern in most research. In seeking findings set in the restaurant's high intensity sector, and in wanting to explore specific dimensions of climate and communication styles such as verbal aggressiveness, a unique and targeted study is proposed. This study aims at helping a restaurant in Olive Garden's Cleveland division achieve elite status. By reducing their last evaluator in which they fall short- (high turnover) the restaurant will achieve status as, "the top ten performing" in its chain. Motivated and theorized by communication curriculum and strategy at Marshall University, data collected from questionnaires (subordinate restaurant staff 18 years +) will be evaluated to determine possible relation between variables of climate and verbal aggressiveness, producing high turnover rates. The hope is to show a relationship that can help leaders in the industry best shape climates and deploy communication styles that help retain employees.

Investigating Restaurant Climate and Verbal Aggressiveness as Antecedents of Employee Retention in the Restaurant Industry

For restaurant staff, chaos feels like home. Many hospitality professionals feel the fast-paced nature of their work, when mixed with good company culture, is highly rewarding (Restaurant, 2018). That said, toxic climates and work-related stress often have negative effects on employee retention (Ali, & Bukhari, 2017). Restaurants are especially susceptible to the struggle of keeping staffed in these intense climates. Altman (2017) reports that, “the average economic cost to a company of turning over a highly skilled job is 213% of the cost of one year’s compensation for that role” (p.1). This cost alone should motivate the restaurant industry to invest in researching effective strategies to reduce turnover.

Workplace Climate

The climate of a workplace is known to influence retention rates generally. Blair Jeffery (2015) discusses the emphases across all organizations in establishing a positive climate stating, “We’ve found that organizations that ingrain these practices will significantly increase employee motivation and productivity, retain top employees and improve bottom-line performance by up to 30 percent” (p.1).

Research has focused on the variables that create organizational climates in restaurants. Ji-Eun (2017) identified 17 dimensions of organizational climate that included: autonomy, integration, involvement, supervisory support, training, welfare, formalization, tradition, innovation and flexibility, outward focus, reflexivity, clarity of organizational goals, efficiency, effort, performance feedback, pressure to produce, and quality. When the researcher compared the demographic data, they evaluated survey questions and found participants had major gaps in

responses. Based upon a few factors like demographic and title, combined with manager's technique and approach, there were different perceptions of organizational climate. When examining responses this study shows that climate is not necessarily universal, but it is unique and is cause for concern, considering that results showed little alignment from management in workplace culture and procedures with subordinates. The limitations to the type of research that exists around this variable comes in that, there has been no measure taken further to link individual perceptions of climate with turnover.

Other research has examined how to improve workplace climate to reduce turnover. Tsung & An Ho (2010) investigated how workplace climate influences turnover in the technology industry. Eighty questionnaires were mailed out to one customer care company in Taiwan that were designed according to the Likert scale, measuring organizational flow experience, or (perceived climate) based on variables such as job characteristics and personal factors. Results demonstrated that when workplaces take time to alleviate stress and regroup through meditation, that work performance and service quality for their customers went up.

A small body of research also examined the restaurant industry. Breal (2007) conducted a case study of the Whataburger company to examine how they were able to increase return through improving workplace climate. In 1996, the national fast food company, Whataburger came to the realization that something had to be done about their company climate within their restaurants. Breal (2007) reported that turnover, "hovers around 300% annually by some accounts" (p.1). In an effort to reduce these rates, the company began hosting their own version of the Olympic games for employees. These games sought to improve company climate and create a culture that enforced standards. The hope was to boost morale and retain employees. Results showed that the games were effective for increasing employee retention. These games did more than boost morale. They

built emersion, culture, the ability to pay entry level employee's above minimum wage, and the ability to offer managers double the industry average.

Research has investigated how climate can influence motivation levels in educational contexts. Singh (2016) first conducted a contextual analysis on motivation and held small group panels with students in the classroom asking open-ended questions about motivation and climate. Results demonstrated negative effects to “carrot stick approaches” and value for engagement, recognition, and autonomy. Without these approaches creating a warm and welcoming climate, students reported they had no reason to stay in the field. This study also investigated factors that shaped climate that fueled motivation to keep students in their major. Overall, results showed that extrinsic and intrinsic motivators were both factors that determined the climate and fueled motivation. Intrinsic motivators like unity in the emersion of work from all members of staff, along with a desire for positive culture built on respect and trust. This was then followed by extrinsic motivators like recognition, money and autonomy. Both of which made for a better climate and willingness to stay.

Verbal Aggressiveness

In order to narrow the focus of workplace climate's causation in high turnover, verbal aggressiveness is the one variable known to enforce a willingness to leave an organization. This is an issue many workers are speaking up about and is suspect in high turnover rates. Schreiner (2016) stresses that, “In the highly competitive and fast-paced world of business, verbal aggression is relatively common.” Infante (n.d.) defines verbal aggressiveness as, “a predisposition to attack the self-concept of others” (p.1).

At the front of research on verbal aggressiveness there is an examination of transformational leadership, which is directly correlated to verbal aggressiveness. What is (2017)

defined transformational leadership as having “rapport, inspiration, or empathy to engage followers” (p.1). These leaders work at changing traditional systems and use positivist styles that are empathetic in nature, while pushing for maximum achievement from those around them.

Gill, Flaschner, & Shachar (2006) were among the first to explore transformational leadership. The intent of the study was to find a relationship between stress and burnout. Subordinates in the hospitality industry were interviewed regarding the type of leadership used by their managers, the stress they felt due to their jobs, and the degree to which they felt they were “burned out.” They found that the degree of perceived burnout is related to the degree of perceived stress and degree of perceived stress is related to type of leadership employed by managers, all of which created an unwillingness to stay in the position. This relates to the variable of verbal aggressiveness in the questions asked in interviews, which discussed the way that managers transmitted themselves when communicating with staff. Studies like these help hypothesis that without communication styles like that of a transformational leader (verbal aggressiveness) turnover rates would be higher.

Done very similarly, Bufquin, DiPietro, Park, &Partlow (2017) measured warmth and competence communicated by management in restaurants, along with organizational commitment. They wanted to know if a more approachable style would generate better commitment by staff and also, drive sells. They used non-probability sampling, mailing out surveys to an unidentified restaurant chain in the Midwest, using the Likert scale. They found that a manager’s warmth significantly decreased turnover rates, and actually decreased sells. Nonetheless, this study helps propose further research on the effects of verbal aggressiveness in the restaurant industry.

Kind, Eckert, Steinlin, Fegert, & Schmid (2018) conducted a study that looked specifically at verbal aggressiveness. They wanted to know if verbal aggression caused stress and burnout among their Swedish population of care givers. They looked at content analysis, examining the reports filled by staff and also surveyed using simple yes, no responses from surveying. Not only did they find that verbal aggression lead to burnout, but also: cynicism, anxiety, lack of confidence, physical aggression (in some cases), and most notably for this proposal, the desire to quit or transfer (turnover).

Cox (1999) published research on the idea that coworkers and managers enforce peer exit (their own turnover). The study took place at a Midwestern university where students were given extra credit for distributing surveys, one being short answer and the other, open ended in an interview fashion. Surveys with closed questions gathered demographic data and determined whether or not the participant knew about peer exit, if they had ever been a victim, the assailant, or had witnessed the phenomenon. Open-ended survey questions determined the strategies one would use if enforcing peer exit. Results showed enforced exit due to levels of stress, and burnout in the workplace- with contributors like verbal aggressiveness. Specifically, “Both managers and coworkers have the personal autonomy to avoid or engage in communication, provide career assistance, withhold work-related help/support, or act in hostile/unfriendly ways. Also, the "communicate with other workgroup members" strategy allows managers and coworkers to discuss the "deviant" employee among themselves and to influence their mutual actions towards her or him” (p.188).

Synthesis

The purpose of this research is to examine how workplace climate and verbal aggressiveness influence staff turnover in restaurants. Previous research has demonstrated that workplace climate influences turnover rates, but this has not been examined in a restaurant context. Moreover, the central role that verbal aggressiveness may have in fueling desire to leave a restaurant staff position has been unexplored. Consequently, the following research questions and hypotheses are proffered:

H1: Perceived workplace climate is negatively correlated to a restaurant staff member's desire to leave their position.

H2: Perceived workplace verbal aggressiveness is correlated to a restaurant staff member's desire to leave their position.

Methods

Participants

Olive Garden restaurant staff in Barboursville, WV is the population of interest for this study. There is particular and exclusive interest in subordinate employees. The sample will come from this single restaurant within the Cleveland division. The survey will be open and available to all staff eighteen years of age and older, with the exception of management. Entry level employees are of particular interest so that the results can be passed on to restaurant leaders for implementing changes in communication strategies and climate that reduce costly turnover rates. Due to the specificity of this studies hypotheses, along with financial limitations, sampling will be convenience. There are approximately 100 subordinates employed at this location. The goal would be to survey around 60 participants. The results of this study are imperative to the performance and overall success of this Olive Garden restaurant, which fails to make

qualification for top 10% of all locations within the U.S and Canada in revenue, coming in at a close 15% due to turnover expense alone. Collecting from approximately 20 participants would be relatively easy for the researcher being an employee himself. Demographics data such as age, sex, race, education level, time in position, and previous employment in the service industry will be collected.

Procedures

The heart of this study is to discover the impact of communication, specifically verbal aggressiveness and climate in what we already know is a chaotic and stressful industry. IRB approval will first be obtained for this study. Surveys will be printed and distributed at the end of every shift during low volume times Monday-Thursday. Managers and service professionals (a branch of management) will present and collect surveys to willing participants at the time they clock out for their shift. Gift cards and raffles will be the push for encouragement, rather than mandating surveys be completed, explaining the restaurant's commitment to employee satisfaction. All participants will be required to provide informed consent before being surveyed. With this consent, participants will rate the climate in their restaurant. In the second half, participants will be given scripts that display varying styles of verbal aggressiveness posed in questions managers may ask when assigning restaurant duties.

Instrumentation

Climate. Thoms, Wolper, Scott, & Jones (2001) used a series of scenarios (factors) where an employee may feel the need to steal from the organization. Then, the Likert scale was used to measure their likelihood to steal in that scenario. For this study, in measuring climate the seventeen dimensions used by Ji-Eun (2017) will be employed. Ji-Eun (2017) used: autonomy, integration, involvement, supervisory support, training, welfare, formalization, tradition,

innovation and flexibility, outward focus, reflexivity, clarity of organizational goals, efficiency, effort, performance feedback, pressure to produce, and quality to determine varying perceptions of climate. In studying climate as it is related to turnover, a few of the above dimensions will be used, but with negative connotation. Scenarios that are given to participants will include examples that involve (lack of training, lack flexibility, lack of clarity, etc.)

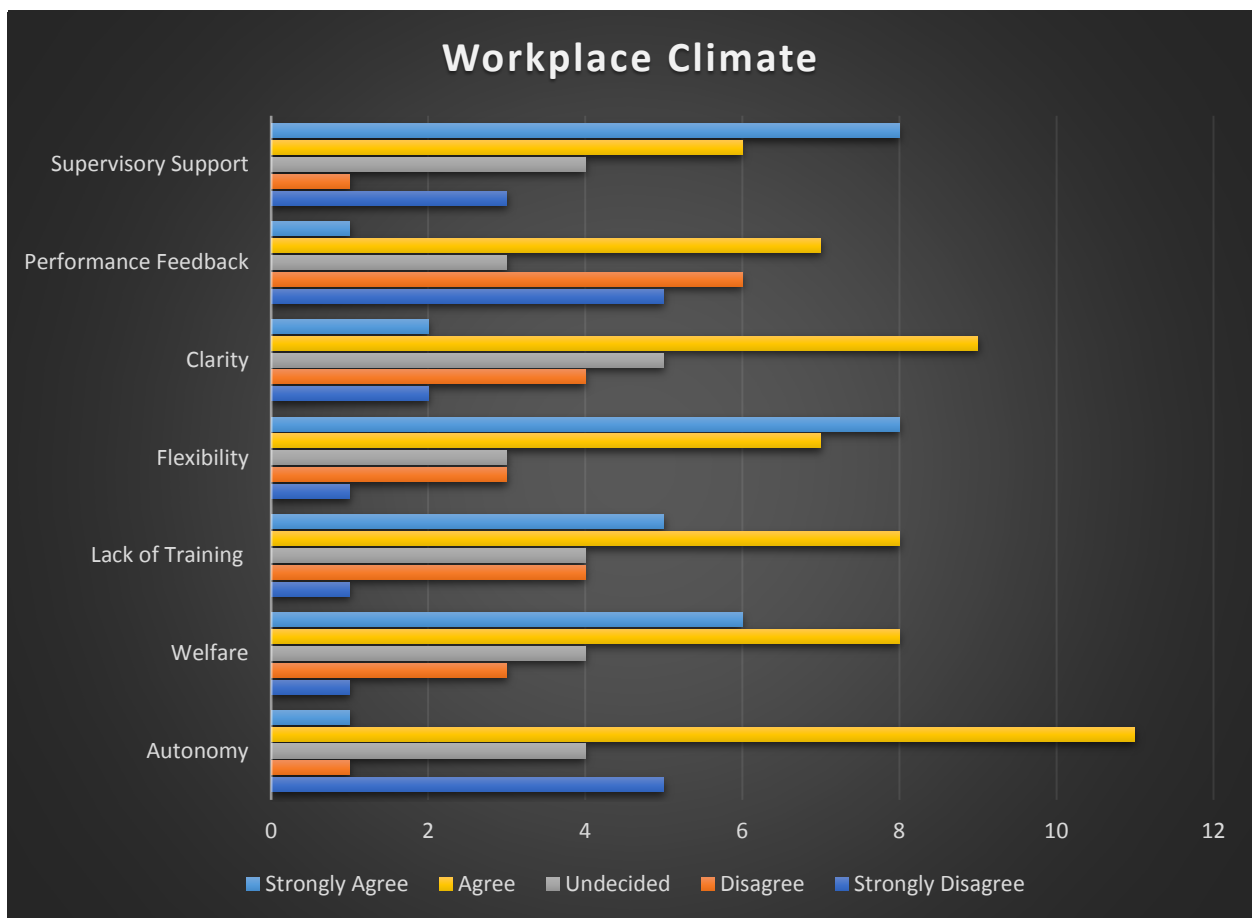
Verbal Aggressiveness. There is a very similar construct for this measurement as there was in climate. A few scenarios will be illustrated in the survey that employ varying identifiers of verbal aggressiveness. Then, participants will rate their likeness to exit the organization according to the X-point Likert scale used by Thoms, Wolper, Scott, & Jones (2001). In order to display verbal aggressiveness within the scenarios that include varying questions posed by managers, universal identifiers need to be understood. The associations of verbal aggressiveness outlined by (Infante (n.d), “name-calling, the use of threats, and ultimatums, negativity, resentment, and suspicion” will be used in the scenarios for this measurement- climate.

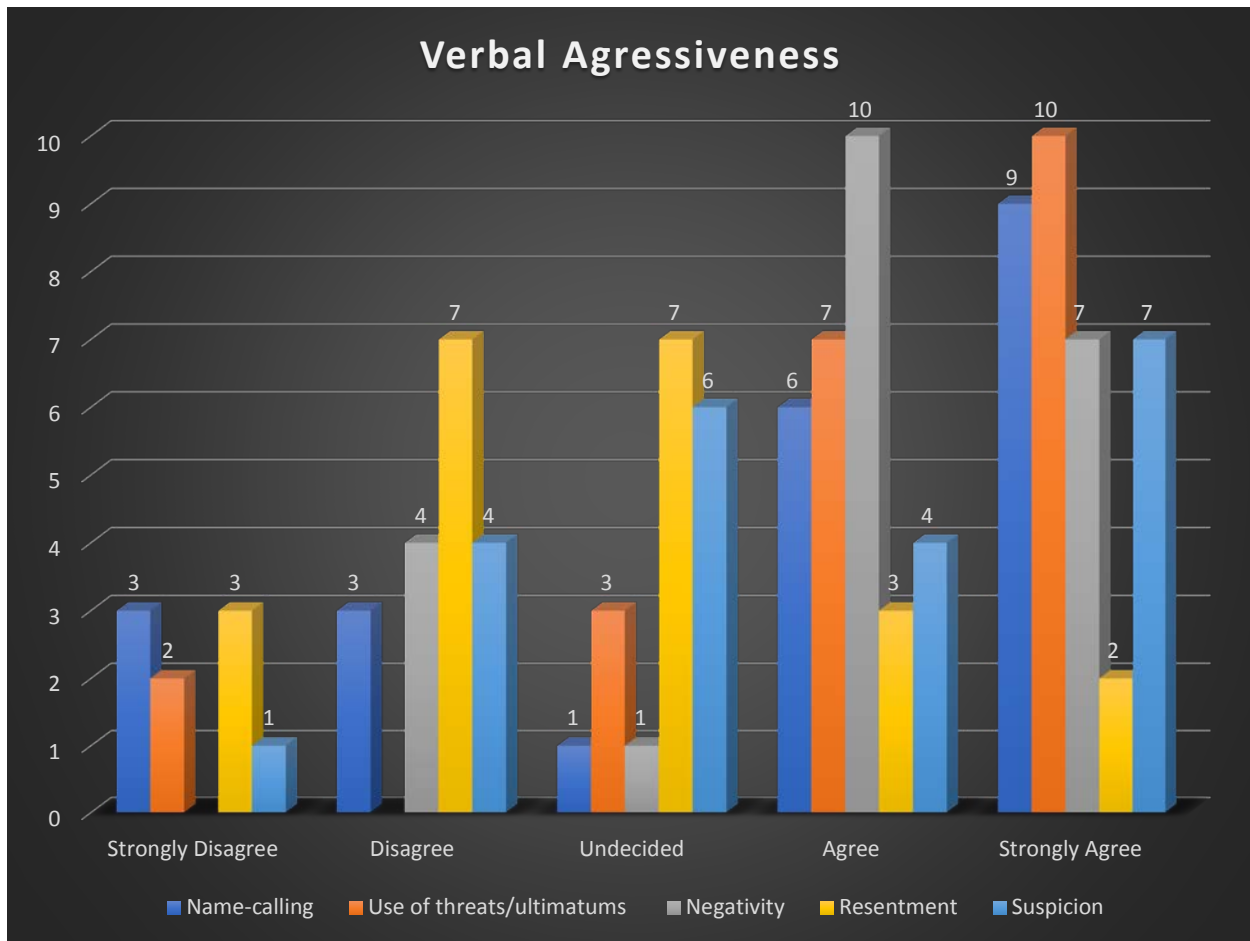
Turnover. First, some content analysis has to occur in sorting through company records, pulling the number of employees who quit their job voluntarily (Thoms, Wolper, Scott, & Jones, 2001). This number will be divided by the number of active employees for that pay roll year (Thoms, Wolper, Scott, & Jones, 2001). In doing this you receive the turnover rate.

Results

After collecting the results, it was proven that in relation to scopes of climate such as-lack of autonomy, lack of welfare, lack of training, lack of flexibility, lack of clarity, lack of performance feedback, and lack of supervisory support employees selected that employees either agreed and/or strongly agreed that the lack of the above indicators would cause them to leave their position.

Similarly, when measuring verbal aggressiveness, variables such as name calling were highest at strongly agree, next to agree (in terms of likeness to leave position). Use of threats and ultimatums with the same results, negativity just slightly opposite with the highest being agree, followed by the second majority (strongly agree). Resentment was tied for undecided and disagree being both the majority of results. Finally, suspicion had the majority of votes for strongly agree, right next to undecided.





Conclusion

Consequently, these results mostly support the original hypotheses. To find that employees are more likely to leave their job because they were not trained properly, their managers were not clear enough on what they expected, did not give enough feedback, or even did not allow for enough autonomy, all were major influencers on climate and pushed for job exit. Then, when it came to verbal aggressiveness it was clear that management could not go around and call that underneath them names, or use threats and ultimatums to achieve goals. The same held true, when supervisory communication was suspicious. The only measurement that did not lead to the conclusion that perceived workplace verbal aggressiveness is correlated to an employee's desire to leave their position was resentment. One may conclude that resentment did

not measure up the same way as the other indicators because subordinate employees found it unlikely that their superiors would be resentful in communication, more so they themselves would act on resentful communication when approached with some of the other negative verbally aggressive communication styles listed above. Further testing and research would be necessary.

Nonetheless, Barboursville Olive Garden can take these results directly to the operation. They will now understand what environment does not work to retain employees. Also, many contexts described and labeled as verbally aggressive can now be avoided in order to retain employees.

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Appendix

Climate questionnaire

Autonomy- Restaurant leaders never listen to those closest to the action. All serving styles and practices are set to the company standard and are scripted. There is no consideration of new ideas, and personal touches when serving.

Lack of autonomy alone would be enough for me to quit my job.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly Agree

Welfare- Restaurant leaders do not care if you have time to run food because you are taking care of your tables. No one cares if you have a family emergency or are sick and cannot make it into work.

Lack of welfare alone would be enough for me to quit my job.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly Agree

Lack of Training- You were never taken through training step by step. There were no mentors or figures to look up to, in order to perform at your best. Trainers acted as if you were simply in the way and something that had to be dealt with.

Lack of training alone would be enough for me to quit my job.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly Agree

Flexibility- Managers do not care if you are in a closing section when serving and have an assignment due the next day. They do not care if the bartender's replacement is running late and you have an appointment at a school event. Restaurant leaders are unwilling to let you swap shifts or have someone pick up your tables and cover for you when it is necessary.

Lack of flexibility alone would be enough for me to quit my job.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly Agree

Clarity- Staff is not made aware of the latest pasta promotion when guests arrive in the building asking about its ingredients and stipulations. No one ever informed hosts and servers about their closing procedures when TQ was arriving for inspections, and now you're in trouble because there was a violation in your work area.

Lack of clarity alone would be enough for me to quit my job.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly Agree

Performance Feedback- Management never tells you that you are doing a good job. In fact, even when you are not following a critical standard, no one is there to correct the action. Maybe, no one taught you what chemicals were safe to use in your work area, or how to properly cut when using a knife in production. You have no insight on how you are doing, causing job stress.

Lack of performance feedback alone would be enough for me to quit my job.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly Agree

Supervisory support- Your managers could care less what you are going through. Your family member recently passes and you are expected to come to work give guests the best possible experience. It is a busy Saturday night, everyone in the restaurant is slammed and management sits in the office tending to paper work.

Lack of supervisory support alone would be enough for me to quit my job.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree

Verbal Aggressiveness Questionnaire

Name-calling- On any given day your manager or peers often say that you are lazy. You hear gossip about other employees and their commitment/stupidity, etc. You often get told that you are worthless, or garbage. Profanity is used and you are spoken down to anytime you make a mistake.

Name-calling would be enough to make me want to quit my job.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree

Use of threat/ultimatums- Any time you are caught not following standard set by your superiors, you are never taught or coached in how to do things the right way. Write ups and termination are always the first resort when threatening you to perform. "If I come to your table and you do not suggest the beverage of the day I will terminate you immediately, I have had enough"

Use of threats/ultimatums would be enough to cause me to want to quit my job.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree

Negativity- You are always afraid to come to a manager to ask a question because they huff and puff and act like you are stupid or incompetent because you had to ask your question to begin with. “I cannot believe you have never done this before, this is exactly what is wrong with our generation.” Expos working the window repeatedly yell for food runners and slam trays calling you out when leaving the kitchen when busy completing a task. All your leaders do is complain about how much they have to do and how they do not have time for you.

Use of negativity would be enough for me to quit my job.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly Agree

Resentment- Everyone at work wants you to be better, and perform to the best of your ability.

You are moving up in the restaurant, but when you start to get recognized by upper management, your coworkers start giving you the cold shoulder and making statements like “Oh did you forget where you came from?”

Is resentment enough to cause you to want to quit your job?

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly Agree

Suspicion- No one ever trusts that you actually do your job. A manager comes up to you and says, “Wow, you actually spoke to that table about the club.” You are constantly being made to feel less than and that you are never capable of actually doing what is required of you.

Is suspicion alone enough to cause you to want to leave your job?

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly Agree

