



Characteristics of small business leadership from employees' perspective: A qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

Leadership is a much-studied topic, and yet, the topic still attracts researchers. As an essential factor in every organization, however, leadership contributes significantly to a business failure, especially in small independent restaurant businesses and this could be due to the unique operations of the industry and the lack of leadership studies on small hospitality businesses. This study aims to fill the gap by exploring the ideal characteristics for small independent restaurant leaders to become an effective leader using a qualitative approach from their employees' perspectives. Qualitative data were collected through four focus groups and one dyadic interview. The findings of the qualitative data analysis revealed nine themes: respectful, compassionate, effective communicator, experienced, effective delegator, gives recognition, sociable, emotionally controlled, organized. The paper discussed implications of the findings for small independent restaurant businesses and the hospitality industry in general as well as implications for theory.

1. Introduction

As a sector comprised of small businesses that employs the largest number of workers in Western countries (Wagener et al., 2010), the restaurant industry contributes significantly to the U.S. economy. According to the National Restaurant Association, the industry was expected to contribute \$798.7 billion in sales to the economy in 2017 (National Restaurant Association, 2017). In addition, the restaurant sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the U.S. economy and employs approximately 14.7 million people or about 10% of the total U.S. workforce and it is the second largest employer after the government (Batt et al., 2014; National Restaurant Association, 2017). Recent data have shown that the restaurant industry remains one of the steadiest contributors to private sector growth, with 40,200 new jobs in February 2016, and total restaurant employment is expected to reach 16.3 million by 2027, which includes approximately 1.6 million new jobs provided by the restaurant industry (National Restaurant Association, 2017).

However, restaurants are vulnerable to failure. Previous studies have shown that about 30% of restaurant businesses fail during their first year of operations and, among many other problems, leadership has been held accountable as one of the roots of these problems and failures (Everett and Watson, 1998; Parsa et al., 2011, 2005; Valdiserri and Wilson, 2010). Parsa et al. (2011) reported that approximately

9000 or, as mentioned earlier, 30% of independent restaurants fail during their first year. This failure rate contributes to a potential loss of \$5.20 billion in restaurant revenue from the U.S. economy.

Despite numerous studies of leadership, especially in hospitality industry contexts, previous studies have shown that no single leadership style can be applied to all situations and not all leaders employ the same leadership style for successfully achieving organizational goals (Valdiserri and Wilson, 2010; Zenger and Folkman, 2009). In addition, most leadership studies have been conducted using the employees of large companies such as hotels or chain restaurants, neglecting the employees of small businesses, especially of small independently owned restaurants owned by an individual(s) who work at the property daily. As a result, the development of leadership practices among small restaurant businesses is limited because considerably less time has been spent discussing leadership approaches within a small business setting, including of these small independently owned restaurants. According to the NPD Group (2016), 630,511 restaurants were operating in the United States in spring 2015 with 340,135 counted as independents.

Moreover, the owners of small independently owned restaurants are generally the leaders of their businesses, and, because of limited resources, they must understand almost all job functions needed for the business (e.g., cook, cashier, and server). Compared to chains or franchised restaurants, small independently owned restaurants tend to face a lack of management skills. Owners must also make decisions quickly

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and often without involving subordinates in the decision-making process, which can minimize employee motivation as they feel their opinions do not matter to the owner, and this feeling contributes to employees determining to leave their job (Detert and Burris, 2007). As a result, small independently owned restaurants experience a high failure rate. Because the unique operations of each small independent restaurant business affect each owner's management style, it is important to understand the effective leadership characteristics for this role. Therefore, leadership in the context of small independently owned restaurants needs to be explored and this study aims to answer the following research questions: first, how do employees perceive an effective leader in small independently owned restaurants; and second, what ideal characteristics for leaders of small independently owned restaurants do employees perceive?

2. Literature review

2.1. Leadership theories

Leadership is a much-studied topic, and yet, the topic still attracts researchers due to the rich complexity of the interactions between leaders, followers, and their circumstances (Badshah, 2012; Kreitner and Kinicki, 2013; Park and Leeds, 2013). As leadership theories have been examined in a variety of studies, among many factors, Wren (1994) stated that the characteristics of leaders (personal traits, culture, and behavior) were factors that influence the success or failure in producing results (as cited in Valdiserri and Wilson, 2010). Amid the leadership theories of the past, approaches based on traits, behavior (styles), and contingency were the three upon which most leadership studies were based (Hsu et al., 2003; Northouse, 2015; Ogbeide et al., 2008).

Researchers studying the traits of leadership earlier in the 20th century believed that great leaders had special traits that not every person had and that they were born with these traits (Mann, 1959; Stogdill, 1948). Studies of leadership behavior, unlike studying traits, which focuses mostly on the leaders themselves, focus on what leaders do and how they behave, whether in a task or a relationship (Ogbeide, 2011, 2008). Empirical evidence has shown that the behaviors of leaders have a great influence on the behaviors of their employees, which in turn can positively affect organizational performance (Chung-Wen, 2008; Clark et al., 2009; McGrath and MacMillan, 2000; Nahavandi, 2006). The last approach, known as the contingency approach, is situational leadership which suggests that leaders should act based on situational factors and should be expected to adapt to different situations and adjust their leadership styles accordingly (McMahon, 2010; Northouse, 2015; Ogbeide, 2011, 2008). Since the early 1980s, researchers have introduced newer concepts to better describe leadership styles such as leader-member exchange theory (LMX), transformational and transactional leadership, and servant leadership. Hence, numerous empirical leadership studies to seek outcomes of the leadership approach such as employees have been conducted in almost every field of studies, including the hospitality industry.

2.2. Leadership studies in the hospitality industry

The hospitality industry is known as a "people" industry because, in addition to providing its customers with physical, tangible products, the industry also provides intangible services, such as face-to-face interactions with customers that require highly service-oriented employees (Putra et al., 2017; Teng and Barrows, 2009). Furthermore, the nature of the work in the hospitality industry is also unique in that it is known for being labor intensive and having an unfavorable work environment with low wages, long working hours, few career opportunities, and time pressures which provide an excellent environment for exploring issues of human resources management and organizational behaviors regarding leadership (Barron et al., 2007; Erkutlu, 2008; Kusluvan et al.,

2010; Minett et al., 2009; Pittaway et al., 1998; Singh et al., 2007; Wong and Chan, 2010). Therefore, effective leadership is crucial, indeed essential, for the industry. As a result, a substantial number of leadership studies have been published in the hospitality industry literature that examine effective leadership styles and how they influence employees in hospitality settings.

An early study of leadership style in the hospitality industry stated that an autocratic style of leadership was popular in the industry because of its intensive focus on management (Worsfold, 1989). The use of an autocratic style in hospitality management can be attributed to the nature of jobs in the industry with an often unpleasant work environment or incompetent management style negatively affecting employee motivation (Barron et al., 2007; Kusluvan, 2003; Kusluvan et al., 2010).

However, according to Foels et al., (2000), the preferred leadership style in the hospitality industry is democratic. This was demonstrated by a study of 180 hotel employees at one hotel site over a four-year period from 1997 to 2000. This study reported that employees prefer leaders with a style that is not autocratic, and prefer a democratic style where leaders inform them of decisions with full explanations (Deery and Jago, 2001). Additionally, a study of 797 midlevel U.S. hotel chain managers and employees found that an autocratic leadership style is not appropriate for managing hotel employees because it can decrease their commitment to service quality. The study also found that an autocratic leadership style had no effect on employee shared values, role clarity, job satisfaction, or commitment (Clark et al., 2009). Employees from different generations such as Generation X and Millennials also tend to respond less favorably to an autocratic leadership style partly due to the negative perception of characteristics of the approach. However, different studies have also shown that the democratic style of leadership is not always applied by leaders or managers. For example, a study of 15 Egyptian and 16 foreign general managers of Egyptian five-star chain hotels found that 68.8% of foreign general managers and 40% of the Egyptians adopt an autocratic style of leadership at work. The study further explained that cultural and language barriers are why more foreign general managers than Egyptian general managers adopt the autocratic approach of leadership (El Masry et al., 2004).

Transactional and transformational leadership are another two approaches that have been studied extensively in the hospitality industry. By definition, transactional leadership is an approach focused on the role of supervision, organization, and group performance promoted through rewards and punishments (Breevaart et al., 2014). Unlike transactional leadership, which is similar to and based on autocratic leadership (Tracey and Hinkin, 1994), transformational leadership emphasizes the emotions, values, and creativity of employees. Transformational leaders offer idealized or charismatic influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, and these characteristics help them motivate their followers to achieve organizational goals (García-Morales et al., 2012; Judge and Piccolo, 2004). In addition, transformational leaders tend to maintain strong relationships with their followers by establishing open communication and providing resources to achieve goals (Brownell, 2010; Erkutlu, 2008; Bass, 1999). Followers are likely to see transformational leaders as satisfying and effective leaders (Bass, 1999). Tracey and Hinkin (1994) conducted a study on large hotel management organization employees, seeking an answer to whether the transformational leadership style is effective and the right fit for leaders working in the hospitality industry. Their results showed that transformational leadership had a strong, positive correlation with all outcomes, while transactional did not have any significant relationship with the outcome measures. A different study of boutique hotel employees by Erkutlu (2008) supported the findings in Tracey and Hinkin (1994); the result showed that all characteristics of transformational leadership behavior were positively related to employees' satisfaction with supervision and their work, employees' commitment, and employees' performance.

Furthermore, [Brownell \(2010\)](#) examined studies from the past 25 years and argued that transformational leadership is the most relevant leadership for leaders in the hospitality industry. This was supported by a different study of 797 midlevel U.S. hotel chain managers and employees whose result stated that transformational leadership was an ideal leadership style in managing frontline hotel employees ([Clark et al., 2009](#)). A recent study of transformational leadership using five-star hotel employees in Egypt also showed that transformational leadership had a significant negative relationship with employees' job stress and job burnout ([Salem, 2015](#)).

In addition to transactional and transformational leadership, servant leadership is a recent leadership approach that has been argued to be a good fit for the hospitality industry ([Brownell, 2010](#); [Ispas and Teberian, 2012](#); [Ling et al., 2017](#)). Introduced by [Greenleaf \(2002\)](#), servant leadership gives leaders a primary purpose of serving others, especially employees, and its characteristics differ from other leadership styles. Specifically, leaders using the servant approach put their subordinates' needs, aspirations, and interests above their own and tend to serve them first as opposed to leading them ([McMahon, 2010](#)). Instead of using "I lead," servant leaders use "I serve" in their approach because they believe that the primary reason why leaders exist is to serve first, not to lead first ([McMahon, 2010](#); [Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002](#)). Also, the primary focus of servant leadership is on developing team member(s) or employee(s), while, for example, the focus of transformational leadership is on the needs and goals of the organization ([Brownell, 2010](#); [Gregory Stone et al., 2004](#)).

Furthermore, studies on servant leadership have shown that servant leadership approaches have the potential to improve organizational performance (as cited in [Joseph and Winston, 2005](#)), including organizational satisfaction ([Laub, 1999](#)), safety practices ([Sarkus, 1996](#)), productivity ([Osborne, 1995](#)), and financial performance ([Melrose, 1998](#); [Ruschman, 2002](#)). In addition, ([Babakus et al., 2010](#)) studied 530 frontline bank employees in New Zealand and found that both customer orientation and servant leadership significantly reduce burnout and ultimately turnover intention. The results also showed that person-job fit mediates the influence of customer orientation and servant leadership on burnout and turnover intention. In a hospitality setting, a study of servant leadership analyzed the influence of servant leadership on employees' customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior and found that there was a positive relationship that was mediated by leader-member exchange ([Wu et al., 2013](#)). Furthermore, a different study by [Liden et al. \(2014\)](#) on 961 employees working in 71 restaurant chains found that the servant leadership approach has a positive impact on restaurant performance and employee job performance, creativity, and customer service behaviors and a negative impact on employee turnover intention. Also, a recent study by [Ling et al. \(2017\)](#) on 1132 employee-supervisor pairs from 80 departments in 16 star-level hotels in China found that servant leadership approach has positive effects on group trust climate and employee work outcomes such as organizational commitment, work engagement, and work performance.

However, despite many studies on leadership in hospitality settings, the findings cannot be aggregated to provide a complete understanding of leadership in the hospitality setting, and this may be because leadership studies in the hospitality context are still in the early stage of development ([Boyne, 2010](#)). For example, despite the increased use of the transformational leadership construct and several studies claiming that the concept has substantial validity for predicting a number of outcomes, including leader performance and effectiveness as well as employee satisfaction and motivation ([Harms and Credé, 2010](#)), some scholars have criticized the theory because of several ambiguities ([Bryman, 1992](#); [Yukl, 1999b](#)). For example, the definition of transformational is ambiguous because of the diverse components proposed by the theory. Also, the construct validity of the theory was doubted because of the overlapping content and high inter-correlation among the transformational behaviors. [Boyne \(2010\)](#) agreed and further mentioned that many transformational leadership studies in the hospitality

industry "have pursued a range of research questions without specifically building upon existing knowledge from previous hospitality leadership studies" (p. 18).

In addition, most leadership measures have been developed using leaders or managers as the subject, neglecting subordinates' perspective. Because employees are the most valuable assets of every organization, exploring and understanding their perspective of leadership is crucial. Studies have shown that most employees leave their job because of leadership issues within an organization ([Abbasi and Hollman, 2000](#); [Holtom et al., 2005](#)). Also, there has been a dearth of leadership studies within the small business context, including small independent restaurants, which has affected the development of leadership practices among small businesses ([Cope, 2011](#); [Cope et al., 2011](#); [Kempster and Cope, 2010](#); [Liden and Antonakis, 2009](#)). As a result, little is known about the characteristics of leaders of small independent restaurants and their impact on employees' performance.

2.3. Small restaurant businesses and their characteristics

Small businesses are known for their importance in creating jobs and helping grow the economies of most countries ([Legohérel et al., 2004](#)). However, unlike large businesses, management systems in small businesses are known to be unorganized and not well established because of limited resources, such as capital and human assets, which means that small business leaders can have difficulty managing their businesses ([Dawson, 2000](#); [Kirby, 2006](#)). Specifically, due to their size, small businesses do not have much time or capital for finding and hiring the right employees. As a result, to survive, they tend to hire employees who are under age 25 or over age 65 as their workforce with a high percentage of these employees having only a high school diploma, and these employees are most likely working in a service industry such as in restaurants ([Headd, 2000](#)).

The restaurant industry, especially small independently owned restaurants, is known for having characteristics such as hectic pace, high labor intensity, instability in employment, and a high level of employee turnover ([Kusluvan et al., 2010](#)). Unlike chain restaurants that have a system in place to help franchise owners tackle major issues such as human resources management (e.g., employee training, retention, satisfaction) and marketing (e.g., new products development, advertising), independent restaurants have very limited access to assistance in dealing with these issues, which causes owners or managers have to depend upon their expertise.

According to [Banki and Ismail \(2015\)](#), the main reason that small independent restaurant owners have for opening a restaurant is to fulfill human needs, such as to seek autonomy. Furthermore, due to the low entry barriers for the industry, a small independently owned restaurant is frequently funded by personal or family savings ([Ahmad, 2015](#); [Parsa et al., 2015](#); [Smith, 2011](#)). They also tend to perform most, if not all, of the leadership functions individually rather than collaboratively as large businesses such as chain restaurants do ([Shailer, 1993](#)). Small independent restaurant owners are also often required to be present at the restaurant on a daily basis to help run and control operations. Therefore, due to the uniqueness of the small independent restaurant businesses, which affects management styles, and a lack of leadership studies on small hospitality businesses, it is necessary to explore the leadership skills best suited for running a small independently owned restaurants. Additionally, there has been a dearth of leadership studies within small business contexts, including those in small independent restaurants, that has affected the development of leadership practices among small businesses ([Cope, 2011](#); [Cope et al., 2011](#); [Currie et al., 2009](#); [Kempster and Cope, 2010](#); [Liden and Antonakis, 2009](#)). As a result, little is known about the characteristics of leaders in small independent restaurants; thus, this study attempts to fill the substantial gap in this knowledge.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

A purposive sample population (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was sought using the following criteria to locate employees who worked at small independent restaurants: (a) at least 18 years old and (b) currently or previously employed at a small independent restaurant for at least six months. This study used the Small Business Administration's (SBA's) definition of small business: an independently owned and operated restaurant business that employs fewer than 500 employees. According to Parsa et al. (2015), about 93% of restaurants employ fewer than 50 people.

Participants were approached using several techniques to join one of several focus groups. Specifically, participants were recruited through a combination of snowball and convenience sampling techniques, such as sending announcements directly via e-mail, word-of-mouth, and flyers. Several instructors of hospitality management classes were asked for permission before distributing a recruitment letter via student email. Flyers were distributed to about 30 small independent restaurants in a town in the Midwestern United States. Restaurant owners were asked for permission to inform their employees of the study by placing a flyer(s) in an employee area or on a bulletin board. Participants who were recruited received \$20 as compensation for their time and transportation at the end of each focus group, which lasted about 1–2 hours.

Furthermore, for this study, a focus group was chosen as a technique for data collection because it helped participants share in-depth information about their perspectives on the characteristics of small independent restaurant leaders. Unlike one-on-one interviews, focus groups are known for their group dynamics that help make the type and scope of data collected deeper and richer through the social interaction between the participants (Chan, 2010; Kandasamy and Ancheri, 2009; Ritchie et al., 2013).

3.2. Participants

Sixteen participants who were at least 18 years old and currently or previously employed in a small independent restaurant for at least six months were recruited to participate in the study. Well-designed focus groups usually consist of between 6 and 12 participants and last between 1 and 2 h (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). However, when specific participants are integral to a situation (Greenbaum, 1998), such as in this case, those having had specific work experience in small independent restaurants and with a specialized knowledge to discuss (Kruger, 1994; Morgan, 1996; Morgan et al., 2013), three or four participants are sufficient to conduct a focus group. Hence, five focus groups with three or four participants in a group were formed for this study.

In detail, one focus group consists of four participants while another three focus groups each consist of three participants. However, the other focus group consists of only two participants, as one participant failed to attend the focus group meeting, and this was considered as a dyadic interview (Morgan et al., 2013). Despite there were only two participants, Morgan et al. (2013) mentioned that the interactions occurring between two participants during the interview process “creates a much greater similarity to focus groups” (p. 2). As one participant is sharing his or her point of view regarding a research topic, the other is extending what the first participant shares by sharing and/or comparing his or her point of view, which makes the process similar to that of a focus group. Hence, like in a focus group, the similarities and differences of both participants still give a researcher more in-depth information than a one-on-one interview. Also, a dyadic interview can be a more effective technique especially when two people come from and have experienced a similar situation, in this case, working at a small independent restaurant (Greenbaum, 1998). For this reason, these

Table 1
Demographic of Participants.

Characteristics	n	%
Gender		
Male	7	46.67
Female	8	53.33
Total	15	100
Age		
19	1	6.67
20	1	6.67
21	5	33.33
22	3	20.00
24	2	13.33
25	2	13.33
33	1	6.67
Total	15	100

two participants were considered integral to understanding work situations, and their dyadic interview was performed and considered in this study. The four focus groups with 13 participants and one dyadic interview with two participants yielded 151 typed, single-spaced pages of transcripts. The demographic information of the participants is available in Table 1.

3.3. Interview guide

The purpose of an interview guide is to help the researchers direct participants towards being more productive and engaging in group discussions (McLafferty, 2004). Researchers should arrange interview questions from general to specific (Kingry et al., 1990). The interview guide that was used was pilot-tested in a focus group by using four master's degree students studying hospitality management who had experience working in a restaurant. After receiving feedback from the participants in the pilot interview, eight major questions were identified for use with the real focus groups. The first four questions were general (Kingry et al., 1990), asking about the participants' intention to work in the restaurant industry, who was in charge (the leader) of the daily operations at the restaurants where they worked, their perceptions of a good leader for the restaurant industry, and the most important element that leaders in the restaurant industry need to have. Next, participants were asked specific questions regarding their perceptions of their leaders' personality and relationship with employees. During the focus group discussions, participants were also asked several follow-up and probing questions.

3.4. Data validation

To ensure the overall validity of the qualitative focus group data and the accuracy of the verbal accounts of the participants' experiences, each focus group discussion was recorded with the permission of the participants and fully transcribed. Despite this study only had four focus groups and one dyadic interview with a total of 15 participants, data saturation was greatly satisfied after conducting three focus groups. Compared to individual interviews, saturation of data is reached earlier in the focus groups, especially when focus groups are conducted using a relatively homogeneous population such as in this study (Greenbaum, 1998; Guest et al., 2017). In their study, Guest et al. (2017) further explained that 90% of all themes were discoverable within three to six focus groups. In fact, they were able to identify the most important themes in their study with only three focus groups. Hence, to further confirm the validity of the findings and to produce a credible set of data, saturation of our data was checked by continuously examining the existing data and conducting one more focus group (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Flinders, 1997). Then, to confirm the data analysis and further test the validity of the findings, participants were given the opportunity to review the themes that emerged from the interviews. This process of

member-checking helped to further validate the data by ensuring that they accurately reflected participants' experiences. Lastly, all data interviews were coded manually by two people, the authors, and three different doctoral students who were trained in the qualitative paradigm were asked to check and refine the analysis and categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

3.5. Data analysis

Data analysis was intended to answer the research questions concerning an effective leader and the characteristics of small independent restaurant leaders. Hence, data coding was applied for qualitative data analysis and thematic analysis was used with the text being divided into small units (phrase, sentence, or paragraph), each unit is assigned a label, and then each unit being grouped into codes (Creswell and Clark, 2011). The codes were then examined for patterns and organized into central themes across the individual cases and, to protect participants information, pseudonyms were used (Ayres et al., 2003; Nespor, 2000; Starks and Brown Trinidad, 2007).

4. Findings and discussion

The research questions were asked to determine an effective leader in small independently owned restaurants perceived by employees and the ideal characteristics for leadership at small independent restaurant business that the participants perceived. The findings answered both research questions through nine themes (respectful, compassionate, effective communicator, experienced, effective delegator, gives recognition, sociable, emotionally controlled, organized) emerged that revealed specific leadership qualities to help leaders in small independently owned restaurants to become more effective as reported by the participants (Tables 2–3).

4.1. Respectful

Being respectful was the first theme to emerge from the focus groups in regards to positive leadership characteristics for small restaurant owners, and it was considered to be one of the most important characteristics that would help leaders in small independently owned restaurants to become more effective. For this study, “respectful” was defined as a feeling of admiration, showing or having respect for all employees, including not talking down to employees, not looking down on employees, and treating employees fairly and of equal worth on a professional level. During the focus group, several participants shared their experiences of being treated both respectfully and disrespectfully at work by their leaders. For example, Mary, a 22-year-old female back-of-house employee, shared her boss's disrespectful behavior toward some employees. Mary stated:

He thinks he's a leader because he's the boss. And obviously we do what he tells us to do, but he's very pompous and he talks down to people, and he makes them feel small. Just, he has made me feel small so many times and he just treats people like they don't matter.

Table 2
Qualitative Research Questions and Themes.

Research Question	Themes
RQ1	Respectful
RQ2	Compassionate
How do employees perceive an effective leader in small independently owned restaurants?	Effective communicator
What ideal characteristics for leaders of small independently owned restaurants do employees perceive?	Experienced
	Effective delegator
	Gives recognition
	Sociable
	Emotionally controlled
	Organized

And that's not good, especially when you're working in a kitchen and putting out banquets that are like 500, 600 people. It's important that your staff is happy. But they're not going to be happy if you're talking down to them or talking to them like they're stupid or like they don't understand English or something. We had a girl who didn't really speak English very well so he would talk to her and she was younger, she was in high school and he would talk to her in this higher register voice, like you're talking to a baby.

A different participant in a different focus group, David, a 33-year-old male employee also shared the same idea and stated “in previous experiences I've had leaders that have been very verbally abusive and to a point where I just didn't respect them at all. When I lose respect, every thing goes down hill from there.”

The examples show that creating a respectful culture in an organization is important and can help improve a company's performance, especially companies in the hospitality industry, which are known for their high levels of employee turnover (Kusluvan et al., 2010). Mary and David's recollections of their experiences with several different bosses emphasize how being respectful to subordinates has an impact on restaurant operations and can reduce costs by reducing the turnover rate (Costello et al., 2011). This particular finding also supports an organizational justice theory, especially the interactional justice theory where it states that employees would be positively affected if they are treated with dignity and respect (Schermerhorn et al., 2004).

4.2. Compassionate

Being compassionate was the next positive characteristic to come out of the focus group data, and “compassionate” was defined as showing sympathy and concern for employees. During the discussions, several participants shared their experiences with leaders who showed compassion for their employees. For example, Samantha, a 19-year-old employee who worked as a server at a local restaurant, shared her experience of being harassed by a drunk customer. Samantha stated:

Once there was a guy, who was just kind of being disrespectful in our restaurant. He, didn't work for us, he was just a customer. But he was really drunk, and he was starting to get handsy with some of the waitresses. He, like, hit on me, he flirted with me and it was just kind of gross, and the manager kicked him out. And then the manager asked me, like, "Are you okay," "What happened?", like, "Is there anything I can do?" So, just talking about that was kind of a serious conversation, I guess.

Later in the discussion, Samantha further stated that “They just handled it really well, and I felt protected and cared for. And, I felt really safe in, like, a, kind of a sketchy situation.” She also added that “The owner did talk to me the next time I saw him and was like, ‘I heard about this, are you okay?’ and he told me that the customer is not allowed in here anymore.”

Samantha's experience was echoed by Cindy, a 21-year-old female waitress. One of her friends had a very similar experience where she was verbally abused by a customer. Unlike different owners where Cindy previously worked for did not care about the situation because the owners thought the customers were always right, this time the owner intervened and asked the customer to leave.

Samantha and Cindy's friend experiences show that how their leaders or managers' action made them feel safe in their workplace. As a workplace known for its vulnerability, restaurant employees are dependent upon their leaders (Ram, 2015). In addition to feeling safe at work, the response of their leaders could have a positive impact on their work performance as it could increase their self-esteem and positive feelings and help them care more about their job and that, in turn, could make them more productive (Fehr and Sprecher, 2009). As can be seen, being compassionate is very important for leaders in the restaurant industry. This particular characteristic could be related to one of

Table 3
Categories of Leadership Characteristics.

Category	Description	Descriptive Statement
Respectful	A feeling of admiration, showing or having respect for all employees.	Avoid “talking down” to employees
Compassionate	Showing sympathy and concern for employees.	“Put yourself in someone else’s shoes”
Effective Communicator	The way leaders communicate with their employees.	“A different tone on how things were asked to be done.”
Experienced	Having knowledge or skill in a particular field, especially a profession or job, gained over a period of time.	“The amount of knowledge and experience definitely makes the leader in the end.”
Effective Delegator	Placing employees in positions they are best suited for and empowering them to make decisions relating to the accomplishment of their tasks.	“I think it empowers the employees and gives them a sense of responsibility...”
Gives Recognition	The process of recognizing employees’ positive job performance at work.	“Definitely recognize a good job when a good job is done.”
Sociable	Willing to talk and engage in activities with other people; friendly.	“Owner and employee should be friendly.”
Emotionally Controlled	The ability to deal with, manage, express and control emotional states.	“Keep a cool head in really hectic situations.”
Organized	The ability to plan and accomplish things in an orderly fashion.	“Struggled keeping organized with the schedule.”

characteristics of transformational leaders, the individualized consideration. As stated by Avolio and Bass (1995), leaders with transformational approach tend to display more frequent individualized consideration by showing and giving support to subordinates. A different study also mentioned that the individualized consideration characteristic is essential for leaders to have as it would help followers to be motivated at work (Sarros et al., 2002).

4.3. Effective communicator

Being an effective communicator was the third theme to emerge in this study, and this emphasized the importance of the way that leaders communicate with their employees, especially in the hospitality industry where lack of communication is an example of a common managerial issue that increases the employee turnover rate (Brownell, 2010). Most participants agreed that communication style in an organization is crucial, especially in the restaurant business, which is known for its fast-paced work environment. Gary, a 24-year-old male back-of-house employee, shared his experiences with the head chef and the owner has different ways of communicating with employees. Gary stated:

The head cook that left had been there for years and had his crew established and was very efficient in turning out food fast and cleaning and had routines set, and so when he left, the owner tried to fill that void. But it wasn't the same. He has different methods. Different methods of communication. There's definitely a different tone on how things were asked to be done instead of before, a harsher tone. A more, get it done now, while before it was work at your own—make sure the job gets done but do it the right way, but since it's the owner now... they are a lot more nitpicky about how things get done.

During the interview, Gary further mentioned in detail how the owner persistently used a harsher tone when asking back-of-house employees to get a job done. Consequently, Gary explained, many employees decided to quit. Being a good communicator is undoubtedly crucial to every organization, especially for leadership, and these findings show that a leader's style of communication directly affected employee performances. The findings support a previous study Fairhurst (1993) that stated, “In choosing words that members accept as representations of actions and events, they become social constructs that members define as real” (p. 333). Especially since the nature of the work in the restaurant industry is uniquely known for having an unfavorable work environment for the reasons mentioned earlier, leaders in restaurants need to consciously choose their messages well and communicate with employees in a respectful manner.

Furthermore, in the example, Gary compared the way in which the two leaders communicated with their subordinates. Even though the head cook did not own a share of the restaurant, he had an influential

position in the business and was responsible for the back-of-house and was able to synchronize all related employees through an effective style of communication. Therefore, different styles of communication can influence employees' perceptions of a leader as either effective or ineffective.

4.4. Experienced

The next favorable characteristic for small restaurant leaders to have that emerged in this study was being experienced. “Experienced” for this study was defined as having experience or knowledge and skills in a particular field, especially a profession or job in the restaurant business that was gained over a period of time. Leaders with experience have been recognized in previous studies that demonstrate that having experience will help leaders develop leadership skills (McCall, 2004). Mary shared her experiences and stated:

And that's why he... he delegates really, really well and if someone doesn't understand something he'll walk them through it, and if someone's new he'll help them in whatever way they can and he just... he always gives compliments to people, he always just makes people feel really good about themselves. Especially if someone's feeling down and it doesn't even matter if it's someone in back of house or front of house. He does that with everybody. And it's just really amazing to work with someone who's been in this industry for years and years and years and is still so... connective. He connects with people on a personal level. He doesn't think that he's above them or anything like that. He just... he's great.

This example highlights that an experienced leader can handle a situation in a way that will have a significant impact on employee performance. A different participant also supported this idea and stated that “the amount of knowledge and experience definitely makes the leader in the end.” This statement is supported by previous studies reporting that experienced leaders can influence the work environment and thus are important in improving employee retention rates (Leach and McFarland, 2014). As low employee appreciation is common in the restaurant industry (Kusluvan et al., 2010), having work experience in the restaurant industry could help someone be a better leader because he or she understands the nature of the work, and the experience would help the leader be more confident in leading and motivating employees.

4.5. Effective delegator

Being an effective delegator of tasks in a restaurant was another topic that came up in the focus groups and reflects the fact that the restaurant environment is fast-paced and requires leaders to manage many tasks. Hence, delegating or placing employees in positions for which they are best suited and empowering them to make decisions related to the accomplishment of their tasks will help leaders in the

restaurant industry focus on other more important tasks. Many of the participants highlighted that being able to delegate work is another important characteristic that a leader needs to have. David, a 33-year-old male employee, shared his previous experiences working with leaders in the restaurant industry and shared:

“So, when a leader's supposed to be doing their job, when they're supposed to be delegating, when you have a team of 12–15 servers, then works a little different when you only have two or three. So, delegation becomes pretty important. And when that doesn't exist, then it just becomes a mad house and there's no organization. And then you kind of start wondering, why is this person a manager? Why is this person a leader when they're not doing anything?”

In a different interview, Laura, a 20-year-old female, shared the same idea with David of how being an effective delegator is important for a leader, especially in the restaurant industry. She talked about her boss's ability to delegate tasks to employees so that the restaurant would run more smoothly. Laura stated:

My boss was fairly good at delegating his tasks, so he hired what he called crew leaders, and crew leaders could be in charge of anything from opening the store to closing the store and counting the money at night, locking it up in a safe.

Also, Laura further mentioned that being able to delegate not only eases the leader's workload, it also makes employees feel empowered by giving them a sense of responsibility within the business. She shared that she felt empowered at the end of the night after counting the money and discovering that the restaurant did well even on a fairly slow night. David and Laura's statements are supported by previous studies that show that delegating tasks to employees gives them the autonomy to make decisions, which empowers them and, as a result, encourages them to perform better (Klein et al., 2006; Offermann and Hellmann, 1997; Sharma and Kirkman, 2015; Yukl, 1999a).

4.6. Gives recognition

The ability to give recognition to employees was another characteristic that leaders of small independent restaurants need that came up in this study, and this was defined as the process of recognizing the positive job performance of employees at work. Recognizing employees and giving them positive credit for their hard work rather than focusing on mistakes makes employees happy and engaged in their work. Participants agreed that recognizing employees for doing a good job makes employees feel appreciated. For example, 20-year-old Maggie shared her story on how her boss recognized her performance during the past year and wanted to raise her wage and stated that “I've been working there for about a year and they told me that they noticed how well I've been doing there and they wanted to give me a raise, so... I think that was something.” In a different story, a 25-year-old male employee, Brian shared that

he felt recognized when the owner gave him an unexpected bonus. He stated that “when I get the pay check he put another like hundred bucks to me saying that “I know you work hard. That's why I'm giving you little tips.” So he was really awesome.”

In this case, Maggie and Brian's company noticed their work and recognized their effort by increasing and giving extra dollars. A different participant echoed Maggie and Brian's sentiment and mentioned that leaders recognizing good job performance make employees feel valued at work. This theme is supported by numerous studies that show how recognizing employees for doing a good job increased their intrinsic motivation and had a positive impact on work performance (Zopiatis et al., 2014). The act of recognition also has been proved to improve organizational performance (Cho et al., 2006; Guthrie, 2001; Milman and Ricci, 2004; Moncarz et al., 2009; Walsh and Taylor, 2007). Also, this theme also supported by many motivational theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, especially the esteem level. When

employees receive recognition for their work, it will increase their self-esteem which later would have a positive impact on their work performance.

4.7. Sociable

Being sociable or willing to talk and engage in activities with employees was another category that emerged in this study. As stated earlier, jobs in the restaurant industry are unique and require significant interrelation between leaders, employees, and customers. When leaders can maintain positive human interrelationships by talking with and engaging in activities with other people, especially with employees, it creates a positive work environment. As a result, it helps employees feel more comfortable at work. It also has an impact on employee job performance, such as being sociable to customers. This finding is supported by previous studies indicating that leaders who are sociable make employees more satisfied at work and willing to put more effort into serving customers (Khuong and Nhu, 2015). Several participants stated that their leader considered them a friend rather than a subordinate from the first day that they were hired, and yet still maintained a professional manner. As Michael shared that “Like, as soon as I got hired, we just started randomly carrying a conversation. He didn't even consider me as an employee. He just considered me automatically as a friend.”

However, as shared by different participants such as Connie, a 25-year-old female employee, leaders should not be too friendly, and they must put some space between themselves and their subordinates so that employees will have some respect for the leader. Hence, as a service industry, being able to interact not only with customers but also with subordinates in a professional manner is very important for leaders because it makes subordinates feel comfortable and willing to work or engage more at work (Howell, 2017). Also, this finding supports the Blake and Moulton's managerial grid where the model shows that restaurant employees prefer to work with a people-oriented manager or leaders with sociable characteristics (Blake and Mouton, 1981).

4.8. Emotionally controlled

Being emotionally controlled was the next theme to emerge and was defined as the ability to deal with, manage, express, and control emotional states. Leaders expressing positive emotions can inspire and motivate employees while the expression of negative emotions, such as anger or panic, can have a negative impact on employee performance (Lewis, 2000). As the nature of the work in the restaurant industry can trigger some negative emotions, leaders in the restaurant business must be able to control their emotions, especially negative emotions. Several participants stated that being calm during rush times was very important because when the leaders could not control their emotions, it had a direct impact on their employees' work performance. As Mary shared:

It's really fast-paced, so... some people... you have to have a—the right attitude to work in a restaurant, either in front of house or back of house. Because it's really, really fast-paced you have to make sure that you keep a cool head in really hectic situations and be able to multitask really well. Some people can do it and some people just... can't.

Furthermore, another participant, Penny, added a narrative that further highlighted the

importance of leaders controlling their emotions. Penny shared that “If your leader's going to...

if he's going to freak out, everyone else is going to panic, and it'll just be like, “Oh, he's freaking out. Like, oh, why is he freaking out? I don't get it,” and then it's just—poof—chaos....”

John also added to the discussion and shared that “I agree, yeah,

definitely, keep your cool. Don't panic. Never panic. That—that should be like rule number one of the restaurant industry, like, when something's starting to go wrong, don't panic, that's not going to help."

Because of the stressful work environments in restaurants, every small independent restaurant leader needs to be able to control their emotions at work, especially during busy hours. Being able to deal with, manage, and control emotions is important for every leader. Studies have shown that leaders who cannot control their emotions tend to have a negative impact on employee work performance. Hence, this finding supported previous studies study stated that leaders negative emotional display had a significant and negative main effect on participant assessment of leader effectiveness compared to a more neutral emotional (Lewis, 2000). This finding also could relate to some theories on emotional intelligence such as a lack of emotional stability or high in neuroticism in the Big 5 personality traits. As mentioned in the theory, leaders who have a high score in neuroticism, they tend to be unstable emotionally (Zillig et al., 2002)

4.9. Organized

Being organized was the last theme that emerged in this study and was defined as the ability to plan and accomplish things in an orderly fashion and this characteristic of leadership is important for a leader in a small restaurant business. Similar to the previous theme, being organized could relate to another trait in the Big Five Personality Traits theory which is conscientiousness. When leaders have a high score in conscientiousness, they tend to be organized and like to spend time preparing, have a set schedule, prefer to finish tasks on time, and pay attention to details (Zillig et al., 2002). An example can be found from one of participants' story, Britney, who shared that "The first day, I was training during parents' weekend, or like Dad's weekend or something, so it was just so crowded, and they didn't teach me how to use the machine. I mean, it's basically like "learn as you go." As a result, it will have an impact on the company's performance.

Furthermore, Britney also mentioned that the high employee turnover rate at the restaurant where she worked might be due to the owner's leadership, specifically in how they train employees at work. When leaders are more organized in managing their businesses, especially as related to their employees, such as in creating work and training schedules, employees tend to be more engaged at work. Leaders can be better organized if they better understand the work situation, identify tasks, and assign tasks to the right employees on a daily basis (Boella and Goss-Turner, 2013). This is supported by previous studies that have shown that being organized, keeping employee work schedules organized, and having a training plan for new or current employees are as aspects of being organized that can have a positive impact on employee performance (Herman et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2012).

5. Conclusion

Numerous studies have been conducted on leadership, yet the majority of these studies have used large companies and have neglected small businesses, especially small independent restaurants owned by an individual(s) who works at the property daily. Consequently, the development of leadership practices among small businesses, such as small independent restaurants, is limited because considerably less time has been spent discussing leadership approaches within an appropriate setting. Hence, this paper has attempted to address the gap in knowledge by attempting to understand effective leaders and the ideal characteristics for the leadership of small independent restaurants as portrayed by their employees. As a result, nine themes were provided by participants that revealed specific leadership qualities to help leaders in small independently owned restaurants to become more effective as reported by the participants. According to the findings, among the many characteristics, being respectful, compassionate, and effective

communicator were found to be the three most important behaviors that a leader needed to demonstrate. As a "people" industry, having some work experience in the restaurant industry was also found to be an important attribute that leaders need to have. This work experience could help leaders understand the industry better and help them delegate work and recognize employees, which were the next two important elements that a leader needs to possess. Furthermore, being sociable, able to control emotions, and organized were the last three characteristics that leaders of the small independent restaurant needed to possess and demonstrate.

5.1. Implications for practice

The main purposes of this study were to explore the ideal characteristics for small independent restaurant leaders to become an effective leader from their employees' perspective. This study will help academics and practitioners understand several characteristics of small independent restaurant leaders as voiced by their employees.

Previous studies have argued that employees are indeed an important asset to any company (Cho et al., 2006). Therefore, since the restaurant industry is known for its high turnover rate, the results of this study suggest that the leaders of small restaurants need to fully understand how, for example, being more respectful to employees and providing them with support will reduce the rate of employee turnover, which in turn will help the restaurant lower training costs and increase services. For this reason, small acts such as not talking down to employees, being present, and helping employees prepare and serve food or clean tables during regular and rush times will help employees feel more appreciative toward their leaders. Giving employees more credit for their hard work rather than pointing out errors is another important means for employers to use to increase the number of employees who intend to stay at their jobs.

5.2. Implications for theory

Despite the many leadership theories that have been devised, this study helps researchers better understand the ideal characteristics needed for leaders to become an effective leader of small independently owned businesses in the hospitality industry based on the perceptions of their employees. These specific characteristics can be found in the research findings where these employees tend to have different preferences for leader characteristics as compared to the main current leadership theories. For example, unlike the characteristics of leaders using a transformational leadership approach who are known for being charismatic, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (García-Morales et al., 2012; Judge and Piccolo, 2004), findings in this study have demonstrated that being respectful was the most prominent characteristic that a leader needed to have. Also, despite the nature of the work in the restaurant industry being considered unpleasant (Barron et al., 2007; Kusluvan, 2003; Kusluvan et al., 2010), the research findings emphasized that leaders employing the positive characteristics discussed in this study would help improve their employees' performance.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Several limitations of this study should be addressed. First, the sample size of the qualitative study was relatively small and collected from a relatively homogenous sample. Also, according to their age range of 19 to 33 years of age with only one participant with the age of 33, the participants were considerably young. Hence, if the data were collected from participants over 33 years old and/or having more work experience, the study could yield different results. Also, the findings in this study were only from employees' perspective and the model should not be identified and generalized as a full competency model.

However, despite these aforementioned limitations, future research

can be conducted through a similar study using a different method of data collection to decrease challenges in finding the right time and place for the focus groups, which commonly occurs in a focus group study (Then et al., 2014). Therefore, by applying or combining different types of data collection for the qualitative portion of the study, such as individual interviews and observations and collecting a larger sample, a study may discover more interesting findings. Also, collecting data from owners or leaders and comparing the results with data from employees might result in more robust findings. Future studies may also consider testing the characteristics found in this study by developing a leadership construct and quantitatively testing the construct for a generalization effect.

Appendix A. – Focus Group Protocol

1. Focus Group Introduction

- Thank you for agreeing to be part of this focus group and we appreciate your willingness to participate. You have been asked to participate in a focus group about leadership in the restaurant industry. You can choose whether or not to participate in the focus group and stop at any time. There are no right or wrong answers to the focus group questions. We want to hear many different viewpoints and would like to hear from everyone. We hope you can be honest even when your responses may not be in agreement with the rest of the group.

2. Introductions

- Moderator; assistant moderator

3. Purpose of focus groups

- The reason we are having these focus groups is to find out your perception of leadership in the restaurant business.
- We need your input and we want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us.

4. Ground rules

- We want you to do the talking.
- We would like everyone to participate. I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.
- In respect for each other, we ask that only one individual speak at a time in the group and that responses made by all participants be kept confidential
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Every person's experiences and opinions are important.
- Speak up whether you agree or disagree.
- We want to hear a wide range of opinions.
- What is said in this room stays here.

5. We will be tape recording the focus group interview

- We want to capture everything you have to say.
- Although the focus group will be tape recorded, your responses will remain anonymous and no names will be mentioned in the report. You will remain anonymous.

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