

The bill is \$113.58. Bob hands his debit card to his server. “I’ll be right back with your card, sir,” a thin girl with light skin and dark hair says. She swipes the card in the Point of Service machine. Then she waits. “Shoot, I need to get those drinks for table 62,” the server thought to herself. “This card’s not going through. I can’t stand at the computer all day and wait for this thing.” A manager walks by, and says, “I need runners in the kitchen.” A guest wonders up to Jennifer, and says, “can you find my server? He’s the guy with glasses and a goatee.” From the corner of her eye, Jennifer sees a small child knock over a large frozen strawberry margarita, sending it spilling all over the table and his mother’s lap . She runs over with a stack of napkins. Table 53, ground zero of the margarita mess, is not one of Jennifer’s, but when stuff like this happens, everyone is expected to help out as quickly as possible. Jennifer is distracted. Though she can usually multitask well, and is good at prioritizing her steps, tonight is busy, and she has five tables. The every day goings on of a high-volume casual dining restaurant such as the Applebee’s in Turnersville New Jersey serve as the chaotic backdrop of this scene. “Back to the task at hand,” Jennifer says to herself.

Jennifer swipes the debit card again. It clears. The slip prints out for \$113.58, and she scampers back to the table to give Bob his debit card and his receipt so he can sign it. “Here you go, sir,” Jennifer says. “ I just need the ‘merchant copy’ signed, if you would. The ‘guest copy’ is for you. Thank you very much. Come back to see us again.” Bob and his wife reply, “Thank you very much, we will.” Two slips print out again at the computer. A merchant copy and a guest copy. They are for \$113.58. Jennifer should

have waited another minute for the first transaction to clear, but in her haste, she double charged Bob. Another server needs to print six separate checks for his table with six people. After that, a server prints out a sales report, detailing how many items they have sold, and for what value. The second set of receipts for \$113.58 are lost in the shuffle, and are accidentally thrown away. Those receipts are for the first transaction that Jennifer tried to consummate for Bob's table. Bob has been charged twice for the single meal that he and his family have enjoyed, and the server has no knowledge of her mistake.

"Hello, this is Anthony. May I help you?" Anthony Frezza, one of the five managers that work at the Applebee's in Turnersville, says. "Yes, I believe you can," a voice replies. "My name is Bob Campbell. I was in your restaurant on Friday, and was charged twice for my meal." Anthony replies, "I'm sorry to hear that, sir. I will cancel the extra transaction in my computer, but it will take three days for the bank to clear it." Bob Campbell was annoyed. "Three days? You're telling me you can't fix this sooner?" Anthony replies, "I'm sorry, sir, there's nothing else I can do about this. It is in the bank's hands now. Let me take down your information, and next time you come in, I can buy your family a meal to make up for this inconvenience." Bob Campbell replies, "this is not working for me." We'll pick this story up in a little while. Things like this happen all the time in a restaurant. The old saying, "the customer is always right" really rings true in the food service business, even if the customer is wrong.

In the restaurant business, sometimes, everything goes as planned. Sometimes, not so much. Because of this, there's no such thing as a typical day. One day can run smoothly. Everyone will show up for work, and on time. One these days, the restaurant

will not run out of anything. During these days, servers don't make mistakes. They don't forget to ring in an order for a particular table. On good days, the cooks don't burn steaks. One these days, hosts don't misquote wait times, and are spot-on with their estimations. Most importantly, on typical days, the restaurant does not receive unexpected "visitors" for inspections from Corporate Headquarters. With so many things going on, anything can go wrong, at any time, for any reason.

Anthony Frezza, the spitting image of Corey Feldman, has been in the business for more than 15 years. He's seen a lot. Sometimes, everything goes as planned, and the restaurant doesn't face any problems. Other times, when the you-know-what hits the fan, managers have to quickly switch gears to become conflict negotiators. "It's important to put out fires before they happen," Frezza says. "I think it's best to solve problems before they become problems. In this business, you really need to act instead of reacting. You can't just let things get out of control."

Everyone knows that restaurants can be stressful places. Frezza doesn't deny this. Instead, he seeks to make shifts go as smoothly as possible. "You need to surround yourself with good people," Frezza says. "You need to have your aces in places. I know that sounds clichéd, but it's definitely true when you're trying to run a successful restaurant." Restaurants are competitive. Servers and bartenders work off of tips, and managers are frequently facing an uphill battle when writing the schedule for servers and bartenders. Not all shifts are equal, but then again, not all servers or bartenders are equal. Night shifts in general are generally more lucrative than day shifts. Weekend night shifts are more desirable than weekday night shifts, and a chance to "close" the restaurant is the Holy Grail. While a typical lunch shift would yield a server \$50--\$75, a

weekend night close can yield over \$200. Bartenders make more, and in some restaurants, the sky's the limit for their tip-share. It is understandable then, why the competition for prime serving and bartending shifts are fierce. Managers constantly have to balance what is fair with what will allow the restaurant to run most efficiently with the 40 hours a week cap on hours that is mandated in most corporate restaurants. Frezza says, "You need to have strong people where they need to be. I'll have the same people close every night if I have to." He continues, "you have to take care of the people that take care of you."

For a restaurant manager like Frezza, running the business efficiently is only part of the challenge. When something goes awry, and the food does not get to the table in a timely manner, or when it is unsatisfactory to the Guest, the manager is expected to make an appearance. Many casual dining restaurants call customers "Guests", in attempt to make them feel more welcome. While it's impossible to make everyone happy, you can often do well for most of your Guests. "It's all about how you approach the problem," Frezza says. "If you approach the Guests and appear that you don't want to deal with the problem, they will notice this. Body language is important. It's important to have an open mind when dealing with angry customers and you can usually make them happy," Frezza says.

Stuff happens. Whether a server made a mistake ringing in the order, or if the cook forgot to begin cooking the item, the result is the same: the Guest is not served to the standard that is expected by the restaurant, and something needs to be done to rectify the problem. The latter actually happens quite frequently, especially if you are trying to cook 20 steaks at once. Sometimes, in the chaos, cooks forget to "drop" (restaurant lingo for

beginning to prepare an item on an order) the 21st steak. Either way, the manager is left to deal with the problem, or else risk that the unhappy Guest will not return. “I tell the people that I’d rather send the order out late than send it out incorrect,” Frezza says. “People usually appreciate that. Sure you get a jerk sometimes, but not all the time.”

Despite the various skills that are necessary for a restaurant manager to be successful, some people don’t appreciate their services, or their skills. “I hate when people tell me they’re going to get a ’real job’,” Frezza says. “This is a real job. It can be extremely difficult, but it can also pay very well.” Managers may face this from Guests that talk down to them, or from college kids that work under them. “This is one of the more difficult jobs around,” Frezza says. “You need to have all sorts of skills, including people skills, to be successful.” Frezza says, “Service is important, whether it’s in a restaurant, or selling anything else. If I buy insurance, and I get a bad deal on my premium, I’m not being served well. Even the president serves the people, or at least he’s supposed to. Everyone serves other people in some capacity,” Frezza says.

Back to the problem of Bob Campbell and the server snafu. “Sir, I wish there was something else I could do about this, but I can’t,” Anthony said. Bob Campbell replied, “I don’t understand why this is so difficult. I just wanted to pay my bill. I didn’t want to deal with this headache. Is there a supervisor or area director I can talk to?” Bob Campbell asked. “My General Manager is not here, but she will be here tomorrow morning,” Anthony said. “You can talk to her if you want, but she will tell you the same thing. I’m sorry.” Bob Campbell replied, “No, I’m sorry. I’m being a jerk. You have been nothing but nice to me. Don’t worry about the free meal. You’re not paid enough to deal with jerks like me. Let me have the last word: ‘Thank you Anthony for fixing the

problem, I will see you soon.” Anthony Frezza was shocked, but it showed him something: he was right. Frezza says, “it’s all about taking care of people.” Frezza says, “you can’t make everyone happy, but that doesn’t mean that I won’t try.”