

## **Crisis Management and Organizational Culture in Restaurant Resilience and Longevity: A Case Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This case study investigates the intersection of crisis management and organizational culture within restaurant resilience and longevity. The research aims to explore the pivotal role played by a restaurant's capacity to navigate crises and adapt to unforeseen challenges in shaping its overall resilience and organizational culture. The chosen focal point for this investigation is the "Restaurant Group SJ," a privately owned restaurant group in southern New Jersey. Through an in-depth analysis of this case, the study seeks to uncover insights that contribute to a broader understanding of effective crisis management strategies during COVID-19 and their influence on cultivating a resilient and enduring organizational culture within the dynamic and competitive landscape of the restaurant industry. This research offers practical implications for restaurant practitioners seeking to fortify their establishments against uncertainties while fostering a sustainable and vibrant organizational culture.*

### **KEYWORDS**

Organizational Culture, Crisis Management, COVID-19, Hospitality, Restaurant Industry, Management

### **INTRODUCTION**

Society is complexly merged with culture, a fundamental force that binds individuals together. Music preferences, clothing styles, and even a collective's political and philosophical viewpoints are dictated by this pervasive influence. Cultures are not merely shared; they possess a depth and stability that shapes societal norms. Yet, culture extends beyond the societal realm, leaving a permanent mark on organizations, irrespective of their scale. Organizational culture, a guiding force, defines an organization's "modus operandi" and influences how its members interpret and respond to events within and beyond its confines (Martin, 2006). It is essential to explore the fundamental principles of organizational culture in the restaurant industry, outlining its essence, significance, formation process, and the diverse array of organizational cultures that exist to manage crises most effectively.

Whether opening a new restaurant or developing one, building a firm restaurant culture and brand is critical to long-term success. However, as a business grows, maintaining a restaurant brand can become more of a challenge for operators. In this cultural audit, "The Restaurant

Group SJ” represents its organizational restaurant culture through its growth and innovation during 20 years of operating restaurants on the Jersey Shore. The group’s restaurant culture and brand guide strategic business decisions, impacting their target customers' menu, pricing, decor, and hiring strategy. This particular Restaurant Group served as an excellent example of crisis risk management during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, saving its employees' jobs and ensuring their safety while staying intact, profitable, and serving the local community.

**Issue:**

The outcome of COVID-19 has emphasized the importance of a comprehensive reevaluation, resetting, and enhancement of organizational culture within restaurant settings.

**Problem Statement:**

"The restaurant industry is facing a distinct decline in its organizational culture, characterized by diminished employee engagement, increased turnover, and a visible shift in the quality of customer service (Jones, 2023). This issue poses a significant threat to the resilience and longevity of the restaurant. It demands a thorough examination of the factors contributing to the decline of organizational culture and the development and implementation of targeted strategies to revitalize and reinforce a positive and cohesive culture. Addressing this problem is essential to protecting the restaurant's reputation, retaining talent, and ensuring sustained success in the highly competitive and dynamic restaurant industry."

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

“The organizational culture is a powerful force that influences the overall health, performance and sustainability of a restaurant” (Deakin, 2015).

**Organizational Culture through the lens of Hospitality**

Numerous definitions abound for organizational culture, with scholars conceptualizing it as the approach an organization employs to achieve its goals, problem-solving mechanisms, or a deeply rooted set of values influencing the behavior of group members (Martin, 2006). In reality, organizational culture encompasses all these dimensions, constituting an incorporation of shared values, symbols, behaviors, and assumptions within an organization. But in the restaurant setting, it is likely to be encapsulated by the phrase "the way we do things around here" (Martin, 2006).

Organizational culture encompasses the values, beliefs, behaviors, and practices that define the identity of a given organization. Within the hospitality industry, organizational culture is pivotal in molding the guest experience, fostering employee engagement, and determining the overall prosperity of the enterprise (Liyandara, 2023).

In the people-oriented realm of the hospitality industry, employees play a fundamental role in providing outstanding service to guests. The organizational culture of a hotel, restaurant, or any other hospitality establishment holds substantial influence over the conduct of employees and the resulting guest experience. Liyandara asserts that a strong organizational culture can inspire employees, enhance job satisfaction, and ultimately elevate guest satisfaction and loyalty (2023).

In hospitality organizational culture, dedication to service excellence is crucial. To stay competitive, hospitality businesses must consistently deliver high-quality service to guests. This emphasis on service excellence is integral to the organization's values, beliefs, and behaviors. For instance, a hotel prioritizing personalized service may actively seek employees with a customer-centric mindset and invest in training programs to enhance their service skills (Martin, 2006).

Another vital facet of hospitality organizational culture is teamwork, especially in hotel or restaurant settings where employees from diverse departments collaborate to ensure a positive guest experience. Cultivating a culture of collaboration and mutual respect can create a positive work environment, fostering improved communication among employees (Deakin, 2015). This positive dynamic often translates into enhanced guest experiences, as employees are more inclined to collaborate to address challenges and provide exceptional service.

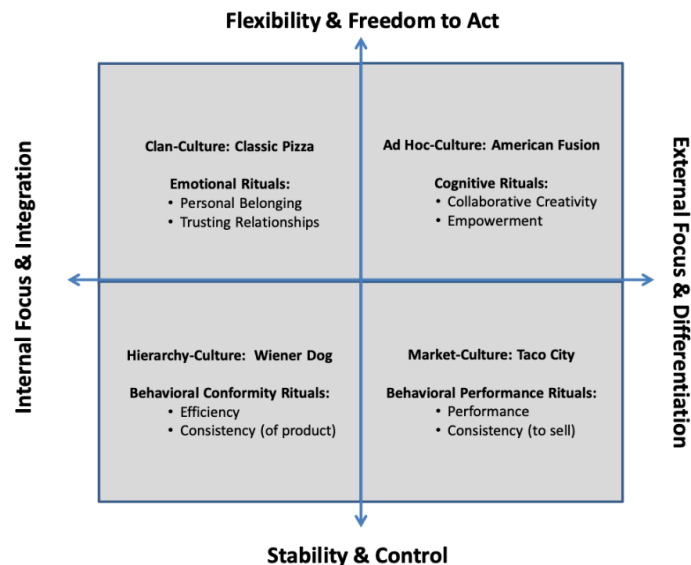
Employee engagement and retention are also influenced by organizational culture in the hospitality sector (Liyandara, 2023). Employees who feel valued and supported are likelier to engage actively in their roles and remain committed to the organization's success. This, in turn, contributes to higher employee retention rates, as individuals are more inclined to stay with an organization that recognizes their contributions and offers growth opportunities.

### **Types of Organizational Culture**

In his research, Martin (2006) divides the organizational culture into three components — artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions — which provide a comprehensive perspective to the reader. The author claims that artifacts, the most visible elements, may challenge outsiders to grasp their meanings fully. Over time, artifacts acquire symbolic significance, embodying the organization's values through a realization process.

The restaurant sector is characterized by specific aspects, such as high turnover and low pay, making it an appropriate subject for examination through a cultural learning lens (Madera et al., 2013). While research indicates that organizations may adhere to various values like quality, value, expectations, and loyalty, customer service stands out as a prevalent one (Koutroumanis et al., 2012). Despite being part of a customer-service-centric industry, individual restaurants differ in their values as they seek to distinguish themselves from competitors. This implies that restaurants operate based on distinct core “rituals” that signify a variety of types of organizational cultures (Figure. 1. Rituals in Types of Organizational Cultures, Martin, 2006):

**Figure 1**  
**Rituals in Types of Organizational Cultures**



The clan culture is situated in the top left quadrant of the matrix, representing a familial environment within an organization. This culture centers around friendship and loyalty values, displaying minimal concern for external competition. Businesses embodying clan culture are internally focused, emphasizing integration over competition. Flexibility takes precedence over control in such organizations (Lund, 2003).

In the top right quadrant, the adhocracy culture is characterized by a more external focus. Organizations with adhocracy cultures prioritize innovation and employee empowerment. These businesses are responsive to customer feedback, often leading to periodic changes in offerings, such as a restaurant altering its menu. Adhocracy cultures maintain flexibility versus control, akin to clan culture, but may be more willing to take risks (Deakin, 2015).

The market culture in the bottom right quadrant mirrors adhocracy in its external focus but differs in its inclination towards control rather than flexibility. Competition among employees is leveraged to drive results, and a more hierarchical structure with titles is commonplace. Business market cultures are typically goal-oriented and emphasize productivity (Lund, 2003).

In the bottom left quadrant, hierarchy culture is internally focused, akin to clan culture. However, hierarchy cultures adopt a more controlling approach, like market culture, eschewing the flexibility seen in clans or adhocracy. The control manifests through established operating procedures typical of a hierarchical structure (Lund, 2003). In a restaurant setting, this might result in infrequent menu changes.

Each organizational cultural framework contributes to forming shared core values that bind the company together (Lund, 2003). The interaction dynamics among employees and between employees and customers hinge on how the organizational culture is established. While existing

literature explores different rituals and organizational cultures, there remains a gap in understanding how various rituals serve as learning mechanisms across diverse cultures.

### **Why the Culture Within Organization Is Important**

“The culture within an organization is very important, playing a large role in whether it is a happy and healthy environment in which to work. In communicating and promoting the organizational ethos to employees, their acknowledgment and acceptance of it can influence their work behavior and attitudes. When the interaction between the leadership and employees is good, the latter will make a greater contribution to team communication and collaboration, and will also be encouraged to accomplish the mission and objectives assigned by the organization, thereby enhancing job satisfaction,” (Tsai, 2011).

The results prove the hypothesis by establishing a strong correlation between job satisfaction and leadership behavior and organizational culture and leadership behavior and job satisfaction. The researcher found that leadership behavior significantly influences job satisfaction; some factors at the organizational level, like culture, also affect job satisfaction (Tsai, 2011). Additionally, since the study was done in a hospital setting, it was found that hospital administrators should be concerned with creating an environment where their subordinates work as a team toward providing quality care. Leadership support and encouragement, trust, and a clear vision consistent with their behavior make it possible for the leaders to convince the subordinates to acknowledge their collective imagination, enhancing job satisfaction.

This article's findings suggest collaboration is vital for employee job satisfaction and acknowledgment. Teamwork is essential in bringing people together to solve a problem collectively (Tsai, 2011). Thus, most people would prefer working in a collaborative workplace, where they might feel more productive. On the other hand, collaboration results from an excellent organizational culture, consistent with the study's findings. However, this could be a hypothesis that can be further tested. Since the relationship between leadership and organizational culture has been established, it would be essential to focus future research on the impact of organizational culture on job satisfaction. Yet, the organizational culture is broad; hence, the study should be narrowed to more minor aspects of organizational culture (Tsai, 2011). Additionally, the study only used questionnaires to collect and analyze their data to inform the conclusions. Data collection could have been more expounded upon, such as conducting interviews to collect detailed qualitative data. Also, observation could have helped capture employees' behaviors, which should be consistent with their level of satisfaction.

### **COVID-19's Impact on Hospitality Industry and Crisis Management**

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic reached the United States, prompting nationwide shelter-in-place orders that significantly disrupted the U.S. economy, resulting in a substantial 22% to 60% decline in the national gross domestic product (Lippert, Furnari & Kriebel, 2021). The service industry, a significant workforce sector with approximately 13.5 million restaurant-related jobs before the pandemic, was disproportionately affected by this economic downturn. By April 2020, unemployment rates in the leisure and hospitality industries skyrocketed to as high as 39.3% (Lippert, Furnari & Kriebel, 2021). The food service industry saw a staggering loss of

nearly 3.1 million jobs, with over 110,000 restaurants either permanently closed or projected to close due to the pandemic's economic repercussions (Jones, 2023).

The widespread impact of the pandemic and its economic consequences has led to unprecedented levels of occupational stress and adverse mental health outcomes (Jones, 2023). While 8 out of 10 people reported experiencing stress before the pandemic, recent reports indicate that as many as 94% of workers are grappling with stress (Lippert, Furnari & Kriebel, 2021). Workplace stress, a significant factor in 80% of occupational injuries, has led to workers with high stress experiencing 46% higher healthcare expenditures, contributing to an estimated annual loss of \$200 billion in absenteeism, lost productivity, and healthcare costs (Lippert, Furnari & Kriebel, 2021).

Numerous studies have linked occupational stress in the food service industry to excessive workloads, lack of job control, and variable pay and schedules (Lippert, Furnari & Kriebel, 2021). With mass layoffs and increased job insecurity, the pandemic has further intensified these stressors (Lippert, Furnari & Kriebel, 2021). A significant 75% of frontline workers reported negative impacts on their mental health due to the pandemic, and as the economy gradually reopened, occupational stress among frontline workers in the restaurant industry continued to rise (Jones, 2023). This can be attributed, in part, to confusion surrounding recommended health and safety protocols and the inconsistent enforcement of those measures. The lack of attention to workplace stress in general has contributed to adverse mental health effects in restaurant workers (Jones, 2023).

Accordingly, due to COVID-19's impact on the hospitality industry, there are some root causes and consequences formed within the organizational culture setting (Table 1.):

	<b>Root Cause:</b>	<b>Consequences:</b>
<b>Economic Impact:</b>	The severe economic impact of the pandemic, including lockdowns and restrictions, has led to financial strains on hospitality businesses.	Organizations adopted cost-cutting measures, impacting employee morale and service quality.
<b>Operational Modifications:</b>	Necessitated changes in operational procedures to comply with health and safety regulations during the pandemic.	Changes led to shifts in the traditional organizational culture, affecting employee routines and customer experiences (Jones, 2023).
<b>Employee Health Safety:</b>	Concerns for the health and well-being of employees due to the risk of virus transmission (Jones, 2023).	The organizational culture evolved to prioritize employee safety, potentially impacting operational efficiency and service levels.
<b>Remote Work and Technology Adoption:</b>	Increased reliance on remote work and technology to adapt to changing circumstances. Workers quit restaurant jobs to have more flexibility.	This shift impacted the traditional in-person, service-oriented culture prevalent in hospitality. Restaurant workers quit their jobs and chose different careers (Jones, 2023).

### **Consequences to the Various Stakeholders** (Testa, Sipe, 2011):

**Employees:** Changes in organizational culture may have affected employee job satisfaction, engagement, and well-being. Increased stress and uncertainty can be prevalent.

**Customers:** Altered service procedures may have impacted the guest experience. Changes in the culture may influence customer perceptions of the brand and service quality.

**Shareholders/Owners:** Financial strains may have affected profitability. Shifts in organizational culture could impact the brand's reputation and long-term sustainability.

**Suppliers:** Changes in operations and financial strains may have affected relationships with suppliers. Delays or disruptions in the supply chain may impact service quality.

**Communities:** Organizational culture changes may have impacted the community's perception of the hospitality establishment's role and contribution, especially if there are layoffs or closures.

**Regulatory Establishments:** Compliance with health and safety regulations may have led to increased scrutiny. Adaptations in organizational culture may necessitate adjustments in regulatory compliance.

### **DISCUSSION**

Having explored the foundational concepts and insights from existing literature on organizational culture, resilience, and longevity in the hospitality industry, bridging these theoretical perspectives with real-world applications is essential. By aligning theoretical frameworks with the lived experiences and strategic decisions of Restaurant Group SJ, the case study aims to extract actionable lessons that can guide organizations in fostering resilience and longevity, particularly in times of crisis.

#### **Restaurant's Philosophy of Success in Restaurant Group SJ: Organization and History**

In the '70s, G.T. opened a small diner in the South Jersey Shore City, serving breakfast and lunch for 34 years; in 2002, he sold it to his son-in-law. Since then, the owner and the current president of the Restaurant Group SJ has transformed what was once a quaint corner diner serving breakfast and window-service lunch into a local legend for locals and visitors alike. The cornerstone of the Restaurant Group's collection, The Original Place is now known worldwide thanks to a visit from Guy Fieri and his show "Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives." Still, the restaurant remains committed to providing the community with fresh and flavorful food, plentiful portions, and fair prices throughout the year (restaurantgroup.com, 2022).

The president revealed that "the mission of the Group is to explore the creativity of the world and build up credibility through consistency" (personal communication, October 30, 2022). The real estate portfolio started in 2014, ranging from 700-2,000 sq. ft. Revenue as a Group approaching \$10 million in sales and net value, including real estate and business value, is about \$5 million to \$6 million (personal communication, October 30, 2022).

The Group's philosophy builds on loyalty and trust, the values the Group seeks the most:

“The Restaurant Group is an organized for-profit business providing food service to its consumers, where 23 different LLCs operate under the trust. There are two ways of doing business: growth and refinement. For the first ten years, since 2002, we were doing a refinement; when we opened up the second restaurant, it turned into growth. Growth costs money; growth takes the life out of a person. It is not for everyone.” (personal communication, October 30, 2022)

### **Restaurant Group’s Structure**

The Restaurant Group SJ counts 140 employees, including the president, vice president, three principals, and six managing partners. The Group’s restaurant organizational chart is an organized chain of command. A general restaurant organizational chart: The business belongs to the president, and subsequently, each restaurant belongs to the owners; they will make all significant restaurant decisions. The owners and executive chefs control the day-to-day operations. In the Group, business owners usually make daily decisions based on their “gut and instinct” (personal communication, October 30, 2022). Senior servers are shift leaders for their leadership qualities and experience. Since the Restaurant Group hires no managers, shift leaders are responsible for the ongoing shift and daily management operations. The Group owners meet each Tuesday to discuss operational standards with all partners (personal communication, October 30, 2022). Regarding creativity, ideas, or things that need to be put into motion to benefit the Group, the president is responsible, added the president (personal communication, October 30, 2022).

### **Organizational Culture and Pandemic’s Crisis Management**

The president described the company’s management style as “commitment-oriented, empowering, strategizing, and good-deal-makers” (personal communication, October 30, 2022). Currently, the Restaurant Group focuses on tech start-ups, authentic cookbooks, and podcasts on the YouTube channel – creative outlets based around the foundation of daily operations and owning restaurants.

“Organizational culture can be a competitive advantage to the extent of how employees learn underlying core values” (Deakin, 2015, p.1). Every restaurant has its culture; it is who that person wants to be. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Group’s sense of community and focus on employee wellness became even more critical. None of the four main restaurants’ locations were closed during the pandemic. Group management leaders set up the Buy One - Get One Free system, plus a 15% gratuity to the orders to keep employees working. As a result, servers were making even more money than if the restaurants were usually doing business. The president of the Group points out: “If our profit margins are 20% and the organization is going BOGO, that means it loses 30% every day. At the end of the day, I care about my employees, and I lead by example” (personal communication, October 30, 2022). Many competitors did not comprehend this move and lost their businesses and workers, while the Business regrouped and became more potent.

According to the Competing Values Framework (CVF), a clan organizational culture type is characterized as a "family-type organization" (Cameron & Quinn, 1999, p. 36). In this type of organizational culture, there is a pronounced emphasis on a collective identity, denoted by a sense of "we" rather than "I." Clan cultures are distinguished by a high degree of autonomy,



cultivating a humane work environment, and promoting loyalty, commitment, and active participation. Scholars such as Koutroumanis and Alexakis (2009) assert that a clan organizational culture that prioritizes a familial atmosphere holds particular relevance in the restaurant service industry. Within clan cultures, employees are integrated into the organization's fabric, and informal lines of communication are highly valued.

Within four years in the organization, employees had made personal observations about the organizational culture of this Group. The group's collaborative (clan) culture emphasizes teamwork, togetherness, and market culture, which reveals a high-pressure and goal-focused environment (Deakin, 2015, p. 9-10).

Referring to Shein's model, the artifacts play a crucial role. The company corresponds to the type "A" organization where everyone has to meet dress code standards and be responsive and respectful to their superiors (managemetstudyguide.com, n.d.). In the meantime, every employee, regardless of their level in the hierarchy, possesses equal benefits and rights, which builds underlying solid beliefs in the KRG. The philosophy of management is ruled by "give to get," which is why loyal employees more often become the managing partners of the Group over time. The interior and ambiance of the restaurants are modern, classy, minimalistic, and pleasant. Every venue has an authentic playlist, a light setting, and no more than 15 tables in the dining room. The signature addition is the open-concept kitchen of all the restaurants in the Group. This way, customers can satisfy their curiosity, find out what is cooking in professional kitchens, and be reassured of the hygiene conditions.

### **Credibility Over Time**

The customer's feedback about Restaurant Group SJ is creditable, reflecting a unique and forward-thinking approach that undoubtedly contributes to its longevity and success in the restaurant industry.

The management style, described as commitment-oriented, empowering, strategizing, and deal-making, speaks volumes about the leadership's dedication to fostering a positive work environment. The emphasis on creativity, focusing on tech start-ups, authentic cookbooks, and engaging YouTube podcasts, showcases a commitment to innovation and staying relevant in a dynamic market.

The exceptional response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic is a testament to the Group's resilience and genuine concern for its employees. While many competitors faced closures and layoffs, Restaurant Group SJ kept its main locations open and supported all its employees. This strategic decision showcased a deep sense of community and highlighted a leadership philosophy prioritizing employee well-being over short-term profits.

The loyalty to a clan organizational culture, as per the Competing Values Framework (CVF), reinforces the idea of a "family-type organization" (Martin, 2006). The emphasis on collective identity, autonomy, a humane work environment, and active participation aligns well with the ethos of the restaurant service industry. This culture has contributed to a cohesive and collaborative environment, fostering teamwork, togetherness, and a shared commitment to goals (McGregor, Goshi, 2020).

Employees' observations further emphasize the positive impact of the clan culture. While challenging, the high-pressure and goal-focused environment is a driving force for success. The adherence to Shein's model (managementstudyguide.com), with a structured dress code and respectful communication, reflects a commitment to professionalism and a shared set of values.

The "give to get" philosophy, where loyal employees often ascend to managing partner roles, creates a sense of equality and shared benefits among all levels of the organization. This approach builds a strong foundation of beliefs within the Restaurant Group SJ and contributes to a positive and motivated workforce.

The modern, classy, and minimalistic ambiance of the restaurants, coupled with the open-concept kitchen, provides a pleasant dining experience and reflects a commitment to transparency and hygiene. The limited number of tables and authentic playlist add a personal touch, creating an intimate and enjoyable atmosphere for customers.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Organizations facing unprecedented challenges, such as those highlighted in this case study, can draw valuable insights to enhance their resilience in times of crisis. The key findings emphasize the significance of adaptability, clear communication, employee support programs, a customer-centric approach, innovation, training, transparency, and trust.

To begin, fostering an organizational culture that values adaptability and clear communication is pivotal. Organizations can implement this by establishing open channels for dialogue, encouraging feedback loops, and adopting responsive frameworks (Dodgson, 1993). By embracing a flexible mindset and ensuring transparent communication, teams can more effectively navigate uncertainties, fostering a resilient workplace culture.

Employee support programs promote well-being and mental health, especially during heightened stress. Organizations can implement tailored programs that address the specific needs of their workforce, such as counseling services, wellness initiatives, and flexible work arrangements. Prioritizing employees' mental health contributes to their overall well-being and enhances organizational resilience by ensuring a motivated and engaged workforce.

Maintaining a customer-centric approach is vital, even during challenging times. Organizations should prioritize customer satisfaction, ensuring that any changes made to adapt to crises do not compromise the quality of service. Proactive communication with customers, seeking feedback, and continuously refining services based on customer preferences contribute to building trust and loyalty.

Encouraging innovation in service delivery and investing in training programs are crucial components of organizational resilience. Organizations can create a culture that values creativity by providing resources for idea generation, supporting experimentation, and recognizing and rewarding innovative initiatives. Training programs should be designed to equip employees with the skills needed in the evolving landscape, ensuring they can adapt to changing circumstances effectively.

Fostering transparency and trust among stakeholders is a foundational element of organizational resilience. Organizations can achieve this by communicating openly about challenges, sharing decision-making processes, and involving stakeholders in critical discussions. Building a transparent and trusting environment mitigates concerns and establishes a strong foundation for resilience when faced with adversity.

In conclusion, the recommendations drawn from this Restaurant Group SJ case study offer actionable insights for organizations seeking to enhance their resilience in crises. By prioritizing adaptability, employee well-being, customer satisfaction, innovation, and transparency, organizations can build a robust foundation for navigating uncertainties and emerging stronger from challenges.

To establish a healthy organizational culture in hospitality, businesses should concentrate on developing core values, clearly communicating them to employees, and ensuring their reflection in all facets of operations. This may involve investments in training programs, the implementation of recognition initiatives, and the creation of avenues for employees to provide feedback and actively contribute to organizational decision-making processes.

In summary, the positive feedback on Restaurant Group SJ highlights its commitment to innovation, employee well-being, and a solid organizational culture. These factors, coupled with a resilient response to challenges, position the Group as a leader in the industry and undoubtedly contribute to its longevity and sustained success.

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