



Wizards Bend Things to Their Will

MAY I SERVE YOU?

Here is a story about a normal board meeting event. It all started with a few ad hoc meetings scheduled during the lunch hour. If only someone had mentioned that the restaurant had made some changes during a downturn in the economy!

I was driving through traffic during commute time to our offsite board meeting, which was scheduled to take place at a hotel in the quaint town of Los Gatos, California. Traffic was light, so I was taking in the scenic beauty— something I rarely take the time to do. As I drove, I kept going through the meeting details in my head to make sure that I had dotted all my i's and crossed all my t's.

One thing on my list had been a request by our CEO to schedule a premeeting with some of our board members and staff. Having had many previous meetings at this hotel, I suggested they meet over lunch in the hotel restaurant. This seemed like the perfect solution for a productive meeting.

Plus, they wouldn't have to spend an extra hour in a conference room, especially since the room where they would be holding their meeting didn't have any natural light. The CEO liked this idea, so I had reserved space at the restaurant.

I arrived at the hotel with plenty of time to check the conference room setup and review all the details one last time with my hotel contact. She handled all the onsite meeting details for the hotel. We chatted briefly about a few adjustments to the logistics, some catering changes during the meeting, and

timing for the arrival of the board members and other attendees.

I made my way to the lobby to greet the guests and direct them to the restaurant across the hall, as the lunch meeting would be starting in less than 15 minutes.

As I was waiting, the restaurant hostess and I spoke for a moment. We had met previously during an onsite meeting, and our conversation wasn't unusual. During our chat, I mentioned that our team would be meeting over lunch in the restaurant at noon.

"I'll be departing around noon," the hostess casually mentioned.

At first, I thought she was sharing some details about her day and replied, "Have a nice afternoon."

Thank heaven she followed up with another question: "Will your group need food for their meeting, or will they just use the restaurant space?"

I thought, "How nice of her to be so interested in my meeting!" and then politely said, "Yes, I thought it would make more sense to have lunch here instead of taking extra time to walk to a nearby restaurant. That way, they will be steps away from the conference room where their next meeting will be held."

"Did you place a special catering order for your group?"

"No," I responded. "I thought they could just order off the menu and charge it to our master bill like we've done in the past." Then I thought, "Why is she asking about the details? Maybe she is just being polite since she will soon be departing."

Her next question finally made me think more clearly: "You do realize that the restaurant is closed during the lunch hour, right?"

It took me a few seconds to process what she was telling me; in fact, I still wasn't getting it.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll be leaving at noon because our restaurant closes at that time, and we don't open again until 5:00 p.m. when we serve dinner," she patiently replied.

All at once, her questions made complete sense.

No one had informed me about that restaurant change since my last visit just a few months earlier. The restaurant had always been open during the lunch hour, so I hadn't thought to check on that detail.

Seeing my deer-in-the-headlights stare, she continued. "If you haven't made arrangements with our catering department, your group won't get any lunch. Our servers won't return until we reopen at 5:00 p.m., and we have a limited kitchen crew between now and 5:00 p.m."

I could sense that she was getting tired of repeating the same message. Perhaps if she had been more direct, the message would have resonated sooner—or perhaps if I had listened to what she was saying, I would have figured it out already.

She continued to maintain her professional demeanor with a smile on her face. That's when it finally sunk in. I had a place for our meeting, but there just wouldn't be any food for them to eat!

"No service during the lunch hour?" I asked in a panicked voice. "When did this change?"

She calmly explained that about a month ago the hotel had done some cost cutting. This took place during a downturn in the economy, and every company, including hotels, was looking for ways to trim costs. The restaurant didn't generate enough business during lunch, so hotel management had decided to close the restaurant during that time—at least for the next several months.

I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. My thoughts quickly went to my list of nearby restaurants: pizza, salads, soup, or maybe sushi? I pictured a pizza delivery truck arriving with a stack of pizza boxes for our executive meeting. That just wasn't going to work. I headed to the front desk in search of my hotel contact. Perhaps between the two of us, we could come up with another plan.

She appeared within a few minutes, and I gave her a rundown of my dilemma.

"I'm concerned about getting food for my group. I have never been a waitress before, but if you can get your chef to make some food, I'll serve it."

She gave me a reassuring look and raised her index finger in the air.

“I have an idea. Now I just need a buy-in from the chef. Give me just a minute. Let me see what I can do,” she said as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Those few minutes seemed like an hour. The meeting attendees had arrived at the restaurant and were already seated. They had no idea of the drama inside my head or what was taking place in the kitchen. I thought it was best to simply get them seated, so I walked them to their table and told them their server would be with them shortly.

To my relief, the hotel contact soon reappeared from the kitchen.

“All my guests have arrived,” I told her with angst in my voice. Before she could get a word out, I added, “What’s the plan? Remember, I can be a server if that’s what it will take.”

She smiled, nodded her head, headed for the hostess area, and grabbed a dozen menus.

“Okay,” she began. “I talked to the chef and explained the situation. It took some pleading, but he agreed to provide some lunch items for your group. However, you’ll have to tell them they can only order from the left side of the menu as the other options aren’t available. Are you sure you want to be the server?” she asked with an apprehensive look.

“There’s always a first time for everything,” I replied.

I located my small notebook and pen, grabbed the menus, and off I went with the hotel contact not far behind for some much-needed moral support.

As I approached the CEO’s chair, he greeted me with a smile and then leaned toward me, assuming I was delivering a message or giving him an update on a board-related matter.

“Hello everyone,” I said. “I have some good news, and I have some bad news. First, the bad news: As of a month ago, the restaurant no longer serves lunch. The good news is that the chef has agreed to a limited menu. Now, for more good news: My name is Linda, and I’ll be your server. Today is my first day on the job.”

They all laughed.

The CEO handled the situation with ease and added, “Of course we’re delighted that you will be our server.” Then he turned to the board members and staff and said, “Linda is the best assistant I’ve ever had. She can figure out how to get anything done. Shall we place our order?”

With that, they all smiled, made a few humorous comments, placed their orders, and off I went to deliver the selections to the chef.

The real entertainment began when I went to fill their beverage orders. No one was behind the bar, and I had no idea where to begin. My hotel contact was nearby and immediately came to my rescue, although both of us were very much out of our element. We pushed a few buttons and laughed hysterically as we tried to fill the soda requests. Working together, we figured it out and served the drinks and meals with finesse (at least, as far as they knew). All the attendees commented that the food was great and the service was impeccable. I blushed a little with embarrassment, but I pulled it off.

After getting everyone off to the next meeting, I profusely thanked the kitchen staff for coming to my rescue in the eleventh hour and for teaching me some new skills, which I contemplated adding to my resume. The hotel contact was such a good sport, and the situation bound us as friends for life.



WAND

(What Assistants Need Daily)

- ※ Like wizards, when you get in situations outside of your realm of experience, remain open-minded, take a chance, and learn new skills.
- ※ If you’re planning an offsite meeting, double-check all details, even if you think nothing has changed.
- ※ It takes more skill to listen than to hear a message, so be sure to take time to listen to those communicating with you.
- ※ Use clarifying phrases like “Tell me more” or “Help me understand” when

you question someone's understanding of your intended message. You can also use "who, what, where, when, and why" questions.

- ✧ If you have a "can-do" attitude, small glitches in a plan can be resolved with minimal stress and a lot of ingenuity.
- ✧ When details don't come together, check all your options (even improbable ones).
- ✧ When you work with a team committed to a good outcome, it's more fun than doing everything yourself.
- ✧ If you need to make special arrangements, don't be afraid to ask for help. If you explain the situation, exceptions can be made.
- ✧ Instead of putting blame on others, work together to find an amicable solution.

*The greatest discovery of my generation is that a
human being can alter his life by altering his
attitude.*

—WILLIAM JAMES