

Michelle Goliger, Mike Phillips, Cristina Meneses,
Bobby Fitzgerald, Chris Hutchins, Jeremy Hsiao

BMGT364, Section 0401
Professor Gosia Langa
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Busboys and Poets Executive Report

Over the past couple of months, Team 5ynergy has analyzed the management practices and organizational behavior of the Hyattsville location of Busboys and Poets, a restaurant chain consisting of five different stores spanning across the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area. Through conducting team research and on-site informational interviews, our team identified and analyzed three distinct organizational behavior concepts relating to Busboys and Poets; stimulating innovation and change, making and implementing major decisions, and improving customer service.

Our team chose to analyze Busboys and Poets because of its unique atmosphere and ability to attract customers by offering more than just good food. Its innovative approach to serving the community involved transforming a standard restaurant facility into a creative space for diverse groups of people to come together. This space is used not only for dining, but for retail and live events as well, including musical performances and poetry readings.

Since its beginnings, Busboys and Poets has strategically expanded to several other locations not typically known for establishing new businesses. The chain has earned a reputation as a hub for environmentally sustainable initiatives and social change. Together, these decisions to expand to cultural yet non-traditional areas and to then invest in those communities have shaped the Busboys and Poets business model. Their mission statement that “Busboys and

Poets...[believes] by creating such a space we can inspire social change and begin to transform our community and the world,” closely aligns with this model.

We selected our first organizational behavior concept, stimulating innovation and change, because we strongly believe that high willingness and ability to change are critical components of Busboys and Poets’ overall success in the food industry. This is evidenced by owner Andy Shallal’s continuing desire to develop unique business divisions beyond the traditional restaurant model, including a bookstore, entertainment venue, and designated lounge space, all of which share the same facility as the restaurant itself. These additional divisions create memorable dining experiences for customers, making them want to return.

The second organizational behavior concept that we analyzed, making and implementing major decisions, can prove to be a challenge in any large team setting. After first examining the Busboys and Poets management structure, we proceeded to perform a more in-depth evaluation of the structure’s effectiveness. Specifically, we focused on management’s overall approach to making decisions, as well as the different types of interactions between the managers and their employees, and the accessibility and transparency practiced by those managers.

We selected our third and final organizational behavior concept, improving customer service, because the quality of service at a restaurant says a great deal about a company’s ability to build long-term relationships with current customers while simultaneously attracting new ones. For this concept, our team analyzed Busboys and Poets’ primary methods for ensuring customer satisfaction and addressing individual customer complaints. Additionally, we looked at how management evaluates their customer service policies to determine which ones work well and which require improvement.

In our initial research, we examined multiple customer reviews of Busboys and Poets from “Yelp!” to give the team an idea of some of the varying opinions about the business. Then, to obtain our primary data, two team members visited the Hyattsville location of Busboys and Poets on two separate occasions. To prepare for these visits, we compiled a series of interview questions tailored to each of the three organizational behavior concepts. Then, during each visit, we conducted several interviews with managers, servers and hosts from various levels of the organizational hierarchy and made general observations about everything from store operations to visual displays and decor to customers’ perceived emotions during their dining experiences. Although we also intended to speak with Busboys and Poets owner Andy Shallal, we were unable to connect with him due to his numerous other commitments. However, through our interviews, we gained a more comprehensive understanding of how each organizational behavior concept applies directly to Busboys and Poets’ practices.

Using our research to guide our analysis, we determined that the Hyattsville location of Busboys and Poets has many overall strengths. Andy Shallal’s initial vision for Busboys and Poets involved creating an environment where employees could embrace the collaborative spirit representative of the company culture while still expressing their individuality. He believed that by fostering a team of dedicated managers and employees who understand the importance of trust and communication in the workplace, he could satisfy everyone involved in the business and induce the contagion effect onto his customers.

The Busboys and Poets company culture paves the way for many of the store’s management practices. For example, there is a great deal of transparency amongst all levels of the organizational structure, including the upper-level and lower-level managers, servers, and hosts. During our store visits, we conducted each interview separately, yet we found that many

of the answers we received from the managers were similar to those we received from the servers and hosts. This shows that an open and honest line of communication exists within the business, making both the managers and employees more likely to succeed in their individual positions.

Effective communication within any chain of command is crucial to ensure employee engagement and job satisfaction. Because Busboys and Poets tries to hire transparent and approachable managers, the servers and hosts feel comfortable asking questions and providing input and feedback. The employees, knowing that their contributions are valued, actively engage in their jobs rather than putting in a minimal amount of effort. This enthusiasm and commitment to the company rubs off on the customers, creating an upbeat and welcoming environment in the restaurant.

Another of Busboys and Poets' major strengths derives from its passion for green initiatives, which affect every aspect of the way that the business is run. When customers are seated, they are not served water unless they specifically ask for it. Without proper context, this may seem inappropriate on the part of the servers. However, Andy Shallal specifically asks the servers to do this so that customers don't waste water unnecessarily. Additionally, the restaurant has a thatched roof, it does not offer coloring books and crayons to children, all of the to-go items are biodegradable, and full menus are listed on the restaurant's website. All of these initiatives, although expensive, help the environment by preserving both energy and material resources.

Many of the Busboys and Poets managers and employees are heavily involved in their communities. In addition to volunteering and working for non profit organizations on their own time, many choose to get involved with their co-workers by participating in projects that benefit a variety of charitable causes. There are even opportunities for community outreach at the

restaurant, such as when local artists are invited to perform for live events like open mic nights and poetry readings. All of these efforts enable both managers and employees to bond over their mutual interests while also learning about the importance of giving back.

Lastly, Busboys and Poets values diversity and individualism, making it easy for managers and employees to express themselves at work. Many have tattoos, piercings, and unique hairstyles, and many have artistic backgrounds as well. The dress code for the servers is fairly lenient, in that they are required to wear all black, but they are allowed to wear any type of clothing that they want, including baseball caps and casual jackets. The hosts and managers, on the other hand, have no specific dress code, and are able to dress as they please. This creative freedom keeps employees motivated and makes them excited to get ready for what can be a seemingly long day at work.

While Busboys and Poets exhibits many strengths, our research indicates that there is also room for improvement with some of its management and organizational practices. Although the company engages in a participative management style and wants employees to feel empowered to solve problems on their own, managers almost always end up stepping in to make final decisions. For example, when a customer complains about the quality of the food that they order, the protocol is for the servers to report the complaint to a manager right away. Then, the manager will step in and decide how to resolve the issue, either by modifying the customer's order, putting in a new order altogether, or giving the customer the meal for free. In these types of scenarios, servers are unable to use their problem-solving skills, and therefore might end up feeling less motivated on the job.

During our interviews, we inquired about the frequency of management meetings at Busboys and Poets. We were surprised to find out that while managers meet every week to

discuss progress toward company goals and focus areas for improvement, employees and managers only meet with each other on a monthly basis. Although servers and hosts can approach their managers at any time, formal full team meetings are quite infrequent, making it more difficult to maintain a proper flow of communication throughout the entire chain of command.

The infrequent meetings between employees and their managers contribute to a larger problem within the organization. According to management, formalized rules and procedures at Busboys and Poets are sometimes lacking, and those that already exist are constantly changing. In our research, we discovered that store managers have the opportunity to transfer to other Busboys and Poets locations every six months in order to change their work environments. Because no two locations are alike, managers are kept stimulated in their jobs and gain experience working with different types of people. However, the major disadvantage is that it forces the employees in each location to constantly adjust to new styles of management. This can weaken the organizational structure because employees have to continually adapt to changing management while also attempting to work through the lack of formalities.

After evaluating Busboys and Poets' overall strengths and weaknesses, we were able to organize the information we collected into three categories pertaining to the organizational behavior concepts that we chose to analyze; stimulating innovation and change, making and implementing major decisions, and improving customer service. The textbook defines innovation as "a specialized kind of change" that involves "improving a product, process or service." (Pg. 592) Through conducting interviews and making observations during our visits to Busboys and Poets, we quickly learned that its willingness to invest in innovation and change is an essential part of what makes the restaurant stand out in such a competitive industry. One of

the key reasons why Busboys and Poets has been able to retain its innovative edge is due to its flexibility and openness to try new methods for improving both quality and efficiency in all of its operations.

In order to properly assess opportunities for improvement, management utilizes customer feedback on review websites such as “Yelp!” Unlike many other restaurants that try to probe customers for feedback with both mail and online surveys, Busboys and Poets relies on social media to determine how customers feel about all aspects of their experience, which can include the food itself, the restaurant’s atmosphere, the quality of the customer service, and any additional experiences they might have with attending live events or making purchases from the on-site bookstore. This heavy use of social media to determine what customers do and do not like requires management to have strong listening skills. They realize that in order for the business to succeed, the customers’ voices must be heard through action research. For example, if many customers on “Yelp!” complain about a particular dish on the menu, the managers often modify the dish or remove it from the menu completely.

Busboys and Poets, as mentioned earlier, is more than just a restaurant. Andy created the space to allow people to read, learn, discuss, and express themselves, and his ability to think outside the box has enabled him to attract customers of all races, religions, and cultures. The physical layout of the Hyattsville location enhances this diverse and cultural experience through its open and airy lounge space, relaxing music, and urban furniture and decor. Both managers and employees keep busy by planning a calendar full of intellectually and artistically stimulating events for the community, including open mic nights, poetry readings, and dialogues about race, sex, and gender. In addition to maintaining the restaurant and planning all of the events,

Busboys and Poets still manages to keep up with its green initiatives and always looks for further opportunity to help preserve the environment.

Although most of the major decisions regarding implementation of innovative and creative new ideas into the business are the result of Andy's hard work, all managers and employees at Busboys and Poets play an active role in executing these ideas as well. By providing every individual with the opportunity to get involved through the participative style of management, the positive activating moods that result amongst the managers and employees help foster even more creativity within the organization.

While this first organizational behavior concept has more of a big picture focus, the second concept, making and implementing major decisions, has to do with the day-to-day operations of Busboys and Poets and its management structure. The chain of command begins with owner Andy Shallal, followed by one regional manager, who is responsible for all five locations of the restaurant. Within the Hyattsville location, there is one general manager who supervises a food manager, bar manager, host manager, and four kitchen managers. Underneath them are the supervisors, followed by all of the hosts and servers, who comprise the general restaurant staff.

Andy is known to be a highly involved owner. He regularly goes into the store to interact with the managers and employees, and his approachable personality makes him a likeable leader. He is more than willing to answer questions and serve as a mentor to the rest of the Busboys and Poets community, and he runs the new staff orientations himself so that he can get to know all of his employees on an individual level. He is most interested in learning about their values and beliefs, and part of the reason why he has fostered such a positive company culture is because he maintains close interpersonal relationships with even the lowest level of employees in

the organizational hierarchy. He tries to make everyone feel comfortable approaching each other, which shows that he has a high level of consideration for both managers and employees. In order to sustain this type of working culture, hiring managers look for candidates who are friendly, experienced, proactive, and collaborative.

The decision-making process at Busboys and Poets involves a strong, open line of communication between the employees and their managers. Employees must know that their opinions are valued by their superiors in order to ensure high levels of engagement. For example, during a visit to the restaurant, we sat down with one of the servers. He told us a story about how Busboys and Poets once received complaints about a particular option on the menu, the turkey burger. The customers were not particularly fond of the recipe that the chefs were using. The server, feeling comfortable to step in, approached a manager with a solution to this problem. He proposed swapping out the current recipe with his own personal recipe. The manager carefully listened to his recommendations and implemented the new recipe into the menu. The results were extremely successful, and customers responded well to the changes. This situation is an example of the high perceived organizational support that the employees at Busboys and Poets have, which keeps them motivated to work hard and offer quality service to customers.

In addition to their valued contributions, employees are given ample opportunity to advance their careers at Busboys and Poets. They have the option of participating in a special program where they receive training to be a supervisor, ultimately allowing them to engage in early preparation for a promotion. Because of the business's emphasis on promoting internally, these types of opportunities prove that Busboys and Poets truly cares about career growth.

Our third and final organizational behavior concept, improving customer service, is most critical to the future success of Busboys and Poets. The business model is centered on quality customer service, which Andy believes is crucial for retaining customers. Many of the employees are extensively trained in several service practices, including Andy's policy of hosts never having their backs facing the door as customers enter the restaurant, and answering the phone by saying "Peace and love, thank you for calling Busboys and Poets." These seemingly insignificant practices add a unique element to the Busboys and Poets experience and actually impact how customers perceive the service. There is also a large emotional labor component to the job, requiring servers to smile and be friendly with customers, even if they may be having a rough day. However, this is not typically a challenge for many of the employees, who are hired in large part due to their positive and genuine personalities. Happy employees result in happy customers, which demonstrates the contagion effect.

Busboys and Poets caters to every type of customer that might walk through the door by offering a wide variety of menu options, including vegetarian and gluten free specialties. They alter the menus as much as they need to in order to keep customers satisfied, even if it means that they incur more expenses in the process. For convenience purposes, the menu is available on the company website, and the paper menus are changed twice a year, once during the winter and once during the summer, which allows customers to enjoy seasonal dishes that they may not be able to find elsewhere in the area. If customers complain, a server or manager asks them specific questions about what they did not like. This could be anything from taste or texture to a specific ingredient in the dish that they ordered. These complaints are documented right away and are later discussed during management meetings to determine methods for improvement. By

engaging in an open dialogue about their weaknesses, managers ensure that customers are properly taken care of so that they will want to return to Busboys and Poets in the future.

In order to help Busboys and Poets overcome their obstacles and achieve continued growth and success, our team has come up with three detailed recommendations that will help sustain the business far into the future. The first recommendation involves empowering employees to be more independent in addressing customer complaints rather than immediately seeking help from a manager. During our interviews, it was made clear that when customers respond negatively to some aspect of their dining experience, servers are required to follow strict protocol, which entails finding a manager to handle the situation. However, this limits servers' opportunity to strengthen their problem-solving skills, and it also forces customers to wait until a manager is available to speak, which might anger them more. To reverse this, Andy should implement a series of training sessions during the new staff orientations in which servers participate in mock scenarios that teach them how to address a variety of complex customer complaints. This type of training will make the employees more equipped to deal with dissatisfied customers on their own while also improving the reputation of the business.

Our second recommendation involves a change in the frequency of scheduled meetings between management and their employees. After discovering that these types of meetings only occur at Busboys and Poets on a monthly basis, we believe that there needs to be a larger degree of formal, structured communication between all levels of the organizational hierarchy. By holding weekly meetings, management will be able to ensure that all employees are on the same page regarding company goals and progress, which will greatly benefit day-to-day operations.

Our final recommendation is to change the management rotation program in order to reduce inconsistencies within the company. Currently, managers change locations every six

months, which forces employees to constantly adapt to new styles of management while also limiting the relationship that they can develop with the employees during the short amount of time they spend at any given store. We believe that by requiring managers to stay at a store for at least one year before rotating, Busboys and Poets will foster a more cohesive work environment where long-term relationships can be built between managers and employees.

Through analyzing Busboys and Poets' management practices and organizational structure, we learned a great deal about how the company's core values are reflected through its initiatives for innovation, decision-making processes, and customer service strategies. By cultivating a community of artists and activists who care about making a difference, Andy has turned Busboys and Poets into a space for social change that far surpasses what any other restaurateurs in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area have attempted to accomplish.

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APPENDIX

General Observations from Busboys and Poets Visit on 11.19.13

- Servers are friendly and seem to smile a lot around customers
- Customers engaging in relaxed conversation with friends and family
 - No one looks stressed, pressed for time
- Customers aren't coming in for a quick bite to eat
 - They care about the experience of having a relaxed and fun outing with friends and family
- Facilities are clean and well-maintained
- Restaurant decor (furniture, artwork, etc.) is stylish, trendy, young, hip
- A lot of employee diversity (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian, etc.)
- Many young, urban, hipster types of servers
 - Tattoos
 - Piercings
 - Unique fashion choices
 - Interesting hairstyles
- Customer demographic is very diverse
 - Balance of old and young
 - Racially diverse
- Liberal environment
- Bookstore consists of a few tall shelves of books
- Bartender wearing a black baseball cap → form of self-expression
- Manager on duty has nice, friendly conversation with a server
 - Manager seems very approachable
- Cluster of employees standing near the kitchen
 - All very friendly with each other
 - Seem very chummy together
- Servers look relaxed
 - No one is tense, stressed, overwhelmed, or running around frantically
- Space is decorative, well-lit, well-designed
 - Store layout not too cluttered
 - Mood lighting
- Servers regularly stop at tables to check in with customers
- Customers seem to be having a good time with their friends and families
- Supportive work environment for servers and managers
- Not too many people at the bookstore (could be because it wasn't a busy time of day?)
- Some servers were occasionally standing in the corner not doing much
- Manager sitting at one of the tables to have brief discussion with 2 servers
- Events listed in menu, including open mic nights, slam poetry, race/gender/sexuality dialogues

Notes from Interview w/ Server 11.19.13

- Likes that Busboys and Poets employees have artistic backgrounds
- Likes that the restaurant is well-staffed → makes it a less stressful environment for everyone
- Dislikes the formal rules
 - Can only smoke an hour before the shift
 - Can't eat on the job
 - Difficult for people working long hours
- Andy used to own a restaurant called Luna
 - Andy is big on innovation.
- Andy is a businessman first and foremost
 - He is people-oriented for the sake of his business
- Employees are encouraged to contribute their ideas and recommendations for improving the products and services
 - Ex. Turkey burger tasted terrible → server recommended that management adopt his own recipe for turkey burgers → added new ingredients → turkey burger was much more well-liked by customers
- Employees can contribute ideas, but not always implemented
- Employees need to know how to describe customer complaints to their managers
- Managers ultimately make decisions for how to deal with customer complaints
 - Servers are not allowed to give anything away for free until approved by management

Interview Questions - Visit on 11.15.13

- 1) What are some of your current customer service policies?
 - How do you evaluate their effectiveness?
 - What does management do on a daily basis to ensure that customers leave satisfied?
 - How successful have these policies been since they were implemented?
- 2) How much thought do you give to improving customer service policies?
- 3) What factors go into hiring decisions?
 - What qualities and skills do you look for in an employee?
- 4) What is the dynamic between management and employees like?
 - What are the different jobs and responsibilities of both management and employees?
 - How well do the managers work together?
 - How well do the employees work together?
 - How does this work culture affect the retention rate of management and employees?
- 5) Does management follow a rational decision-making model when making and implementing major decisions?
 - Please describe the decision-making process in more detail.
 - Does management use a democratic approach when making decisions?
 - Are employees encouraged to contribute ideas?

- Do they empower employees?
- 6) How often are staff meetings held at Busboys and Poets?
- What topics are discussed at meetings?
- 7) Do you focus equally on maintaining current divisions of the business and expanding to new divisions, or does one require more time and attention than the other?
- 8) What are some examples of ways that Busboys and Poets gets involved with the community?
- Please describe community projects, green initiatives, etc.
- 9) Do you have any immediate plans to make changes to Busboys and Poets divisions?

Notes from Visit on 11.15.13

Improving Customer Service

- Emphasis on being open and honest with customers
- Andy's policy is to never have back to customers at the door
- Important for servers to smile a lot → should be genuinely happy to be working there
- When customers complain, managers get involved right away
 - Ask questions about the specifics of what the customers don't like
 - ALWAYS document complaints to be discussed and improved later
 - Switch servers to different tables if necessary (if personalities clash) → doesn't happen often
- Andy and managers rely on Yelp for feedback from customers → don't send mail surveys because it wastes paper
- Always finding ways to improve customer service
 - Manager meetings every week to discuss customer satisfaction, what needs to be changed/improved, how to reduce theft, etc.
- Alter menu a lot to suit customer needs → difficult thing to do, but want to keep customers happy
- Paper menus changed twice a year (winter, summer) → keeps customers happy and interested in new choices
- Menus available online as well
- Employees must answer the phone "Peace, love, and thank you for calling Busboys and Poets"
- Customer comments that they don't like the food
 - Manager gets involved right away
 - What don't they like about it? Taste? Texture?
 - Complaint is documented
 - Food is sent back to kitchen and new one is brought out
 - These types of complaints brought up in meetings
 - If there are multiple complaints about a certain dish, it will get changed on the menu

- When customer complains, servers should try to solve the problems on their own (employees encouraged to really step up) → however, if servers cannot diffuse on their own, get manager involved

Stimulating Innovation and Change

- Employees are active in the community
- Green Initiatives
 - Don't serve water unless customer asks for it
 - Grass (thatched) roof
 - To-go items are biodegradable
 - Andy pays more, but better for the environment
 - Employees not allowed to use to-go items
 - No coloring books/crayons for kids
- Big focus on community involvement
- Reach out to community through open mic nights and other events
- Restaurant is the core of the business, but all divisions are extremely important to the business model
- Any new divisions are completely at Andy's discretion (sometimes upper level management as well) → lower managers and employees don't make recommendations for this
- Management focuses a lot on events → keeps them busy
- Open mic nights, slam poetry, race/gender/sexuality dialogues
- Lounge area to hang out, talk, relax, get work done

Organizational Structure, Making and Implementing Major Decisions

- Chain of Command
 - 1 Regional Manager
 - 1 General Manager for each store (5 total)
 - 1 Bar Manager, 1 Food Runner/Busser Manager, 1 Host Manager, 4 Kitchen Managers (1 is a floater and head chef)
 - Supervisors
 - Employees (Servers)
- Bar manager is slightly above food runner/busser manager, but they are mostly equal
- Owner, regional manager, general managers meet to make major decisions
 - Each departmental manager can make changes if necessary
- Locations switch every six months → managers can choose their new locations
- Like to promote within before hiring externally
- Andy is at the store all of the time
 - Active involvement in company
 - Talks to employees and managers a lot
 - Gives guidance and advice → very open to talking about anything
- Annual meeting held with Andy
- Andy runs new staff orientations (trains them himself)
- Dialogue between employees and management is extremely important
- Managers always want feedback from employees

- Very approachable managers → can talk to them about basically anything, keep themselves open to employees
- Not a lot of concrete, formalized rules → rules change all the time
 - Each location does things a different way
- Staff meetings held once a month to discuss changes and ways to improve service, have employees give their feedback
- Andy wants employees to feel comfortable approaching managers
- Many employees have other jobs outside of Busboys and Poets
 - Working for nonprofits
 - Theatre
 - Arts
 - College grads pursuing other options
- Serving staff wear all black to distinguish themselves, but can wear whatever type of clothing they want → form of creative expression, but identifiable to customers as an employee
- No dress requirement for hosts or managers
- A lot of transparency in management → different people answered questions the same way (employee and supervisor/lower level manager)
- Employees empowered to contribute ideas → management listens well
- Hiring managers look for people with...
 - Good personalities (creative, extroverted)
 - A lot of availability
 - Reliable transportation
 - Experience
 - Being shy is okay, but need to smile and be friendly → Andy thinks it's very important to smile
- Hiring managers want people who are highly tolerant of diversity
 - Candidates get asked questions about diversity to test their tolerance
- Andy does a leadership conference/training program for the new hires
 - Asks questions
 - Wants to learn about individual employee stories
 - Really get to know them
 - Learn about their beliefs, values
- New employee training is challenging → get thrown right into it → if they can survive the training, they are a good fit for the business
- Special supervisor program offered (optional for employees)
 - Employees allowed to fill in role as manager
 - Requires extensive training with Andy
 - Serve as liaison between employees and managers