



Definitely Not Hell's Kitchen

Building leaders at Earls with the TKI

How do you succeed for nearly three decades in the fiercely competitive casual-dining business? According to Mark Barry, vice president of Human Resources with Earls Restaurants, it helps to have a secret formula.

"The secret formula is to create an organization that has the capacity to renew itself," says Barry. "The average life of a concept in our business is four to five years. The moment you stay complacent is the moment you're left in the dust."

Founded in 1982, the Vancouver-based Earls chain now has 62 restaurants in Canada and the western United States. But getting there hasn't been easy.

"Earls was once alone in our niche between the quick-service and white tablecloth restaurant," says Barry. "But our niche has become very crowded indeed. And there's a shrinking pool of people to recruit from."

To stay ahead of the competition, Earls invests heavily in training people for the knowledge and competencies they need to run a restaurant, and in developing them as leaders. "The key to everything is developing excellent leaders," says Barry. "People don't quit their jobs, they quit their bosses. To create engagement, we need to have the strongest leadership of any industry."

Barry notes that employees are referred to as "business partners" at Earls, and that the vast majority of leaders come up through the company. "But our business is considered transitional—a stepping stone for people seeking other careers. The big challenge for our leaders, who manage up to 200 part-time staff with widely varying goals, is getting that workforce to buy in to our vision."

A key ingredient in the Earls secret formula is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), which the organization has been using since 2006 in its team-leadership seminars for junior leaders such as day supervisors and kitchen supervisors.

"We address leadership development as a philosophy of personal mastery," says Barry. "Really effective leaders develop a capacity to take information about themselves and systematically work on improving. With less-experienced people who need to engage transitional staff, it's crucial for them to ask, 'What kind of leader am I?'"

Armed with information the TKI gives them about themselves, leaders at Earls learn to master one of the toughest challenges of all. "Conflict invariably comes up with leaders who are managing so many relationships," says Barry, "but dealing with conflict is difficult for many people."

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“The TKI positions conflict in terms of self-awareness, so people understand their own tendencies for handling conflict. It helps them realize that there are choices in dealing with conflict—not better or worse, but more or less effective in various situations—and that there are consequences of choosing each mode. What opportunities exist for them to use other modes in a strategic way?”

Barry sees that kind of strategic thinking as vital to being an effective leader: “Leaders have to be very deliberate and strategic. If they can put aside emotion and defensiveness, and create that pause, that moment of rationality—that is the essence of leadership.”

Barry says creating strong leaders is a point of professional pride at Earls, whether those leaders stay with the company or not. “Leadership is a personal voyage. We often get letters from people who say it has benefited their careers and their personal lives. As an organization, that sort of feedback and contact really juices us. We have left people with something they can take away. That is very inspiring to us.”

Mark Barry

is a graduate of Queen’s University and a certified executive coach. Mr. Barry has led Earls’ strategic Human Resources initiatives since 1995. Earls Restaurants has been on the list of the 50 Best Employers in Canada for four consecutive years.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument is available from
Psychometrics Canada at www.psychometrics.com