



Us vs. Them

by Ellen Rohr

We all report in to somebody. Employees report to their managers. Managers report in to the owner, or shareholders. All owners, even the solo operator, are accountable to their customers.

Someday, you may become the person to whom others report. On that day, you cross a line. You cross a boundary into a foreign land, a place that isolates you from the people who—the day before—had been your comrades, your friends, your brothers and sisters. On that day you move from being one of “Us” to one of “Them.”

In my lifetime, I have had about 100 jobs. It’s not hard for me to put myself in an employee’s shoes because I have worn out several pairs. I was one of “Us.” And, I will never forget the day, the place and the moment I became one of “Them.”

Many of my 100 jobs were restaurant positions. I’ve worked as a dishwasher, pantry chef, sauté chef, busser, food server, bartender and cocktail waitress. As hostess, I greeted and seated. As Oyster Café cook, I shucked thousands of oysters. Once, I was the dessert girl, for lack of an official title, and made cheesecakes by the dozens.

Gather that much experience in an industry and the inevitable happens. Someone asks you to become a manager.

“Ellen, you’ve been doing a great job around here. When Sammy goes into rehab, we’d like you to replace him as manager. Are you interested?”

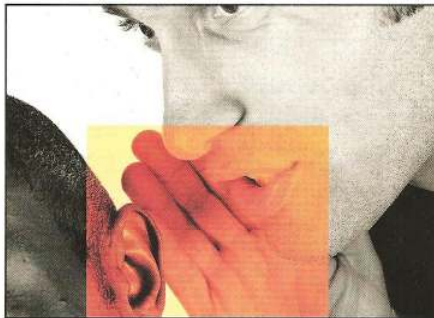
Translation: Would you like to take on more responsibility, more hours, more stress and less money? The last manager ended up semiconscious, in a fetal position in the corner of the walk-in freezer. Are you foolish enough to do it?

“Sure,” I said. After all, it was a promotion.

I was handed the keys to the restaurant. The keys! The symbolic scepter of leadership was passed to me. I closed my hand around the keys. I felt different, stronger, and smarter. I walked from the manager’s office into the dining room. Walt, one of the bartenders walked up and asked, “Have you seen Sammy? I need him to open the liquor cabinet. It’s time to open the bar.”

Puffing up a bit, I pronounced, “I have the keys, Walt. I’ll open the cabinet for you.”

Walt looked at me, first in surprise. Then, a veil fell over his features. He was wondering if anything he had just said could be used against him in a court of law. At the same time, he was touched by sadness. I was gone from him as a friend, as a co-con-



spirator, as a cocktail waitress who would only laugh when he broke a rack of glasses. From this point on, around me, Walt would edit what he said. Around me, he would be wary and cautious. Because I had crossed the line and was now one of “Them.”

Since that day, I have been one of “Them.” It has been helpful to remember what it is like to be one of “Us.” It helps me recognize the rotten, knuckleheaded things bosses do to the folks who report to them. It’s those things that cause the border between the countries of “Us” and “Them” to be so broad and hostile.

“They” should teach “Us” what we are supposed to do.

If someone is going to follow your lead, isn’t it reasonable to expect you to know where you are going? Managers are always looking for “self starters” and “people who don’t need to be told what to do.” How convenient that would be for the manager! Is it so much to ask that managers be competent and decisive? I’ve discovered that people love to be led if there is someplace worth going—and, if you map out a way to take them there.

As a manager, I have often failed to do this. I heard a sobering statistic that says, “75 percent of a manager’s time is spent correcting behaviors you never explained or taught in the first place.” On the flip side of this problem, lies another problem.

“They” don’t let “Us” just do our jobs.

Working with a rudderless manager can be frustrating. But,