

THE CASE OF THE MISFIT MANAGER: BRANTHAM'S ENGLISH PUB

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An expansion to Ian Brantham's "Brantham's English Pub" triggered the first non-family member hire in the firm's fifteen-year existence. Like many entrepreneurs, Brantham did not have a well-developed hiring process and took some shortcuts. Linda appeared like a great candidate, but, from the start, Brantham realized that he and she had different ideas about how the business should be conducted. He realized, also, that it might be hard for him to trust a non-family member. The business was running well, but Linda did things he wasn't sure he liked. And then the rumors started. . .

INTRODUCTION

"I dunno, I guess it started last October. Everything was a wee bit wonky from the beginning, ya know, but . . .," Ian Brantham trailed off, his British accent more pronounced when he was agitated. He shook his head and sighed, "Somedays I wish I'd've left good enough alone. We were small, we did well enough. If I hadn't expanded, I wouldn't have to hire outsiders. Or maybe it was just Linda." It was a late April afternoon in 2016 and the crowd was thin at the pub. "I'll stand you an ale if you'll listen to my story."

Brantham was in his early-50's and was born and raised in the United Kingdom. His earliest memories are of "helping" his father at the Horn and Hound Pub in Westchestershire. Brantham's mother passed away when he was ten years old and, coming from school, he would stop at the bar to help with the setting up. (His aunt collected him after supper for bed time and saw him off to school the next morning.) A small booth near the kitchen became his homework nook and homework struggles were often alleviated with the help of some of the customers. "Mr. Thompkins was an accountant; he was good for mathematics. Mr. Courtney was a barrister and helped with grammar. Captain Clyde had retired from the navy and knew just about everything about geography," Brantham reminisced.

As the years past, he took on more bar responsibilities – dishwashing, kitchen prep, cooking – and when he was old enough, waiting on the customers and bartending. After high school, he spent a year at a university, but admitted to “not half trying.” Later he took several correspondence courses in accounting and marketing just to learn more about the business, but mostly he learned by experience.

In 1990, he met Diane, an American exchange student, who claimed that she brought him home as a souvenir when they married a few months later. At first, Ian worked tending bar of other restaurants, but coming from a long line of pub owners, he followed the family tradition when he opened Brantham’s English Pub in 2001. He leased a small building in Pomona, a suburb of Los Angeles, and had recreated a traditional English Pub. The bar was open Tuesday through Saturday. It opened at 4 pm, closing at midnight except for Friday and Saturday when it remained open until 2 am.

The bar soon developed a loyal following, mostly from those who worked or lived the neighborhood. Men’s (or women’s) sports team from rugby to bowling and everything in between would use it for an after-game watering hole. Working professionals in the area would drop in for one drink and a light meal to allow the notorious Highway 10 traffic to ease up before making their commutes home. “We also kind of developed a ‘Tuesday night group’ that would show up for the corned beef and cabbage and a ‘Thursday night group’ who played darts. The Sierra Club stops by after their meeting each month. There’s a group of middle-aged ladies that come every Wednesday; they call themselves a book club, but I’ve never seen any books. Some nights our ‘regulars’ make up 60 – 70 % of our business.”

Unlike his father’s bar, the Branthams had a limited menu – a soup of the day and a few sandwiches that changed seasonally. Ian and Diane ran the bar by themselves, hiring one or two of Diane’s seemingly endless supply of siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, (and, later, Brantham’s own children) to help out when needed. “I guess we got kind of spoiled. If Diane or I needed to be away, I’d pick up the phone and call around until I found someone with the time. We never had any real trouble; if anyone thought about slacking off, they knew they’d hear about it from the family.”

Family members were contracted in official capacity as well. Diane had a sister-in-law who was the pub’s CPA and an attorney cousin was available for any legal matters. Another family member sold insurance. A brother owned a construction company and could handle repairs or remodeling not covered by the landlord.

In February 2014, things started to change. The building next door to Brantham's caught fire late one night. By the time, the firefighters arrived, the building was not salvageable, and it was pulled down by summer.

Brantham thought a lot about that space. Parking at the pub could sometimes be a problem. Maybe it could serve as additional parking? The bar tended to be packed on Friday and Saturday nights and it might be nice to have some extra space. Then, again, while the food quality was great, some guests wished there were more options, but there was no space to expand the kitchen in the current building. He was still renting his current location. Maybe it would be time to build exactly what he wanted on this empty lot? Or maybe he should save his money and do nothing? But, then again, what if someone bought that lot and built a new bar? Or a fancy restaurant? Ian and Diane spent a lot of time considering of the possibilities.

"The bar was good for us. It supported our family and sent our kids to college. Not rich, mind you, but comfortable. We'd saved a nice nest egg mostly planning for retirement, but maybe this was a good investment. We're still at least ten years from retiring. Maybe this would payoff better. We could also sell the bar instead of just closing the business."

This rumination came to an end when Brantham's landlord – who also owned the lot – announced that he was wanting to retire and would Brantham be interested in buying the building and, maybe, the lot? "It was one thing just to make dreams about what we could do. Finding out that I might have a new landlord who might have plans of his own really caused this to happen."

The two came to terms and by November, Brantham owned both his current building and the adjoining lot. The loan he took on these limited what else he could spend to develop the property, so he decided to expand the kitchen and use most of the rest of the space to be open-air seating. This open-air space would have a small stage for live music as well. The southern California climate had limited rain and outdoor seating was possible nearly year-round. A few space heaters for the coldest days would be easily obtainable and all that would be needed to keep things comfortable. The old kitchen would now be additional indoor bar space.

Best of all, most of this work could be done with almost no disruption of the existing business. Family pitched in to help with some tasks on Sundays. Diane's brother scheduled the most disruptive construction on Mondays when the bar was closed or mornings during business days, clearing out so the bar could be operational by evening. Grand opening of the outdoor area and revised menu was set for October 2015.

RESTRUCTURING

This new operation meant some changes. Brantham liked to tend bar and would continue with help during the busy times. His nephew had just enrolled at the local university after time in the military and was keen to have Friday and Saturday work, the pubs busiest nights. Diane was ready to spend less time in the kitchen. Her niece, Debbie, a chef for several years, was hired to replace her, expand the menu, and hire and manage a small kitchen staff.

Brantham decided to hire a manager who would handle the rest of the “front of house” staff – those waiting on customers, delivering food and drink, and bussing tables primarily. This time, they had no one to tap from the family and would have to look outside.

He was afraid that an advertisement might generate too many applicants, so he enlisted spreading the news throughout Diane’s family. Within a few weeks, he had about a dozen resumes. One applicant, Linda, seemed perfect. Actually, she was the only one who seemed to fit most of the criteria Brantham thought he needed. Linda had worked at half a dozen restaurants in the Los Angeles area and seemed to have a lot of experience.

After talking it over with Diane and Debbie, he called her in for an interview, although he chose a time without Debbie or Diane present. Brantham admitted, “I really didn’t have a plan on what to ask her. I just asked her to tell me about her jobs and the things she did at them. I just shut up and listened. We’d decided to use a computer system with iPads for taking orders and she had done that before. She knew bands and soloists that she thought would play in the outdoor area and increase business. Everything she said was fine, but, for some reason, I just didn’t take to her. I figured it was because she wasn’t family. There really wasn’t anyone else and we wanted someone to start early enough to help us set things up right. Maybe I should have checked her references, but usually people only put down those who’ll give them a great reference. I was so busy, I didn’t bother. I called her the following day and offered her the job.”

Brantham stated the salary he intended to pay her. Linda bounced back with, “That, plus tips, right? I’m going to be out there making sure the customers are taken care of, I deserve tips, too.”

Brantham didn’t know what to say. “Maybe this was standard in the business?” he thought. “Well, okay,” he told her.

“And since I’ll need to work a couple weeks before your grand opening to hire everyone and get them trained, I’ll need you to supplement my salary those weeks since there won’t be tips.”

“Umm, well, I guess,” Brantham sad uncertainly. It wasn’t exactly what he’d thought, but maybe it was the acceptable thing to do.

STARTING DAY

Linda showed up on the designated day. Right away, she had a list of things she wanted changed – tables moved, a different method for setting up tables, and a dozen or so “little adjustments” as she called them. While these things were not always what Brantham had envisioned, he deferred to her experience.

One thing she asked for was a tip jar. She explained, “The way I run things, all the tips are pooled and then divide among the servers based on the hours they work. I keep a spreadsheet of everyone’s hours and what tips we brought in each hour and then divide everything up at the end of the night.”

Brantham asked, “So the person who works hard gets the same as someone who doesn’t?”

“You can’t look at it that way,” Linda replied. “Sometimes you work hard, and the customers are poor tippers.” Again, Brantham wasn’t sure, but reluctantly agreed.

It was four days before opening, and Brantham realized he hadn’t seen anyone coming to interview for positions as waitstaff or bussers. When he asked Linda, she stated, “Oh, I just called people I know and offered them a job. Most of these are people I’ve worked with before. They’ll come in the day before opening and I’ll tell them the set-up here. I’ve got it all under control. By the way, I’ve got a DJ coming for music for opening night.”

This was news to Brantham. They had discussed only live music and Brantham had envisioned acoustical guitars and more of a background music feel. To him, a DJ was going to mean “young crowd music” and not necessarily something he thought his regular customers would like. Of course, they could always come inside if they found the music too loud or decided they didn’t like it.

He wondered if one day of training would be enough for the wait staff. How much background and experience did they have? Would they fit with their existing clientele or would some of their most loyal customers feel like Brantham’s English Pub wasn’t really the same? Brantham was beginning to feel uncomfortable. If

Linda was right, opening day would be a success. If she wasn't – well, it was too late to even consider that!

On opening night, Linda arrived an hour before opening and stayed through closing and clean-up. She waited on customers, helped deliver food, and bussed tables, all while keeping a sharp eye on her staff. While there were some opening day glitches, they were minor things and typical to grand openings. "I guess I was worried about nothing," Brantham reflected.

NOW WHAT?

A couple months later though, Brantham started to rethink that idea. Linda was now showing up for opening and the rush hour and then was gone the rest of the evening, showing up again at closing – mostly to distribute tips. Then she quit coming in at closing, figured tips the next morning and distributed them when the staff came in. One day she didn't show at all; her adult daughter had flu and Linda wanted to stay with her. A couple weeks later, a cousin dies out-of-state, and she needed to be gone for four days – plus she requested an advance on her salary to pay for her travel. Then another daughter had a baby and needed some help. About once a week, she had some excuse why she could not come in. When Brantham brought up how little time she was spending at the pub, Linda told him that she had been hired to manage the staff and she was doing that; it shouldn't matter than some of it was done remotely. Brantham had to admit, there wasn't really any issues with how the staff was working.

There were other things, though. Staff received discounted meals; Linda was using her staff discount for friends and family members. While this was not expressly forbidden, the understanding was that this would be used infrequently. Linda had someone using this discount almost every night, sometimes multiple times. Also, Brantham noticed that Linda always got the largest cut of tips; she claimed that she worked more hours than the rest of the staff and therefore earned more. Brantham had let Linda do the schedules for her staff and hadn't really paid much attention to how many hours each was working. It did seem to him that there were a lot of them but only a few working each night. Maybe this was true.

Yet another example: Brantham had given Linda the combination to the safe in the office; she needed to make change and lock up excess cash. She had passed the number around to nearly all the wait staff, so she wouldn't need to make a trip to the pub to deal with this when things arose while she was gone. Nothing was stolen, but Brantham felt uncomfortable with so many people having access. "Maybe nothing was wrong, but I feel like I'm losing control."

Then there were the rumors. Bands were frequently paid in cash, usually in one-hundred-dollar-bills. Someone had noticed that Linda always seemed to have a hundred-dollar bill in her wallet that she needed change for on these nights – coincidence or some sort of a kickback from the band? Some staff thought that Linda's closest friends got better shifts or better tables more frequently than they did. No one complained directly to Brantham, but the waitstaff interacted with the kitchen staff and Debbie overheard comments from time to time.

Several customers mentioned they knew Linda from some of the other restaurants she had worked at before Brantham's. They were under the impression that she had been asked to leave due to stealing or other underhanded dealings. Brantham noted that his shrinkage was higher with the expansion, but assumed it was due to more business. Now he wasn't sure. "If I'm too critical, she might quit and then I'm in real trouble. If I'd never expanded, I wouldn't be in this situation."

As he finished his ale, Brantham said, "So it's been five months and I'm still not sure if there's a problem or not. If there is, is it me or her? What do I do now?"