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The temperature is higher and things move faster, but restaurant kitchens aren't so different from any other workplace—you've got egos, stress, and the constant pressure to deliver. In this episode, Craig and Annie Stoll, husband and wife owners of the renowned San Francisco-based Delfina Restaurant Group, talk with Stanford Professor Bob Sutton about the organized chaos that rules restaurant kitchens. What keeps everything from going off the rails, the Stolls explain, is predictability and consistency.



Transcript

- One of the first things I do when I walk into one of our kitchens is I go straight to the trash bins, and I'll pick up a can of olive oil, and I'll shake it, and I'll say, "Do you know what that sounds like in there? "Sounds like money.. "That's money, that's olive oil." (upbeat music) - Friction.. (static) This huge psychological burden.. - Without friction, we would not have fire, and we would not have sparks.. - I gotta get a knife.. (man laughing) I gotta hide it, and I end up spending a lot of time ruminating.. (static) (upbeat music) - Hi, I'm Bob Sutton.. I'm an organizational psychologist and Stanford professor, and this is the Friction podcast.. (upbeat music) On today's episode, we're joined by husband and wife restaurateurs, Craig and Annie Stoll.. Craig and Annie own the San Francisco based Italian restaurant group called Delfina..

Running a restaurant is not unlike running a theater production.. There's a hungry audience to satisfy, actors to direct, and it can fly off the rails in a matter of minutes.. We invited Craig and Annie to the podcast because of their experience growing from one to seven restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area.. (upbeat music) Okay, so you said something, Craig, right before, which I just thought was a wonderful jumping off place for the Friction podcast, which is when you run a restaurant, it's like putting on a Broadway play every night.. So now you've got seven restaurants? You're opening your 7th? - Yep.. - So you've got seven different little Broadway plays running, so I hate to start with the negative, but let's start with the negatives, since this is the Friction podcast.. So let's sort of zoom down, and when things start going off the rails in the Broadway play, what happens and what does that look like? - There are so many moving parts.. (laughing) - I mean, it's off the rails every minute.. - Every day.. It's not will something go wrong today? It's what will go wrong today? - Okay, so let me, so this is great..

So you two walk in, and you get a little sick feeling.. Like what's some of the symptoms? - Well, we're pretty used to it by now, but it's not even when we walk in.. It's when we wake up at 6:00 in the morning, and look at our emails.. That's when it starts.. - That's how you know before-- - Oh yeah.. - That's where it starts.. - Oh yeah.. Sometimes, if it's too quiet, it's a little weird.. People aren't around, 'cause it's a, they're a bustling atmosphere.. If you walk in, and it's too quiet, people are missing..

People haven't shown up, so that's always a bad sign.. - Last night, I looked at the reservation books right before opening, probably half an hour before opening, and I noticed that we scheduled a six top when we're not supposed to.. - Oh.. - Financially, we open at 5:00.. They schedule a six top at 6:30, which means that table, most likely, has to sit open for an hour and a half.. - Ah.. - So I called the restaurant, just to find out who wasn't trained properly, and no one answered the phone, and then I called, we have an inside line, and no one answered the inside line.. Everyone's there.. They're, we're about to open, so then I called the restaurant again and-- - Sous chef picked up.. - One of our sous chefs answered, and I said, "What's going on?" I could hear the line, the phone lines ringing in the background, customers calling, and he said, "Oh, we're all in line-up meeting." - That's a pre-shift meeting..

- You need to get downstairs, and get a manager to answer the phones.. - So A, there's a reservation problem, called to resolve the reservation problem.. - And no one's answering the phones.. - And nobody's answering the phones, which means there's a supervision, there's training, there's supervision, there's possibly even the reservation system, there can be issues with, but that's just one-- - It's just typical.. - Right, right, but I like that, 'cause that's a typical little episode that you gotta

stop, you gotta think.. But in that episode, there's all these symptoms that you just described, which is are the people well trained enough? Are they aware enough? 'Cause you just described almost a whole movie to me already, - Are the managers managing? You know, are they supervising? - It doesn't end there.. So then we take that, and this is, like you said, we've got a lot of things we need to look at.. We need to do retraining on the reservation system, we need to figure out why is the reservationist taking her break at the time where the managers need to be in this meeting, and why aren't the managers paying attention, and who is there? - There's just so many moving parts, that if one of them is out of sync, or out of rhythm, it messes everything up, and the dishwashers, right, if the dishwasher is not doing their job, and washing things, and then bringing them out to the dining room, putting them where they're needed, then the servers don't have any spoons to go and set the table with, and it's like, it slows them down, and they're not there for the guest who didn't like their soup, so the guest is upset, 'cause they're flagging down the waiter, and the waiter's off trying to get a spoon, this simple spoon that he needs, because the dishwasher wasn't trained, or is too slow, or didn't show up that night, or whatever, so there's this domino effect.. - I love the vignette of the dish, 'cause you can just see it happening all the way through, that everybody's gotta wait a little bit longer, and then everything just sort of falls apart.. - It compounds, yeah..

So like the play, everybody has to do their part.. - Do the part.. - You need your cues.. - And I like, for you, Annie, describing the things you look at in the morning, 'cause to me that's, it's part of the rhythm.. Reservations.. - Yep.. - What emails have come through, so that way, you got sort of this rhythm to keep track of it.. - I have a very rigid routine.. - So to me, this is fascinating, 'cause one thing we keep finding in places that, as an outsider, it looks like there's no rhythm, that that's one of the main things that saved everybody, 'cause they kind of know when to do what.. It helps in life enormously..

- Yeah.. The whole day is timed out.. - It is interesting, because also in that structure is that you not only create predictability, you actually show respect for everybody's time, 'cause they kinda know what to expect and when to do stuff.. They're not just waiting around.. - Annie's a stickler for meetings starting on time.. - Good for you.. - And keep them to an hour and a half.. - An hour.. - An hour.. - If he's there, it's an hour and a half..

- Yeah, exactly.. I tend to go off.. - I always have to rare him back in, come on, it's time to come back in.. We're talking about something else right now.. - That's the healthy friction.. (upbeat music) - What do you look for in the kind of people you like? How do you train them? What's the sign they're not working? - We look for people who are passionate about the business, because if they're not, there's no way in hell they're gonna continue to do it.. - Okay.. - It's not worth it.. There's way too many hours, way too much stress, and not enough money, and I'm sure every industry says the exact same thing, but.. - Okay, so you've got the passion..

What are the warning signs you look for in an interview or when you do background checks that despite the passion, that you're worried? - Well, I have a friend who hires teachers for a private school, and she was interviewing a woman who was babysitting my daughter.. - Uh-huh.. - And so she asked for a reference, and I didn't realize it was a big deal 'til later, but I said, "Oh, you know, "she's always on time, "and she never smells like alcohol," and Megan thought that was hilarious, but we're talking about the restaurant business here, so don't do drugs, don't drink, make it on time, don't talk negative about your past experiences, have some excitement and passion, but if I'm interviewing someone that can barely look at me, that's talking negative about another, their other experience, they smell like alcohol, they're late, they're dressed shabbily, I mean, we get it all, all the time.. - It's a different industry, you know? - It's a different industry.. - The expectations are different, I guess.. - You know, the only thing that I really get compliments on, for the last 20 years, is I know how to hire.. Ever since we opened, I can tell right away when I meet somebody whether they have anger issues.. - Ooh.. - Whether they actually-- - We should make an official screener for the no asshole role.. - Yes, I'd love that..

(laughing) I can tell within the first five minutes.. - Really, wow! - I can tell within the first five minutes, yeah.. - And in your business, there's a lot of things to set off anger, because of you're in a rush and under pressure.. - Yeah, and you can't give good hospitality if you're an angry person, and with that pressure, that anger'll come out it, and it might come out in a passive aggressive way.. You can just sort of tell, as a guest, if someone's not a warm, friendly, loving person.. - My understanding, from some of our mutual friends, and knowing this kind of, not everybody works out.. So what's the sign that somebody isn't working out? - If they're sending emails at 4:00 in the morning, that's a huge red flag.. Like we just saw this morning, when I woke up.. Why is this person, at 4:00 in the morning, sending emails or something? - Okay.. - There's something wrong..

- There's certain terminology that people sometimes use.. People will say, "I'm confused," and when they say that, they generally mean, "I'm pissed off." (laughing) - Management wise, just not following directions, not following the SOPs, consistently getting things wrong.. It's usually a drug or alcohol problem.. - So that's the red-- - We find-- - Those are the temptations of the industry, right? - Yeah.. - Yep.. - We'll see that they lose confidence of the people they're in charge of.. - Oh, that's interesting.. - We'll sense that the people that they're leading don't have the confidence in them, and sometimes, they'll come to us for things, instead of going to them.. As soon as we see that start to happen, it's definitely a sign.. - Or they'll say, the service staff will say, "I don't feel safe." - Oh, yeah, there's that..

- Ooh! - Meaning during service, they don't feel supported, they don't feel that their leader has their back, and so they feel, and they've used the word unsafe quite a lot, so they're not-- - So that's not like, physically safe.. That means that I can't do my job.. I don't feel supported.. If something's wrong, somebody's not gonna step in and help me.. - It's like a sport.. It's like

being a soccer player on the field, and you don't have your coach with you, so you're not sure what you're supposed to do, or if something goes wrong, that they're gonna have your back.. So servers will walk in, and they'll see who's managing, and they'll either have a big sigh of relief, or they'll be really nervous, depending on who's managing.. - Response time, too, is a thing we're really big on.. We demand a lot our staff.. They've gotta perform at a top level..

It's super competitive.. We want a great product, and we need to give them tools to do their job, whether it's training or emotional support or encouragement, or whether it's literally blenders and small wares, and things that they need to use, and if stuff's broken or not there, we expect our managers to fix it and have it working well, always.. (upbeat music) - So one thing we haven't talked about very much is the guest, 'cause you're now, at least my vision.. You're in much different mini markets, sort of, so you've got much different sort of customers, and the fact is that there's some customers who are great and wonderful, and there are some customers who make everybody miserable.. Talk about friction.. - Yeah.. - So let's start with a good customer.. - We have a lot of good customers.. I mean, Delfina's been open for almost 20 years, and we've got people, we have guests who have standing reservations.. Every single Sunday night, they come in and sit in table 11B..

They come in at 5:30.. They leave at 6:30.. We book that table at 6:30.. That's every Saturday night.. We have other guests that come in every Sunday night, and we have guests that come in that have been coming in since we opened.. We call them the patio people, which is a whole 'nother story.. - But just amazing people, who love the food and the wine, and will call to see what's on the menu, or they'll check online and come running in, if one of their favorite things is on that night.. - I mean, it's so cliché, but they're like family.. Those are our good customers.. - So those are your good customers? - Yes..

- Okay, so now let's, it's part of the business.. So who's difficult, and what do you do about them? - We had one recent episode with the guy who was really disrespectful to our management.. He's always a problem, and he comes in, and he's very demanding.. He was a known person that puts everyone on edge when he comes in, and he's very rude and very demanding, and tells us to turn the music down, and my manager had made reference to him a couple of times, and they deal with him, but he was really out of hand one day, and started calling one of my managers names, and telling her she's fat or whatever, and so she kicked him out, and he reached out to me, you know, how dare you, and we stick up for our staff.. - And it was interesting.. He continued to follow up with a series of emails, demanding an explanation.. - Or he would Yelp us.. - And demanding, yeah, basically threatening to-- Write a negative Yelp review.. - Yeah, not just Yelp, but he said social media, I'm gonna destroy you on social media.. But it was interesting, and a certain point, we just had to, we just did not respond..

We stopped responding.. We just didn't wanna engage anymore.. - I will say lately, and I've been talking to my staff about that, the public seems really angry right now, and one person, and I'm getting these stories a lot.. She ordered a clam pie, clam pizza.. - Clam pizza.. - Went to go pick it up, among other things, and we were out.. We were out of it.. We were out of clams, and she lost it, was screaming at my general manager, demanded she go across the street to Mollie Stone's and buy clams, and make the pizza.. Just really awful and rude, and I've been hearing, I was hearing these stories from different restaurants about sort of being abused a little by the public, and these are kids working for us, that are getting screamed at by the public, and they're in the hospitality business, so they're not allowed to do anything about it, and I just think it's really important, and Craig and I really support them, and they'll email and say this person did this.. They said they're gonna write you, and I said, "Well, when they write me, "then I'm gonna give them a piece of my mind "by the way they treated you..

"That's what's gonna happen here." - I think we draw the line at that, if they're abusive toward our staff.. - I was at a restaurant recently where a woman sent back her bacon because it wasn't crisp enough two times.. I just, what? - Oh, no.. This happens all the time.. All the time.. - Oh yeah.. They need to leave feeling good.. - Right, right, right.. - We need to give them a good experience, and if it takes sending the bacon back twice, we'll take care of it.. - So Jacob Jabber, he's the CEO of Phil's Coffee now, so I interviewed him for my last book on assholes, and he talked about their mantra, and they have much shorter interactions with customers than you do, by the way, so it's kind of a different thing, but he said, "Our base thing is we kill 'em with kindness," and they even use the Michelle Obama thing, "When they go low, "we go high." Does that sound familiar? - Yes, absolutely, 100%..

In fact, it's a challenge for our managers.. They like that challenge.. I'll take this one.. Who's gonna take this one? I'll take this one.. - So they show 'em as much love as possible.. - Yeah, that's what they need.. They are unhappy.. - They also come to a restaurant, a lot of people come to restaurants for more than the food and service.. They come craving something more.. (upbeat music) I think it goes in such a micro level, too..

Depending on the restaurant, my involvement in the kitchen can, like at Delfina, we don't have a chef de cuisine, which would be the chef in charge of that restaurant at the moment, so I'm more involved.. So I'm on the phone in the morning talking about the size of the cauliflower we're gonna use for that night's menu.. - Yeah, what's this with cauliflower? Everywhere I go, there's cauliflower.. It wasn't there three years ago.. - It's the hottest.. It's the trend.. - I had cauliflower like nine, including at your restaurant, like nine different ways in the last two years.. - No, we've had it in our pizzeria menu for years.. - One farmer is growing us little fist sized heads that we're serving a whole head, a whole little head as a vegetable side dish at Delfina, so on any given day, I can be talking to our chef or the farmer himself about little teeny heads of cauliflower, or the plumber about, or people, investors, or you know, it's just, there's a lot that takes place, and it's really all over the map.. - So you started out with this restaurant of 12 people..

Now you're up to the 7th restaurant you're gonna open.. How does what the two of you do, how has that evolved and changed? - We hired a lot more people to help us.. - Structure.. - Structure.. - Yeah, we struggle with that.. - So what is the stuff that you feel like you have to keep doing personally as long as possible? - We still personally do the new hire orientations.. Every six weeks, it's the Annie and Craig show.. - I don't like doing them, but I think they are the most important thing.. It's very important that our culture and values, that everybody knows and understands them, so we have our mission statement and our core values that we live by, that everyone needs to live by, so those orientations, we go through the mission statement and the core values, and how we started and who we are.. So that can never change..

My roles changed a lot.. We both decided recently that it's important that I'm more involved with the HR department as we grow.. So we have an HR director, but it's so important that the owner is really involved with what's going on in HR, because that's something that cannot break in any way.. - Right.. - So I'm spending, I'd say 50% of my time with my HR director building that up, and making sure that that's-- - Well, given how the two of you have described the business, if you don't have the right people in the right place, and you're not keeping track of what's going on, then nothing else can happen.. - Right.. We recently lost our General Manager and Assistant General Manager at Delfina, and I went in to step in, and it was actually a big mistake.. It was not, I can't go step in on that level anymore, whereas I used to, when we opened Delfina, I would often host or always manage, but once we got management, and once we started growing, I would fill in as a manager at various restaurants, and then I stopped doing that, and now, years later, for me to fill in at that level just, first of all, I don't know how to do anything.. (laughing) Right? And I got involved in such, you know, the level of what the server shifts want, and what they need, so once I left, they were still coming to me, and my new General Manager was like, what word did he use? - He felt undermined.. - He said, "You undermined me "by answering this person, "when I'm the manager now." - Wait, so this is really interesting..

What are the details that you still really, 'cause you both are talking about how important the little things, what are the details that you still think you have to focus on? Because there are some little details, and what do you think you can't let go? - I get the emails directed to me from every restaurant.. I see the emails that come through from every single restaurant, and I also see everything that's uploaded to Box in our Cloud to keep my finger on the pulse, and I also, first thing in the morning, at 6:00 in the morning, with my coffee, I go through the reservation books, and I'll never stop doing that.. - Okay, well, that's the flow of money and people.. What about food? We were talking earlier about little baby cauliflower, and that sounded, actually, pretty cool.. You see to know a lot about little baby cauliflower.. - That actually excites me, much better than HR.. (laughing) I don't call it micromanaging.. I call it managing.. - Right.. - Because there's so many details, so it's hard..

Sometimes, I feel like if I let go of something, I come back to it later, and it's spiraled out of control or it's degenerated.. - So I'll give you a, I'll tell you a little apocryphal story.. I don't even know if it's true, but I heard it from multiple sources.. So apparently, Steve Jobs had an obsession with the bags at the Apple Store in the early days, which, it doesn't seem like Steve Jobs would be at the level where he'd really care about the bags, but the reason he thought the bags were so important was if you have a cheap bag, it feels like you bought something cheap.. When you have an expensive bag, it's like the last thing you touch.. So that's the kind of detail.. Is there stuff like that out there? - Oh yeah.. Every restaurant I walk into, I immediately adjust the lights and music.. Cleanliness, I mean, I look for smudges in mirrors, I look for-- - Recycling.. - Recycling, composting, and trash..

So one of the first things I do when I walk into one of our kitchens is I go straight to their composting bin, and the trash bins, and the recycling, and I'll pick up a can of olive oil, and I'll shake it, and I'll say, "Do you know what that sounds like in there? "It sounds like money.. "That's money, that's olive oil." Or I'll look and say, celery that's cut when there's three inches of it left, or four inches of it left, or if they're trimming the frisee too closely, so there's a lot, I look for waste, but I also look for the quality of product as the absolutely first thing, and I'm up in everybody's stuff, and when I walk into any of our locations-- - So in that situation, by the little things, you're setting the tone for how they should behave when you're not there.. - Yes, ideally.. Tasting and eating the food, I'll schedule how and what I eat throughout the day to coincide with what restaurant I plan to be at and when so that I'm actually hungry enough to taste a few things.. If I'm just there for a meeting, if I'm just there to check in, whatever, but I'll always at least get a few things to eat.. (upbeat music) - Annie and Craig, it's been great to talk with you.. I've had a great time, and I can hardly wait to go eat at one of your restaurants.. I think it's time to go back to Locanda, especially.. Thanks so much.. - Thank you..

It's been so much fun.. - Thanks for having us.. (upbeat music) - The big thing I took from Craig and Annie was the importance of maintaining rhythm, creating predictability for yourself and your team shows respect for everyone's time, and can help you spot when something or someone is falling out of sync.. (upbeat music) Please spread the word about The Friction podcast.. Rate and review us on iTunes, and share your favorite episodes with your colleagues, your family, and even your therapist.. On the next episode, we will be joined by Hayagreeva Rao.. Hayagreeva is a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and my partner in crime on The Friction Project.. Together, we're going to share some of the lessons we've learned about organizational friction so far.. And now, for the final tangent.. - We opened Delfina with, we got an SBA loan for part of it, and we maxed out a stack of credit cards for the rest..

- So you did the classic of maxing out all your credit cards and just hoping you could make it the first few months.. - It's the definition of bootstrapping.. - Yeah, yeah.. - We didn't really have much to lose.. - Yeah.. - We kinda started with nothing.. - And then the space, the rent was cheaper than our apartments, so we figured we could move in, but I was in the kitchen every

day, cooking and working, and Annie was running the front of the house.. There were nights we slept on the banquettes, we were so tired.. So anyway, it was popular right out of the gate, and we got great reviews, and the house was packed, and within a year, we were able to expand.. - We got to pay back his grandma, his ex-wife..

(laughing) - But yeah, so we expanded it after, about a year and a half in, we expanded.. We doubled the size, and then in doing so, we got things like heat.. (laughing) - Storage.. - Storage.. We used to store the wine under the banquette, and people would open the cases and steal bottles from, while they were having dinner.. (upbeat music) - We can't do this without you.. Tell us what's driving you crazy and what are you doing to make life better in your organization, for yourself, and for the people that you work with? Please send us your friction stories, tips and tricks.. We'd loved to hear from you via Twitter @ECorner, or please send us an email at stvp-ecorner@stanford.edu.. (upbeat music) The Friction podcast is a Stanford ECorner original series, brought to you by Stanford Technology Ventures program, and Designing Organizational Change.. Friction is produced by Rachel Jill Kowski, and Alli Rico..

Jake Smith and Stife Studios are our editor and audio engineers.. Susie Allen and Victoria Johnson are our writing and marketing.. Danielle Stucey is our designer and digital products manager, and I'm Bob Sutton.. Thanks for joining us.. This is the Friction podcast.. (upbeat music)..