

The Army Was Tough, But Restaurants Made Her Cry – Lessons From the Drive-Thru From a Former KFC Exec

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Monica Rothgery is a natural leader. She has trained army soldiers, managed fast-food restaurant teams, built international franchise locations, and wrote a book about it all called *Lessons from the Drive-Thru: Real Life Wisdom for Frontline Leaders*.

The leadership journey fueled her unique approach to restaurant management and a mission to uplift frontline leaders. Serving in the Army gave her important skills that the former KFC Chief Operating Officer carries to this day as an author and speaker.

“Getting trained by the U.S. Army to become an officer is some of the best leadership training there is,” Rothgery said to Shawn Walchef, host of the Restaurant Influencers podcast.

But when she transitioned from military leadership to managing a fast-food restaurant, culture shock set in. There was no manual for leading people who had no prior professional training.

She quickly learned that the expectations set for soldiers, who received weeks of even the most basic training, didn’t translate to the world of restaurant team members. Many were starting their first jobs.

“When I told soldiers they had to do something, they had to do it. If I told a team member to do something, they could just leave, and sometimes they did.”

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The lesson she learned was that to lead effectively in this new environment, Rothgery needed to inspire her team on a much deeper level.

Caring about these people as individuals first, not just team members, was the key to getting them to care about the restaurant and the customers. This was a big change from leading an army unit. To inspire differently, she had to care differently.

Storytelling and a passion for recognition are at the heart of Rothgery’s leadership philosophy.

Her career soon gave her opportunities to test these across cultures. When she moved to Southeast Asia to help build KFC locations in Thailand, she brought the idea of using stories to inspire and unite. “Does appreciation transcend culture?” she asked.

The results surprised her: by focusing on recognition, appreciation, and storytelling, she motivated her team to outperform even their own expectations. Language barriers and cultural differences didn’t stop them from becoming their best.

Despite the successes, she still had a tough road ahead. The local culture was so risk-averse. The pressure to succeed made the fear of failure immobilizing. She recalled a particularly humbling moment when her team in Thailand was slow to embrace her strategies.

“I told the team, ‘I’m going to teach whoever wants to

learn,'" Rothgery said. Out of eight in the original meeting, only two people showed up for leadership training.

Over time, it worked. One of those in that training became the COO of a franchise group. "That was a win," Rothgery reflected.

Lessons from the Drive-Thru

Rothgery's book, *Lessons from the Drive-Thru*, takes readers behind the scenes of her journey. She shares the hard-earned wisdom from her toughest days as a frontline leader.

Written for restaurant managers, her book distills leadership down to its core: "This is every mistake I ever made, all of the bad shifts and late nights," she explained.

The book focuses on the stories from Rothgery's early career in the 1990s, particularly her time as a general manager at Taco Bell.

"Being a restaurant general manager was the hardest job I ever had, way harder than being in the army," Rothgery said. "I quit every day in my head, but I always came back the next day."

Her stories are raw and honest. She empathizes with restaurant teams because she has been with them in those trenches. She believes good leadership can leave a legacy and change someone forever.

"I wrote this book for frontline leaders," Rothgery emphasized. "The ones who think their job is just running the next shift. But they have the power to shape lives—most importantly, the lives of the people they manage."

For Rothgery, the real heroes of the restaurant industry are those in leadership who deal with the pressures of daily operations, customer satisfaction, and team dynamics. "Your

job is so much bigger than you believe. You change lives,” she said, urging restaurant managers to see the immense value in their roles.

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“You’re not the bottom rung of the food chain in careers. You’re a coach, a teacher, a pillar in your community.”

As her book continues to reach more readers, Rothgery remains on a mission to empower restaurant teams and show their value in the industry. “My dream is to lift them up and help them realize their potential,” she said. In her next book, she plans to expand on unlocking that potential from the bottom up.

“Frontline leaders are so often doing the job of the person underneath them, but if we could get everyone doing their own role, we unlock growth.”

About *Restaurant Influencers*

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