SHIFT WORK FORWARD

The Crew Comes First

Inside Burgatory's Journey to Build a Financially Smarter, Stronger, and More Empowered Team

By Darren Dahl

In 2019, the leadership team at Burgatory—a restaurant chain with seven locations in and around Pittsburgh—was preparing for liftoff. After years of steady growth and buzzworthy acclaim—"Best Burger in Pittsburgh" kind of acclaim—the team was gearing up for a private equity deal that could take their quirky, high-quality burger-and-milkshake brand national. What they didn't know was that their plan would be upended and their path to evolve as a business would come in a very different way.

Burgatory wasn't just a concept restaurant; it was the crown jewel of a hospitality group with deep family roots in Pittsburgh, a lineage that stretched back to beloved local joints like Fuel and Fuddle and Uncle Sam's. Many members of the executive team—including Vic Bovalino, president and operating-partner of Burgatory—had worked their way up from dish pits and grill stations. Growing the business wasn't theoretical; it was personal.

"We were having those exciting talks," recalled Alexis Bovalino, Vic's daughter, who had grown up working in the business and had recently returned to the company as HR Director. "Our executive team was putting on blazers, meeting with investors, and walking them through stores. There was real energy—the sense that this brand could go big."

Then COVID hit.

In March 2020, the world shut down. So did full-service dining. And so did the dream of national expansion.

"It was like flipping a switch," Vic said. "One week, we were fielding investor calls. Then, we were on the phone with every single employee, figuring out how to keep them afloat."

Rather than retreating into panic or implementing slash-and-burn layoffs, the leadership team pursued a different approach. They cut their own salaries, applied for PPP loans, and

used the pause to reflect deeply on their actions.

"We asked: if we had the chance to rebuild this business for the next 10 years, what would we change?" Alexis recalled.

That moment of reflection sparked a quiet revolution—not flashy menu changes or interior redesigns, but a ground-up reinvention of how Burgatory operated. They began tracking line-level costs more aggressively. They examined whether their systems—financial, operational, and leadership—could truly scale. And when the dust of the pandemic began to settle, they realized they wanted more than just recovery.

They wanted resilience. And they were about to get help building that from an unexpected source.

A Door Opens

In the spring of 2023, Alexis received a call from Bonny Yeager at Partner4Work, the Pittsburgh-area workforce development board. Bonny had been actively seeking restaurants to join a pilot project with the National Fund for Workforce Solutions (now Shift Work Forward). The goal: help companies enhance job quality—not just wages or benefits, but also voice, career mobility, and long-term engagement. And that wanted to do that by teaching them how to play the Great Game of Business, a team-based system that teaches employees how the business works—so they can make smarter decisions, win together, and share in the rewards. Burgatory stood out from the beginning as a great candidate to play.

"They were already transparent," Bonny said. "They'd been running employee surveys. They promoted from within. They were already thinking about how to build real careers in hospitality. We didn't have to sell them on that. They were already there."

The timing was ideal. Burgatory had spent the past two years rethinking everything—from food costs to organizational charts. However, they still needed to build the financial literacy and systems necessary for everyone, from line cook to CFO, to communicate in the same operational language.

Bonny offered something new: a chance to partner with a GGOB-certified coach and participate in a national pilot to see if open-book management could work in full-service restaurants.

"We said yes," Alexis said, "but honestly, we had no idea what we were getting into."

Laying the Foundation

Coach Anne-Claire Broughton came on board that fall. She'd seen the GGOB work in, commercial laundries, marketing firms, coffee roasters, and manufacturing companies—but never across seven restaurants at once.

"The first question was: where do we even begin?" Anne-Claire said. "Do we try to train every restaurant team at once? Do we start with one store?"

Ultimately, they decided to start at the top—with Burgatory's admin team. The design team included HR (Alexis), Finance, Culinary, Beverage, Training, and Operations—most of whom had come up through the restaurants themselves. Vic, still leading day-to-day operations, was the numbers guy. Others were what Alexis called "restaurant smart": creative, customer-focused, and deeply committed, but not fluent in EBITDA (profit) or forecasting.

"There was a lot of friction at first," Alexis recalled. "It wasn't that we disagreed—we just didn't understand each other's language."

But that started to change. They learned to huddle. They practiced forecasting. They studied their financials not just as reports, but as stories—stories of food waste, scheduling gaps, labor trends, and opportunity. They played their first MiniGame—targeting runaway costs on ramekins and other smallwares—and saved $26,000.

"It gave us proof of concept," said Vic. "The numbers weren't abstract anymore. They were something we could teach. And they were something we could change."

Training 500 People in 3 Days

By the spring of 2024, the admin team at Burgatory was ready. They had spent nearly half a year building their financial muscles—forecasting, tracking variances, running MiniGames (short, focused, team-driven competitions designed to improve a specific business outcome), and even splitting responsibility for projections: Vic handled revenue; the controller tracked expenses; and Amber Barbusio, the officer manager, took charge of labor. They laughed. They argued. They challenged each other.

"We were definitely mixing art and science," Pam said. "Some weeks, the numbers looked like jazz. But we were starting to make music."

Now it was time to bring the entire company into the game.

With Anne-Claire's help, the team planned a bold move: a three-day, all-team launch across all seven locations. It would be like a traveling roadshow—games, prizes, training, and coaching, all on the restaurant patios while stores stayed open. The goal? Train 500 employees on the basics of open-book management, from how a dollar of revenue gets spent to what drives each store's profit. The admin team took turns, with half keeping the restaurant open and the other half presenting with Anne-Claire.

"Half of us were the teachers," said Alexis. "Meanwhile, the CFO was washing dishes. Vic was greeting guests. I was taking orders. We wanted the crew to see that we weren't just talking about culture. We were living it."

Each session featured games like Family Feud to teach direct costs, labor rates, and gross margin. They tossed Burgatory swag—hats, socks, t-shirts—into the crowd. They told real stories about how small choices (like not throwing away ramekins) added up to big results.

"It wasn't about dumbing it down," Amber explained. "It was about showing respect — meeting people where they were and giving them the tools to think like owners."

"GGOB made it clear that we're all in this together," Lisa Marthens, Beverage Director. "Before, the numbers were there, but now we understand what they mean. That changes how you show up."

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>
> **PAM OSWALD**
> Accounting Clerk, Burgatory

Local Stores, Local Scoreboards

One of the biggest lessons from the launch was this: no two Burgatory locations are the same.

"Robinson is in a mall. North Shore is next to a stadium. Fox Chapel has a very different crowd from Cranberry," said Vic. "So why would we hold them to the same numbers?"

Anne-Claire and the admin team worked with each general manager to develop customized scoreboards. Every store had a critical number, but their EBIDTA targets varied depending on traffic patterns, seating layouts, and even liquor licenses. Each store picked a name, a mascot, and a MiniGame. The culture of competition took off.

"We enhanced the Burgatory Cup," Amber said. "It's a monthly contest—who's forecasting accurately? Who's driving margins? Who's owning their scoreboard?"

Pam, who now helps forecast for multiple stores, described the shift as subtle but profound.

"Before GGOB, managers would say things like 'I think it'll be busy this weekend.' Now they're looking at last year's comps, weather forecasts, labor plans—and then challenging each other to beat it."

Shifting the Business

Meanwhile, hourly staff started stepping up. One bartender took charge of liquor tracking. A line cook who never spoke up in meetings began asking smart questions about food cost. People began to see the connection between daily decisions and monthly bonuses.

"People started caring more, not because someone told them to, but because they understood why it mattered," Jake Gardner, General Manager at the Cranberry location. "That's the real culture shift."

- **A Silverware Recovery MiniGame: The first big win—$26,000 saved. "We used to throw away $26,000 in silverware a year," said Jake. "That's like tossing out a car. Culture is what stops that. Or doesn't."**
- **Cheese Vendor Switch: A taste test proved that the cheaper cheese was better. Savings: $45,000.**
- **Liquor Tracking: Switching from a clipboard to a Google Sheet saved $6,000 and gave bartenders visibility into their pour costs.**
- **Cleaning Challenge: Prepping for health inspections turned into a game. One site cut cleaning time from three hours to 45 minutes—and passed with flying colors.**

Playing MiniGames weren't just gimmicks. They were problem-solving engines.

"It gave people a reason to care—and a way to act," said Anne-Claire.

A Culture in Motion

By late 2024, Burgatory wasn't just doing GGOB. They were living it. Amber, who started as a server and now helps run payroll and tax reconciliation, became known for her "Amber Alerts"—error catches in forecasts or vendor bills that saved the company money.

"We turned that into a game, too," Alexis said. "Who can catch the next Amber Alert?"

"We started catching each other—in a good way," said Ralph Davies, Kitchen Manager at the Cranberry location. "If someone saves a silver bullet from going in the trash, we celebrate it. That shift made a huge difference."

Meanwhile, Vic began noticing something new at the Friday leadership huddles. "There was less defensiveness," he said. "More curiosity. Managers weren't just reporting numbers — they were asking, 'How can we get better?' That's when I knew it was working."

By early 2025, the effects of the Great Game of Business at Burgatory were no longer theoretical. They were showing up in ways that could be seen, measured, and most importantly, felt.

On paper, the wins were clear: Store-level initiatives saved tens of thousands annually on food, liquor, and supplies while locations like Robinson, Cranberry, and Waterfront were hitting their EBITDA goals.

"We saw the numbers move," Vic said. "But the bigger change was cultural. People started seeing themselves as contributors, not just workers."

"You can't build a culture like this without the right people," said Nina Maroney, the Bar Manager at the Cranberry location. "You need a staff that wants to grow and a foundation that invites them in."

Financial Smarts at Every Level

Before GGOB, Burgatory had some financial tools in place—general managers could access sales reports and inventory summaries. But few understood how they could personally influence the numbers.

"We had information," Vic admitted. "What we didn't have was engagement."

That shifted dramatically after GGOB. Now, line cooks forecast food costs. Bartenders track liquor waste. Hosts and servers participate in MiniGames that focus on upselling and gathering guest feedback.

"Forecasting became a team sport," said Amber. "It's not just guesswork. We look at last year's numbers, adjust for seasonality, and factor in special events. It's a real conversation."

Pam herself, once new to hospitality after a career in banking, found herself leading financial training at Homestead. "I'm not just doing the books anymore," she said. "I'm part of building a business."

The ripple effect extended across the company. One veteran chef, once skeptical of forecasting, started bringing his team together weekly to predict food costs—and beat them.

"They didn't just hit targets," Alexis said. "They built pride."

"It's the kind of growth that sticks," said Anne-Claire. "Because it's rooted in ownership, not orders from above."

Career Pathways and Promotions

Perhaps the most significant change was how GGOB enabled career mobility within the restaurants.

"We've always promoted from within," Vic said. "But now we have a structure to support it."

Since launching GGOB, Burgatory has seen a wave of internal promotions, with line cooks advancing to shift leaders and kitchen managers. Servers stepped into Assistant General Manager roles. Former hosts joined training teams. And it wasn't just title changes. It was financial mobility. Several managers crossed the threshold into $55,000–$65,000 annual salaries—an actual living wage for the Pittsburgh region.

"That's life-changing money," Bonny Yeager from Partner4Work noted. "And it came not from outside hires, but from building up their own people."

MiniGames and forecasting became valuable developmental tools. For example, a bartender learned to track inventory variance during a MiniGame. That experience served as a stepping-stone to managing liquor cost control for his entire location—a role that later facilitated his move into management training.

"If you care, you stay," said Nina Maroney. "If you don't, you won't last here. That's how we built a team of people who are in it for the right reasons."

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>
> **VIC BOVALINO**
> President and Co-Owner, Burgatory

Challenges Along the Way

The journey wasn't all smooth. Not everyone bought in immediately. Some locations struggled more than others. At Fox Chapel, a historically slower location, traffic patterns and staffing challenges made it difficult to meet targets. At North Shore, winter months remain brutal for sales.

"We had to be realistic," Vic said. "You can't bonus your way out of traffic that isn't there."

They also learned hard lessons about timing bonuses. Early on, bonuses were tied to quarterly performance, but one bad month could wipe out a quarter's worth of progress.

"That crushed morale," Alexis admitted. "So we switched to monthly bonuses, which kept momentum higher and disappointment lower."

Training GMs to be financial coaches—not just managers—also took time.

"At first, some felt overwhelmed," said Anne-Claire. "But once they saw it wasn't about becoming accountants—it was about telling better stories with numbers—it clicked."

Hidden Wins: Dignity, Confidence, and Vice

Beyond the financial results, the culture shift could be seen in smaller, quieter ways.

Frontline crew members started speaking up in huddles, offering ideas on labor scheduling and food waste. New hires learned GGOB principles in orientation. Surveys revealed improved engagement in areas such as communication, accountability, and career development.

Employees also reported personal growth.

"We've heard stories about people using forecasting lessons to budget better at home," Alexis said. "Managing a family grocery bill isn't that different from managing a store's food cost."

One employee said that playing MiniGames on liquor tracking helped her get out of credit card debt. Another said learning about labor costs inspired him to finally pursue a manager-in-training role—something he never thought he was "smart enough" for before.

"That's the magic of this work," Bonny said. "It's not just about margins. It's about dignity."

Sustaining the Momentum

As of spring 2025, the Burgatory team continues to push ahead with the GGOB. They continue to refine their practices, using third-party tracking from Working Metrics to assess long-term impact on wages, promotions, and retention. They're investing in coaching leadership skills at the GM and AGM levels.

And perhaps most exciting: they're mentoring other restaurants in the region who want to try open-book management.

"We want to be a beacon," said Alexis. "We want to show that you can run a profitable, growing business—and put your crew first."

Or, as Vic put it: "Margins matter. Profitability matters. But so does pride. So does belonging. When you build both, you're not just surviving the next wave. You're surfing it."

Thinking like that is why Burgatory's future looks brighter than ever before.

Lessons from the Game — Advice for Other Restaurants

Burgatory's journey into the Great Game of Business offers a powerful blueprint for other restaurant operators. Here's what they would tell others thinking about making a similar leap:

1. **Start at the Top — But Don't Stop There**

   Building financial literacy began with the admin team. However, the real magic occurred when frontline employees became involved.

2. **Customize the Game to Your Business**

   Burgatory didn't try to impose a one-size-fits-all scoreboard. Every location had its own critical number, its own personality, and its own path.

3. **Make Financial Literacy Fun**

   Turning numbers into competitions—with swag, bragging rights, and real prizes on the line—made financial training sticky, memorable, and energizing.

4. **Share the Numbers — But Teach the Story**

   Burgatory moved from financial disclosure to financial literacy—a much deeper investment that paid off in smarter decisions at every level.

5. **Don't Underestimate the Emotional Impact**

   Team members who once felt powerless—who thought profits were for 'the suits'—now saw a direct line between their daily actions and their own bonuses. That changed how they showed up for guests, for each other, and for themselves.

6. **Play the Long Game**

   Today, the rhythms of GGOB—including huddles, forecasts, MiniGames, and celebrations—are deeply ingrained in the culture. They're as much a part of Burgatory's brand as the hand-cut fries or boozy shakes.

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About Shift Work Forward

Shift Work Forward is redefining what workforce systems can achieve—making them more inclusive, responsive, and effective. Its work is powered by a network of local leaders who understand their communities and the impact of racial inequities on the people they serve. Shift Work Forward equips its Network Partners with tools, resources, and a national platform to test ideas, celebrate progress, and share what's working. Together, they influence the systems that shape workers' lives—improving job quality, informing workplace practices, and advancing a future where every worker can thrive and every job is a good job.