

The renovation process took about eight months to be completed to all the partners' satisfaction. Michael then chose a new name for the store. In 2008, the restaurant reopened in a quiet way, as "Upside Down." There was reason to be optimistic when it reopened; the redesigned interior was extremely pleasant with artistic touches and appealing earth tones, the bar was well designed and located in the middle of the restaurant, and the neighborhood had a promising mix of potential customers.

However, from the start, Upside Down was unable to capitalize on these advantages. The reasons were both strategic and operational. There was unresolved confusion between the partners about how to position Upside Down—should it present itself as a family restaurant, a quasi-professionals eatery, or a late night bar hangout? Each one of these had a potential customer pool. A persistent concern was whether any one such niche would be large enough to sustain the business and help it grow. Being very narrowly defined might cut out certain groups from the mix. The partners tried to balance all these different customer needs and requirements by having both a bar and an extensive menu, offering eclectic items as well as traditional, comfort food, with a wide range of pricing. Then it seemed that in trying to be all things to all people, there was a danger that Upside Down was not being especially attractive to any of them.

Another serious issue was that of staffing. As a restaurant, having a good staff was critical to its success. However, the restaurant business is notorious for turnover and it appeared that Upside Down did not escape that curse, indeed having it worse than many others. One of the initial partners was a chef/manager, Johnny, who had been recommended by one of the partners. Within a short time of reopening, it became clear that he was not up to the task of running the restaurant. Stephen recommended that he be terminated from the job and the partnership, and that was done. Since then Georgia had to fill in as intermittent manager, as many employees were hired and fired as chief chefs or managers. There was also churn in other positions such as wait staff and bartender. One announcement for a bartender position drew about 800 responses, but barely a handful of them were qualified and passed muster in other respects.

For Georgia, one irritating problem was that she was soon pushed into the role of the chief decision-maker and emergency manager of Upside Down. Soon after opening, the restaurant was faced with a series of operational issues, such as: a bartender found drinking on the job one day, the chef insisting on making his own dish rather than the one listed on the menu, and a sudden visit by a neighborhood magazine to write a review. All these situations needed immediate decisions and action, and there seemed to be nobody other than Georgia to pick up that slack. That state of affairs continued, hence her trek to the restaurant on a blustery Saturday morning.

The more serious and nagging concern on Georgia's mind, however, was not about the operational challenges. It was about the status and future of the partnership.

Family, Friend, or Partner?

In running Food Station, Georgia was used to complete control in making all levels of decisions. She and her husband were co-owners; they worked in complete harmony and with a unified vision.

However, the partnership at Upside Down was a completely different experience. Each of the partners appeared to have a different vision and wildly varying levels of commitment, among themselves, and even for the same person over time. In the beginning, there was considerable enthusiasm and each partner made the required initial financial investment readily. Over time there was erosion in their quality of commitment and involvement. Although ready to proffer expert opinions and directives, nobody else seemed ready to contribute in more tangible ways. The responsibility for the business enterprise fell on Georgia and Michael.