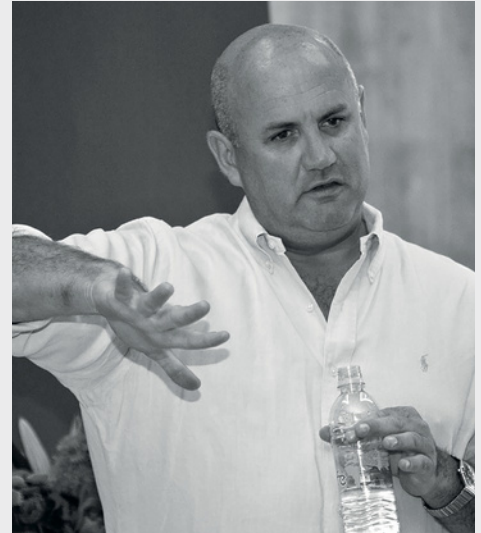


Transforming Business Leadership: The Origin and Approach of The Engine Room with Co-Founder Mike Lucy



If you have ever eaten at one of London's many cultural institutes the chances are you will have been hosted by the hospitality company, Company of Cooks, the brain child of former CEO, founder and owner, Mike Lucy. Mike's former company (merged with CH&Co in 2019) served up food & drink throughout the likes of The Southbank Centre, Royal Opera House, Royal Academy of Arts, National Portrait Gallery, Imperial War Museum, RHS Gardens Wisley, Regents Park and Chiswick House.

We had the opportunity to catch up with Mike on how he transformed Company of Cooks into a multimillion-pound business and why he has now turned his attention to using that experience in co-founding The Engine Room. Mike and his team spent decades sculpting his contract catering business spanning multiple notable sites throughout parks, heritage and performance venues. Expanding from a single site - Kenwood House - into one of the leading hospitality businesses in London and surrounding counties, transforming contract catering by creating contemporary food and drink experiences/brands that complement the beauty of the parks or the talent on the stages and in the galleries they sit alongside.

He believes The Engine Room approach is a big part of what drove his success, and now feels this approach can offer a real solution for all hospitality businesses wanting to move beyond survival mode and really thrive. It perhaps offers a much needed lifeline for business

owners especially as we witness more key players closing the doors to established restaurants, all claiming their business model has become unsustainable in the current adverse conditions. [\[link To Caterer Article\]](#)

When facing setbacks, how do we navigate off-course situations in business? Amidst industry challenges and risk aversion, how do we contemplate expansion and long-term goals? Are we investing our time wisely for the business's benefit? To ensure growth we must



reassess our strategies and shed old habits. Recognising our limitations, seeking external expertise, like consultants, is crucial. However, implementing their advice effectively is key. Sometimes, despite awareness, resource constraints hinder significant change.

The Engine Room's existence came from the simple question, 'What if there is another way?'

Mike is one of those heavyweights whose advice goes a long way. When you get the chance to speak to Mike

his experience is palpable and his words are powerful. He has gained the foresight to see things as cogs and collections, systems and mechanisms, which if connected by the right mix of people, will make a good business great. And through the peaks and troughs on his journey to success he has honed an effective strategy that he sees as entirely translatable for others.

Mike shared '...we became a very good business (ups and downs of course) when we realised we had too much exposure to poor weather in the parks and we had to find growth under cover to ensure a much better cash flow throughout the year. All year-round turnover allowed more confidence in investment in people and costs. We prioritised trying to be in business with large partners with big businesses, which allowed our actions to have greater effect. But fundamentally the one thing we got really right, where others may not have, was getting quality and profitability both right most of the time.'

The introduction of the latter formed the pivotal principle that profoundly accelerated the company's growth and led to a sustainable business model that was fed by financial and reputational success. Mike knows you can obsess over profitability or you can double down on quality, but without a balance between the two there is no longevity. 'The only way we [CoC] managed the balance of the two was with what we refer to as our brain, which we called The Engine Room.'

origin story

We asked Mike how he put this methodology into practice. He ventured that there were many variations and iterations of the company that predated and informed one quite radical decision. He said 'I completely separated the commercial team from finance which was a painful process.' Mike added 'Culture needs to surround finance to make it work for us not at us.' This division created a commercial team that he referred to as The Engine Room. He says this was '...a collection of people and series of software elements, but vitally important it is a day in day out line of communication with those people that feed it and are dependent on it to plan and to manage. There are the metrics on the business side of things, but you also have metrics on the quality side of things - tackled in the same way. Doing things that make you grow not at the expense of making money.'

Mike explains: 'There is a brain required in every successful business. That brain, much like the human brain, is some- thing that connects all the parts and processes the information. It sends out signals, receives signals, and, in effect, passively advises the being on what it should be doing - whether it's severely cold or there is a significant threat - in all manner of challenges and how best to act to protect that being. Whatever the business entity, if it really wants to thrive, it needs some form of brain or engine room.' This central intelligence ensures a smooth operation without requiring your involvement unless it

signals a need for your attention. And if we now run with the engine room analogy, there is a set up process that is required before you switch on the engine and leave it the mechanics. Notably, a clear vision and what it is you want to measure to ensure that the desired outcomes become an actuality. 'You can set your expectations down in your business plan. This document qualifies the set up and calibration - it's what you are going to measure - this defines the quality of information in circulation - ensuring data is relevant and useful, allowing feedback loops and timely exchanges creating a relaxed approach to managing data so you can focus on what's next.'

The result, as Mike points out is, 'You get confidence from accurate performance data. I could put my own thoughts and personal attention to what matters most: partner relationships - what we do from their point of view and a customer point of view and build those areas.' Embracing this liberation not only saves time and paves the way for successful prioritisation but also provides an unwavering perspective of your business at any given moment. This presents an opportunity to remain a dynamic leader, equipped to make profound long-term decisions crucial for personal growth, team development, and business expansion.

As this was one of the most potent tools within his own business, Mike established a business model based on this element with one of his Commercial

Directors Andrew Lovell and after some experimentation, launched a company in 2021. The point was to make it widely available for other businesses of all sizes to incorporate The Engine Room into their organisational structures to facilitate success of a multitude of hospitality ventures. As our partners will testify, this is exactly what it has begun to do. [\[Link to case study page\]](#)

'The opportunity for The Engine Room is to be that brain for other hospitality businesses'. It is a 'thoughtful processor'. One that integrates and processes data against the plan and offers experience-led, effective and empathetic actions. As Mike says 'There is nothing worse than going into your daily business with worries about either quality or profitability and the chances of fixing decrease as the stubborn problem stays'. If you sort out the engine of the business, bring balance to profitability and quality with The Engine Room, you regain your freedom to play on top, take risks and innovate.

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