



OPINION ARTICLE

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# Redefining Hospitality Leadership: Kerten CEO Marloes Knippenberg on Management Philosophy and Delivering Organisational Success

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Whilst the traditional lodging and restaurant sectors remain the cornerstones of the hospitality world as we know it today, it is undeniable that the emergence of hybrid business models has significantly impacted the space. One of those 'new players' is Kerten Hospitality - an operating vehicle for creative concepts across the boutique hotel, serviced apartment and food & beverage, as well as coworking and business members club segments. Taking the opportunity to sit down and 'talk shop' with Marloes Knippenberg, CEO of Kerten Hospitality, AETHOS explored some key leadership questions. If the hospitality industry is continuously redefining itself, as well as the boundaries of the areas in which it operates, does the same hold true for leaders and their management styles?



Some research suggests old leadership models no longer apply in fast-changing business environments. In the past, hierarchy and a centralised decision matrix seem to have been the formula for success, hinged on an omni-present CEO persona. Nowadays, more and more companies are adopting network-centric structures in which self-management is key.

**AETHOS: From your experience as a leader of a young but growing organisation, what is it that delivers system value and drives organisational outcomes?**

**MK:** A lot of the successful start-up companies and those organisations that have been classified as 'disruptors' of the hospitality industry are based on decentralised 'networks' in which employees are encouraged to be engaged, decisive



what is important is the fact that leaders will need to establish and define a common purpose and goal for the organisation and its employees. In other words, to point towards the end goal and overarching business strategy - how to get there and what specifically the tactics are - is then collaboratively worked out by management and the team members.

People become followers when they connect to a vision rather than a person. Leaders of today therefore need to look holistically at a team's needs and aspirations. The corporate setting very much resembles a school in which a teacher is evaluated on a regular basis - a mindset we tend to forget in the business world. Matrix structures, network organisations or Holacracy, are the way to move forward as a team and support the organisation's growth. It is no longer about the necessities of a leader but more about aligning with an organisation's vision and its driving forces.

AETHOS: One of your self-professed leadership mantras is 'size doesn't matter, [but the] creative spirit does' - how does this translate into your day-to-day management?

**MK:** Throughout my years of holding various senior operational and commercial management positions, I realised that working with the right leadership team is pivotal for one's own success. In my view, it is the inspiring leaders who know how to move a business forward and who are the navigating forces in the career path of any employee. I therefore believe that, as a CEO or senior leader of an organisation, one's duty is to empower people so that innovation is uninhibited and employee engagement heightened. This, in turn, creates a framework within which management and employees are collaboratively working towards a common goal and vision.



importance of the 'creative spirit'. Adopting a bottom-up approach, where leaders listen to the new generation, is pivotal. We live in a very fast-paced environment and things are changing constantly. The old style of learning, doing and advancing is irrelevant. Leaders of today will have to understand that the young generation sets the tone.

**AETHOS:** What are some of the leadership lessons that you have had to face since assuming the CEO seat?

**MK:** In today's business world, we business leaders are often 'dropping our employees in the middle of the ocean' and telling them to swim. In a way, it is a 'survival-of-the-fittest' mentality. It is about giving freedom and allowing teams to set their own boundaries. Those who rise to the challenge will thrive. The key leadership lesson that I have learnt is that self-motivation is critical for personal growth. So, when people raise the topic of the metaphorical 'glass ceiling' for women in leadership roles, for example, I get a bit disconcerted by what this (indirectly) implies - that, in essence, one is a victim of the industry's rigid and out-of-date ethos. Yet, I see things slightly differently. Becoming a CXO means you have to make a personal choice and, often times, give up things from your personal life - regardless of whether you are a man or a woman. Everyone handles such kinds of freedom differently and it is their right to do so. In my opinion, the proverbial 'glass ceiling' is not so much a gender-related issue but instead more akin to a search for greater balance in the power struggle for women. There is a well-chartered, step-by-step growth in our industry that does not take into consideration if you are a woman or a man. It rather focuses on the drive you have and on the steps you are willing to make to get to your target destination. Sometimes this means giving up on things and setting different priorities.



make-up of the future hospitality leaders?

**MK:** It is hard to grow to the higher echelons within the hospitality industry if you are an outsider to it and have missed on the starter's learning curve. Yet, at times, it is this outside perspective that helps executives advance in the industry. However, what is pivotal here is that industry insiders or outsiders need to be willing to roll up their sleeves to get things done. In a people-driven business, such as the hospitality industry, whether it is a business focused on hotels, restaurants, coworking concepts or any other type of industry sub-segment, employees appreciate that their leaders know the 'nuts and bolts' of the business that they are running. Future industry leaders should not forget this and remember that 'not losing touch' with guest-facing functions as well as back-of-house roles secures them the respect of the organisation.

I also believe that combining corporate and entrepreneurial journeys is key for present day and future leaders. It helps executives to remain nimble and adaptable when dealing with different business environments and scenarios - a skill that ultimately elevates their ability to make the best of any situation and obtain optimal outcomes from their teams. In my experience, such contrasting backgrounds also facilitate pushing the innovation agenda. Lastly, being the perfect communicator is the one character trait any senior executive cannot do without - if a leader fails to communicate his/her vision, goals and strategies, and/or is unable to express their empathy, then the road to success will be peppered with challenges.

So, the recipe for becoming a better leader is quite simple: Live by the values and build something meaningful around those values. Take ownership of your responsibilities. Only