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Model, mentor and measure: How to inspire employees

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To have a hotel staff that creates great guest experiences every day, managers and department heads need to understand it all starts with them.



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Most hospitality leaders I meet these days are well aware of the importance of having frontline colleagues deliver authentic, genuine hospitality experiences for guests on a daily basis.

However, when guest survey results come up short and when guest reviews skew to the negative, too many managers seem to blame the frontline staff. Yet true visionary leaders understand that excellent service on the front lines starts with a great leadership. In my KTN training workshops I often share the “3 Ms” of hospitality leadership: model, mentor and measure.

Model hospitality excellence

Every day your frontline staff members are watching you closely, much in the same way as a 4-year-old child watches a parent. If they see you modeling behaviors that exude warmth and generosity, they too will exhibit these behaviors. Alternatively, if they see you falling short of standards—especially while interacting with guests—they will know it's okay to cut corners too. I'll never forget one time a few months back when I was asked to do a training program for a hotel that was near the bottom of TripAdvisor rankings for its location.

Although the executive managers only inquired about training for their frontline staff, I insisted on also doing a session for the leadership. We talked about how important it was to model the behaviors, such as always greeting guests encountered throughout the hotel. About two hours after that session, after I changed from my business suit into my workout gear, I found myself standing alone in an elevator when the door opened and in walked one of the department heads I had just trained. I guess since I'd changed clothes, he didn't recognize me as the trainer, so I kept silent to see what would happen. Sure enough, he remained silent, stoic and expressionless as we rode down 20 or more floors and then exited into the lobby without saying a word. Guess he didn't get anything out of my training.

When I started my career working for Marriott International back when it was still literally a family business, that was the first time I heard the old adage, “Take care of your employees and they will take care of your guests,” and it was far more than a slogan.

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My managers always asked how my studies were going, how my girlfriend was doing and what my plans were for after college. To this day, I see that great managers truly live by this philosophy; they take time to truly know their staff's "story."

If you want your employees to remember (and use) guests' names, be sure you remember and use their names (and even better, the names of family members). If you want them to go above and beyond for guests, go above and beyond for them once in a while when they face life's quandaries. If you want employees to enthusiastically acknowledge and greet all guests they encounter throughout the hotel, acknowledge and greet them with enthusiasm in the back hallways. If you want them to discover and react to the guest stories being lived out every day on the other side of the guestroom doors, take time to know a bit about what's going on in their personal lives.

Mentor hospitality excellence

Although it has been 30-plus years since my first hospitality job, I still remember well the many mentors I was fortunate to have when I started as a bellman at the Lexington Marriott Resort and throughout my early career. I still remember how Craig, Rich and Charlie each led by example every day, and they always took time to give one-on-one advice on my next career steps. I can also remember each of them correcting me from time to time when I made rookie mistakes. When I started my first training company a few years after that, I was fortunate to be mentored by one of the best in the business, Howard Feiertage, who at age 89 is still mentoring aspiring young hospitality students as a professor at Virginia Tech.

Besides serving as a role model, a great mentor provides targeted feedback and coaching tips for their protégés. They are not afraid to give constructive feedback and, even at times, a bit of harsh criticism if it is called for. Great mentors never let a shortcoming go unnoticed and are always consistent with upholding standards of excellence. As soon as a guest steps away, they make it a point to critique poor performance and suggest corrective action. They also take time to praise their protégés when they see progress.

Measure hospitality excellence

Visionary hospitality leaders know that since hospitality is such an intangible, they look at multiple metrics to see "the big picture" of their team's performance. Too many managers look only at the monthly guest survey index/guest satisfaction scores provided by their corporate office or brand. This is almost as bad as public school teachers who only "teach to the test." Of course part of this is because just as too many school districts focus only on test scores to measure progress, so do too many hotel brands only focus on survey scores.

The best leaders look at a variety of metrics to know how their staff is truly doing at delivering authentic hospitality. First and foremost, they use good old-fashioned MBWA (management by wandering around) to frequently engage firsthand in conversations with their guests rather than sitting in an office reading reports. Since they occasionally pitch in alongside their colleagues during periods of peak demand, they also observe firsthand how the staff performs in action.

Beyond that, they also implement other methods of measuring hospitality excellence such as "Caught in the Act" programs, whereby supervisors and shift managers recognize incidents of above and beyond service. Or "Catch Me At My Best" type programs whereby guests are asked to report incidents where a staff member made their stay extra special.

The best leaders find creative ways to recognize and celebrate hospitality excellence. Rather than just sending out congratulatory messages via email, they also take time to thank colleagues in person, to recognize them at staff meetings and even to send personal handwritten notes.

Doug Kennedy is president of the Kennedy Training Network, Inc. a leading provider of hotel sales, guest service, reservations and front desk training programs and telephone mystery shopping services for the lodging and hospitality industry. Kennedy has been a fixture on the industry's conference circuit for hotel companies, brands and associations for more than two decades. Since 1996, Kennedy's monthly training articles have been published worldwide, making him one of the most widely read hospitality industry authorities. Visit KTN at www.kennedytrainingnetwork.com or email him directly doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com. He is the author of "So You REALLY Like Working With People? - Five Principles for Hospitality Excellence." (https://www.createspace.com/6608751?ref=1147694&utm_id=6026)

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