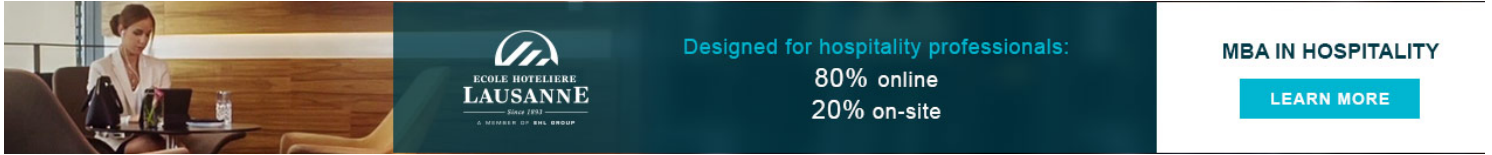


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OPINION ARTICLE

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Leadership Lessons Learned From Being A Guest When The Hotel Was Overbooked

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situation playing out at hotel where I was a guest, and it provided an invaluable reminder of just how important effective leadership is when things go wrong in the hotel business.



The story is that I was traveling back from a trip to the Middle East where I had taken my college age daughter to practice the Arabic she is learning at University. To split up 16 hours of flying time, I planned for us to stay overnight in Rome, Italy at a hotel I had used previously and knew was directly connected by a walkway to the airport. Since we landed about 8pm, we would be able to grab our bags, walk to the hotel, secure our room and drop the luggage, and take a cab to city center so I could show her the famous Roman Colosseum.

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All went as planned with the flights, baggage claim, and immigration, and since the hotel I'd booked carried the flag of one of the oldest, largest and most respected International hotel brands, as we entered the lobby I was confident that my plan had worked out!

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who I noticed had a "trainee" badge on, warmly welcomed my daughter and I and thanked me for being a member of the brand loyalty program.

Although it was spoken kindly, her next statement that shocked me; there were no rooms ready and she would buy us drinks in the bar while we waited for the 30 or so minutes it would take. "What? 9pm and no rooms?" I asked, as she had not acknowledged that this was a major shortcoming and it was about 5 hours after their posted check-in time. Being in the business, I tried to be as polite as possible, especially since she was obviously new and doing her best. I pointed out that my daughter was only 19 and I don't drink alcohol, and asking if there was instead a place to get a bottle of water or snack.

To my surprise there was no other option, so we proceeded to the bar where we found it overcrowded and understaffed as was the restaurant. After a long wait, my daughter was able to flag down the bartender and get water but no snacks. We changed clothes in the lobby restroom and then went back to the desk. "Good news," Giulia said, "your room is ready" and off we went. Yet to our surprise the room key did not work and then a young man came to the door of the room we were assigned to explain that he was already staying there.

Back to the desk we went to explain the situation, still maintaining a polite demeanor. Yet when another guest nearby heard our story he practically shouted out "You TOO? WHAT is going on here?" Then I realized that most of the guests who were originally in line with us about 45 minutes ago were still in the lobby also waiting for their rooms.

As my daughter and I :

heard at numerous other guests who had lost their cool

hotel experience ever. I also noticed that of the four people at the desk, two had trainee badges and no one had a management title on their nametag. (I should add that all seemed to be handling the situation as well as possible and maintaining their hospitality demeanor.) Several guests were asking to speak with "THE" manager, but the only ones I saw responding seemed to be shift supervisors and they were certainly doing all they could as well.

Finally, our trainee issued a new key to another room and although this time it was not occupied, it did smell strongly of fresh smoke and the mini bar was half emptied, but at least it was clean. We dropped the bags, grabbed our taxi, and ended up having a memorable dinner at my favorite street café right across from the Colosseum.

Reflecting back on this situation, I first of all felt bad for the frontline staff who were left to deal with such angry guests and such a difficult situation without proper leadership there to support them. I felt especially bad for the two bright young front desk staffers who were wearing those "trainee" badges; what a terrible first impression of the hotel industry to go to work for a top tier hotel brand and observe this big of a gap in service. I also felt bad for the other travelers who were counting on this reputable hotel brand to deliver a place to rest for the weary international airline passenger, especially the families with young children and elderly.

One good thing about being a hotel trainer though is that incidents of bad service like these give us plenty of new material to write about in training articles such as this one! So here are my training tips for this month, which I hope will serve as reminders for managers who will inevitably one day face a similar situation:

- This was obviously
and leadership should never have left their poor

of four staffers on that shift were wearing "trainee" badges. Had the executive leadership team pro-actively managed this situation, it would have played out completely differently.

- Knowing the hotel was overbooked and needing to wait for evening departures (such as the many airline crews we saw walking out the door while we waited) management should have scheduled extra staffing for all affected departments.
- A mid or executive level manager should have been right there inside the front door greeting guests upon arrival, politely explaining the circumstance, humbly apologizing and gently asking for patience.
- They should have provided drinks and snacks, especially knowing that most guests are arriving from International flights. With no place in the hotel other than the bar to buy refreshments, offering bottled water, juices, fruit and some snacks would have gone a long way and some complimentary beer or wine would have soothed the drinkers.
- The bar and restaurant should have been properly staffed for a sold-out / over-sold night. Likewise, the bell staff should have been staffed accordingly (there was only one bellman.)
- Extra housekeeping supervisors should have been called in to speed up room inspections.
- Guests who were first sent to occupied rooms should have thereafter been escorted to the second room by a manager or at least a frontline colleague.
- To avoid this whole situation, the hotel should have asked early on in the day for volunteers who were willing to be relocated to a discounted (or comp) room at a neighboring hotel much like the airlines do by asking for volunte

personalized emails to apologize.

Instead, this hotel suffered a loss of guest loyalty to go along with plenty of negative social media exposure. I know my daughter had this all over SnapChat and I'm sure most guests were doing their Facebook rants like I was. I hardly ever take time to do online reviews, but this time I vented to both TripAdvisor and Booking.com. (By the way, the management did respond to my one-star TripAdvisor review – but it was a generic and canned apology with no reference to my personal situation. For me this was worse than no reply at all and showed an even greater lack of empathy.)

I hope these lessons help managers understand that although bad situations are bound to occur in the hotel business, because if leaders pro-actively manage them the situation can be made better for all parties. Most of all, I hope those two trainees don't give up on their careers in the hotel industry after this! I suggest they apply elsewhere as soon as possible.

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