

## I've Seen the Enemy and It Looks A Lot Like - Us! - By Joseph M. Gravish

2006-11-28

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The many excellent articles written and published in various lodging industry media here and elsewhere are well-written, incisive, educational and often humorous. Most should be mandatory reading for those currently in positions of influence and authority as well as those aspiring to, or considering, a career as hotel managers. Successful hotels managers today are not unlike Special Forces soldiers - reveling in the excitement and the challenges. Their objective, all too often, is to make something out of virtually nothing.

Some of those articles however provide lofty advice from the 30,000-foot level. This article is different. It describes real management-employee issues from the foxhole level. It 'puts a face' on the day-to-day controversies hotel managers find themselves in. It defines who your real enemy might be and provides a terrain map to search him out. It can be used as a lessons-learned report should you find yourself in similar circumstances. It can help you more easily accomplish your mission.

We recently worked with a hotel struggling with several management-employee issues, most notably the quality of the workforce. To diagnose the root problems it was necessary to first gather enough intelligence (who was the enemy, what are his strengths and weaknesses) and conduct a thorough assessment before making suggestions to overcome the challenges they faced. Unfortunately, what we found, as described below, is that the most serious threat may lurk within the organization itself.

We initially conducted perimeter reconnaissance patrols - actually two surveys - one from managers and supervisory staff, the other from hourly wage employees. We also did long-range patrolling delving into the hotel's operating culture to analyze recruiting and hiring practices, retention and employee rewards programs. Finally, we probed into their employee separation history.

Here's what we discovered.

1. The enemy was not who some thought it to be - it was not the employees. Both the salaried and hourly wage survey results included from-the-heart, well-intentioned comments - their concerns targeted the performance and financial health of the hotel (for example, customer satisfaction rates, indicators of service and product dis-satisfaction, etc.) and their anxiety over employee welfare issues (for example, compensation and benefits).
2. The enemy was not a lack of unskilled, talented applicants and staff. Almost every survey responder submitted narrative comments citing commendable, and not so commendable, hotel policies and practices directly affecting either their guest's satisfaction or their personal ability to properly service their guests.
3. The enemy was not unmotivated employees. When given adequate resources, sufficient training, and an 'I care about you' attitude by managers, employees fulfilled their service commitments. Few employees were ever discharged for unsuitability or a lack of desire to do their job. In fact, guest service ratings were generally above brand average. For a number of consecutive months the hotel's guest satisfaction level ranked in the top third among its geographical brand peers.
4. The enemy was not disloyal employees. Despite, in many cases earning less than the Democratically proposed federal minimum wage level, with no programmatic service raises and absolutely no benefits, employees claimed to enjoy working at the hotel. Pockets of turnover however hovered around 100% annually for the last few years, especially in jobs that were physically strenuous and monotonous.

Our conclusions: The level of employee care varied greatly among departments. Some managers truly cared and did something to show it; some didn't 'walk the talk'; some treated their subordinates as widgets. As a team, management needed to deeper look into the mirror. Generally speaking:

1. Managers tended to focus almost exclusively on the lowest common denominator, whatever the issue. Reputation and image were important, but only as far as the least amount of dollars could support it. The question 'What would the guest (or owner) expect when staying here?' was rarely asked. As described in an outstanding article by J. Ragsdale Hendrie ('The Hospitality Fix Is In') the operating culture was akin to '... they (guests) won't know the difference...they don't care...what can we get away with?'
2. Managers viewed employees more as a labor expense than a capital asset. Employee appreciation efforts were frequent but disjointed. It was difficult to determine if these initiatives resulted in increased worker efficiency or loyalty. There was little feeling of long-term job and financial security on the part of employees. Standards (the 'what') for pay raises were in-place but the frequency (the 'when') was ignored. Pay raises, when awarded, were insufficient to positively impact the turnover rate.
3. Managers considered interviewing an intrusion into their daily duties. Hiring was more an act of desperation rather than deliberation. Middle managers considered human resources policies and practices burdensome. Managers were not held accountable for retention/turnover rates.

4. Managers adopted 'get-em on the books and put-em to work now' as their new employee welcome and reception program. Recurring skills improvement training was non-existent, unless in response to specific problems or mandated by the brand. .

Fellow hoteliers, we must do better. The management of this hotel, and you, have a unique opportunity to capitalize on the populist mandates reflected in the recent election. We are the target of numerous initiatives such as government-directed minimum and living wages and even mandatory benefits. As an industry we need to decide to come over from the 'dark side'. Embrace the obvious. Build the reputation needed to attract and retain the best of more than 300,000 new hotel workers needed in the next few years. To those that adapt and change - bravo - celebrate - mission accomplished - enjoy the many fruits that success brings. To those that do not and risk failure - retreat is the only alternative.

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*Mr. Gravish apologizes for re-phrasing the message of U.S. Navy Commodore Oliver Perry to U.S. Army General William Harrison after the battle of Lake Erie (1813), and to Pogo, and his creator (1971 comic strip).*

*Mr. Gravish is a human resources professional with over 25 years leadership experience at numerous organizational levels and diverse environments, both national and international. He is an advocate of building successful through, and by, people - first.*

This article comes from Hotel News Resource

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