

It Can Be That Simple: Why We Must Stay Focused on Clean Rooms and Truly Helpful Service - By
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I've heard a lot of talk lately about adding innovative amenities, restructuring hotel organizations, and 'thinking outside the box.' These concepts can improve operations and customer satisfaction, but only if they do not take our focus off the essentials: a clean room and a friendly, helpful staff.

Although I have worked in hotels for the past 15 years, I have only been a hotel General Manager for 1 year. Direct contact with guests-still very fresh in my memory-helps me concentrate on what is most important to them. During my first months as GM I devised an intricate plan to transform my hotel. I decided to work on cleanliness and staff conduct in the beginning and then move on to implementing more complex ideas and buzzwords. I was so proud of my plan. It had all kinds of statistics, "out of the box" ideas, and neat terms such as ESSOcc, LNRs, and, of course, RevPAR.

I decided to keep things extremely simple in Phase 1 and, before I knew it, we were constantly filling up. I raised rates and continued to fill up, even in slow season. What was I doing? I simply dedicated myself and my staff to maintaining immaculately clean rooms and providing genuinely helpful service.

We replaced housekeepers that would not perform up to standards. We retrained our housekeeping staff and got their input on what they needed for them to do their job successfully. We then started having contests and games to make the job fun. These contests were not based on ADR or occupancy; they were simply based on cleanliness of rooms as determined by guests or inspections. I'd hide blue crystals, about the size of a quarter, in rooms where there was something to which the housekeepers needed to pay special attention. If they didn't find the crystal, it meant that the room was not cleaned to standards. At the end of the month, the housekeeper who found the most stones got a prize like tickets to the movies or the comedy club. Housekeepers with the cleanest rooms that I inspected would also get prize. If we improved QAR scores, then I treated them all to a luncheon.

We also worked on creating a friendly and helpful staff. I've worked at many hotels where the staff was very nice and had beautiful smiles, but refused to give guests site-seeing advice, make reservations at local restaurants, or make photocopies for over-stressed guests. I started off simple. I insisted that my coworkers not only acknowledge guests in the hallway by saying "Hello," but also wait for the guest's response. I instructed them to look for an opening to ask, "How can I help you, today?" When a guest asks for directions, we shouldn't just recite them and expect the guest to remember. I had my staff show maps to our guests and then give them written directions (preprinted if possible). When a guest requested a recommendation for a restaurant, my staff would first ask what kind of food the guest liked. Then we gave honest opinions and offered to make reservations. We wanted to prove to guests that we would help them at every opportunity and that they could expect results from us. I explained to my coworkers that we must "retrain" our guests to ask for assistance without worrying that they are interrupting anything.

Achieving this kind of staff behavior takes constant work and reminding. I probably spend 1/4th of every day being a cheerleader. The easiest way to have a pleasant staff is to make work fun. Start the morning talking to coworkers. Have light-hearted conversations and tell a couple of jokes (clean jokes!). Or recount a funny work situation you have lived through. This puts your staff in a better mood and helps them forget their personal problems.

Managers must lead by example. Coworkers need to see me interrupt my work to help guests, or even just to talk to the guests. They know when I am having a bad day, and they see that I try to make sure the guest never knows it. Even if I am stressed, they see me stop in my steps and ask guests if they need any assistance. They will then see me provide that assistance. Leading by example is the only way to get this philosophy embedded into the core atmosphere of the hotel.

So, before you start "thinking outside the box," adding more amenities, or trying to restructure the hotel organization, get back to the simple basics. The guest is renting a room. It is crucial you give them what you promised: a clean room! Next, remember the guest is visiting the area; that is why he needs the room in the first place. Guests see the staff as local area experts, so train your entire staff--not just the front desk--to help and talk to guests.

And, most importantly, be a cheerleader. Encourage the behavior you would like to see. Don't confuse things with technical gibberish; just hire and train coworkers that actually care about your guests. Keep it simple so that everyone can understand and adopt your philosophy.

If you have truly clean rooms and a sincerely helpful staff, the guests will come . . . to your hotel.

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