

Walking The Thin Line Between Excellence And Mediocrity - By Doug Kennedy

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Like most trainers, I frequently engage participants in interactive activities that hopefully shift some paradigms for the long term.

With one such activity, I give teams of two participants a list of hotels in a city they've never been to, and then have them each place an inquiry call. Afterward, each participant reports back to the overall group on their experiences and observations.

Recently, while training the reservations team of a four-star hotel, the results were especially interesting when one team in particular described their calls. The first participant had a glowing report for the agent she'd spoken with, and raved on about how he was so enthusiastic about and so hospitable that the participant actually felt bad about not booking at the end! Interestingly, the second participant reported the polar opposite experience, as her agent did little more than check dates, quote rates and described rooms as being 'your basic hotel room with one or two beds.'

While it is always fun for the participants, it's especially interesting as an unbiased observer to see how two different hotels within the same location, serving the same hotel market segment, paying the same wages, and recruiting from the same labor pool, can have such extraordinarily different levels of hospitality/guest service.

How was it that these two employees of similar hotels performed so differently that day? Was it luck? Did we just happen to catch their best employee at their best time of day? Or was it a factor of the choices the employees made that day?

Two alarm clocks went off at approximately the same time of morning. Two employees woke up and readied themselves for their workday. Both traveled about the same distance, to work about the same shift, for about the same pay. But one employee made the choice of delivering hospitality excellence to the best of his ability, every shift, every transaction and for every guest. The other made the choice to do his job exactly as it is outlined in the job description; doing nothing more and nothing less.

So why is it that associates at some properties make the choice of hospitality excellence while employees elsewhere choose to be average, or to put it another way-mediocre?

Is it that one hotel has a better luck of the draw when hiring new staff? Do they have a better applicant screening process complete with pre-employment testing and peer interviewing? Or is it more a factor of the overall culture that starts with ownership and executive-level management and is reinforced daily at the supervisory level?

Speaking solely as a guest who has frequented both excellent and mediocre hotels in all labor markets, it just has to be more than a mere coincidence that some hotels can succeed in even the toughest labor markets while others wallow in mediocrity even where the unemployment languishes in double digits.

Speaking as a hospitality industry trainer who has been able to peek behind the scenes at some of the world's best hotels, I can share these observations about the corporate cultures of hotels that aspire to hospitality excellence daily. These hotels tend to have:

Owners who are willing to invest in the physical product and the systems necessary to facilitate service efficiency. It is hard to deliver hospitality knowing you are about to sell a guest a substandard accommodation, and just about impossible to satisfy guest needs without the proper technology systems.

Engaged, involved leaders who lead by example under the tightest of scrutiny. Real-world operational standards don't exist in training manuals; they are set by managers who can be observed in action themselves creating hospitality excellence daily. Interestingly, these same managers treat both employees and guests with authentic warmth and generosity, the hallmarks of hospitality. They know that hospitality starts in the heart of the house when they greet their first staffer in the back hallway upon entering the building.

Managers and supervisors who coach versus command. Great hotels have supervisors that closely observe each employee transaction, and who know the job well enough to help each member of the team tweak, revise and maximize their performance. Even the greatest so-called 'superstars' all need continuous coaching to maintain hospitality excellence.

Visionary leaders who see the actual level of hospitality and guest service as it really is being delivered daily in the lobby. They don't relay on the opinions of one quarterly mystery shopper inspection report, nor brand-sponsored guest comments/surveys, nor any other single metric to tell them where service is. They observe firsthand how guests are treated and how efficiently things are working (or not), and have a much more critical eye than any guest or mystery shopper.

Managers and supervisors who pitch-in during inevitable bottlenecks. The best managers always seem to appear at just the right moment when the staff is nearly overwhelmed; they not only provide that extra set of hands to get you caught up but help you gain confidence that things will work out. I can still recall how more two decades ago as a bellman of a golf resort I greeted the PGA Senior's tour bus only to watch all the famous golfers parade off the bus and directly into their rooms, leaving the absolute biggest pile of luggage and golf bags imaginable for our team of just two. Minutes later there was Mr. Hines, our resident manager at the time, taking off his suit jacket and humbly asking our bell captain, 'How can I help you

guys get through this?’

Leaders who honor and understand the front-line perspective. You can always distinguish visionary leaders in the field of hospitality by the way they talk about their front-line employees. Those who appreciate them the most speak with respect, admiration and appreciation. Those who don’t just complain about how tough the labor market is in their town, how hard it is to find good people these days, and that ‘young people just aren’t motivated anymore.’

Indeed, it is a thin line—a razor-thin line—between hospitality excellence and mediocrity that employees in our industry traverse every day. In the end, the same number of hours are worked, the same number of calories are burned and the same wages are received. But those who choose to walk the path of hospitality excellence are rewarded daily as well. While their counterparts elsewhere go home each night complaining about how many rude and nasty guests there are out there these days, those who make the choice of hospitality excellence enjoy their work everyday, and mostly go home raving about how many nice, interesting, and appreciative guests they met that very same day in the very same town.

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His articles have also appeared worldwide in more than 17 prominent international publications including the HSMAI Marketing Review, eHotelier, 4hoteliers, Hotel News Resource, Hotel Online, Human Assets - Dubai and Hong Kong, Hsyndicate worldwide, BAHA Times - U.K., Hospitality - Maldives, and the Hotel Expert Magazine Hong Kong.

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