

Hotel Lessons Learned From A Five-Star School Principal - By Doug Kennedy

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For five years now I've had the privilege of being a parent-volunteer at my children's public school, which is Hollywood Hills Elementary in Hollywood, FL. Now I might be a little biased in saying that this is the best elementary school anywhere, since Mrs. Roberts is my personal hero, but I do have lots of evidence to make the case that our school is one of the best in our state if not nation.

For example, Florida has assigned a letter-grade to each school, based on its students performance on the annual standardized testing we call FCAT, and HHE has achieved the highest-possible ('A') rating every single year since the program was launched! The state also awards a 'Five Star' award for schools that also excel as a community, for example by having an active volunteer base, community/local business involvement, and student community service, and for the past 9 years HHE has also achieved this award too.

Like hotels, absolute excellence in schools is neither accident nor coincidence, but rather the result of energetic, in-touch leaders who inspire those around them to reach for even higher levels of performance. This is certainly the case with our school's longstanding successes, thanks to the dedicated and passionate leadership of our very special Principal, Mrs. Vered Roberts.

Having watched Mrs. Roberts in action for five years now, I've often told her that when she retires from her career in school administration she would make a fantastic hotel general manager! But since she loves her job and won't be leaving anytime soon, perhaps our industry's hotel general managers and other leaders can benefit from exposure to some of her 'best practices' (although I'm certain she doesn't call them that!)

Highly Visibility. Mrs. Roberts always seems to be around, especially at key moments. I've often called her our 'omnipresent Principal' because she seems to somehow be everywhere at once. For example, she can be seen personally overseeing morning drop-off and afternoon dismissal, sending off the field-trip buses, and stopping by to speak at all school assemblies or PTA meetings. But beyond these scheduled times she just always somehow seems to be around when you need her. Like a good General Manager, Mrs. Roberts mostly manages our school from its hallways, corridors and classrooms, not from behind her desk in her office.

Excels at Hospitality Communications Essentials. Mrs. Roberts greets everyone first, always with a smile and usually by name despite that we have 800 kids in our school. She never starts a conversation without first asking how you are doing, and she has an uncanny ability to remember everyone's 'story' such as 'How was your recent business trip to New York?' or 'Is your wife finished with her big project?'

Shows gratitude. Even in the hospitality industry, I can't think of anyone who is better at sending thank you notes and personally expressing gratitude in other ways than our Mrs. Roberts. She seems to understand that great leaders always humbly attribute their successes to those on their team, and I've heard her deflect credit for her successes to her great teaching staff, the administrative office, our children, the parents, and our PTA volunteers, but never once to take credit personally.

Door is always open. Despite how busy she might be running our large school while simultaneously overseeing the major construction involved with its expansion, when you really need Mrs. Roberts she's guaranteed to be there. Most of my meetings with her have been impromptu ones, but when our children have had occasional issues/challenges over the years, Mrs. Roberts' agenda has always been open for a meeting on one day I am in town or can sneak away from work.

Handles complaints well. Once in my five years as a school parent I had a single complaint about our school. (Not a bad track record considering that many years!) Knowing how many parents unjustly voice undeserved complaints, it was with reluctance that I complained at all. Yet this incident, although minor and non-intentional, was a bruise to my ego and a little egg on my face as a parent, so I really felt I needed to voice my complaint. Within minutes after I left a message with her administrative assistant, Mrs. Roberts returned my call and not only listened to my complaint in detail, which alone gave me validation, but she managed to support her staff's position while still expressing empathy for my situation and circumstance.

Supports Her Staff When The Chips Are Down. Part of being a great leader is being able to inspire loyalty from your team, and the best way to do that is to support their honest and best efforts through good times and bad. Since Mrs. Roberts is so in-touch with her teaching staff, she knows firsthand how each is performing. In recent years I have more than once seen a top member of the teaching staff have to face undue criticism and scrutiny by the board of education for what I have happened to know firsthand to be completely unjust reasons. In both cases Mrs. Roberts was the voice of reason and returned her staff's loyalty by standing up for these extraordinarily adored teachers until their reputations were cleared and their actions upheld.

Makes Sure Our School Is A Good Neighbor. Mrs. Roberts knows that like a hotel a school must be a good neighbor in its community. Sometimes this means balancing the needs of the school with the needs of those living in the homes surrounding it. Especially in recent years with our school's expansion project generating construction noise and traffic, Mrs. Roberts has at time had to make some tough decisions whereby no one party got exactly what they wanted but the decision was made for the collective good of all parties. Besides those in our immediate neighborhood, Mrs. Roberts also encourages our PTA and school to participate in fundraisers and other community events important to our city and county.

Although we could definitely use an extraordinary leader like Mrs. Roberts in the hotel industry, and she would make a great hotel General Manager, I'm thankful that she's fully dedicated to her profession which is making a huge contribution every day to the education and quality of life of our school's children, including my own. I know I've personally learned much about leadership by seeing her in action, and I hope readers find relevance in her exemplary actions as I continue to do every school day.

By Doug Kennedy

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