



Back to the Front: Improving Guest Experiences at The Langham, Hong Kong

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While classroom interactions, readings, group projects and homework can help students develop new insights and understanding, nothing beats experience for the ultimate learning opportunity. With that in mind, Boston University's School of Hospitality Administration developed Tourism in China, a class that strikes a balance, with classroom learning provided for the first seven weeks of the semester followed by a 10 day trip to China during Spring Break. This past March, 24 students and three faculty members followed up the classroom portion of the class by traveling together to Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. In each city, they undertook field research as they visited, studied, and explored tourist destinations and luxury hotels.

During their trip, the students and faculty toured the front and back of house and

met with members of the executive management team of The Langham, Hong Kong in Kowloon. Langham, a luxury hotel chain, is held by parent company, Great Eagle Holdings Limited. That company is headquartered in Hong Kong and boasts whole or partial ownership of 14 hotels under the Langham or Langham Place brand. Boston, for example, is home to the Langham Hotel Boston, located in the former Federal Reserve Bank. The General Manager of Langham Hong Kong, Bob van den Oord, served as resident manager at the Boston property a decade ago.

A highlight of the visit to The Langham, Hong Kong in Kowloon was the opportunity to learn about the hotel's creative approach to operations. Several members of the executive management team spoke with the BU students and faculty about how

they have worked to improve customer service, increase employee satisfaction, and also break down front-of-house and back-of-house silos.

To accomplish this, The Langham, Hong Kong redefined the role of housekeeping supervisors, expanding their responsibilities and changing their titles to Guest Experience Managers. Dean Dimitriou, the executive assistant manager of rooms, was responsible for implementing and overseeing the change process. In a one-on-one interview with faculty member, Dr. Michael Oshins, who traveled to China with the BU contingent, Dimitriou answered questions about this innovative approach and its impact on hotel operations.

[Oshins]: What made you think of the idea to create Guest Experience Managers? Have you seen or experienced the dual role of housekeeping supervisor and experience manager at previous properties or companies?

[Dimitriou]: We came up with the concept internally. We brainstormed with the team on how we can further increase our engagement with our guests and collect more preferences to place on their profile. After a number of meetings, we all came to the conclusion that as our guests spend a considerable time in their rooms, why not bring our guest relations service to the guest floors.

The Housekeeping Floor Supervisors went through an intensive training including butler service, engagement training, and guest relations knowledge. With a slight adjustment on the headcount, we were able to reduce their room check responsibility from 60 rooms per day, to 50; therefore allowing them to spend that extra time to welcome our guests and engage with them during their stay.

In short, Guest Experience Managers ensure tailor each guests room setup based on their





preferences, offer a warm welcome upon arrival, offer a personal room orientation, offer personalized unpacking service, a welcome beverage on arrival, a point of contact during their stay, engage with the Guest during stay, collect preferences from the guest (e.g. how they like their room setup or extra items they like in their minibar etc.), leave personalized notes in their room post engagement and offer a fond farewell on departure.

What was the process and execution for making the change happen?

With every project we work on, we follow a process, known internally as “Langham Logic”. This process involves:

- Defining the situation at hand: What is the purpose of the project, the problems and opportunities, and the duration

- Measure: Looking at past data, collecting current data for a period of time, understanding the processes involved, understanding where we are now in the current process, and benchmarking measures
- Analyze: Looking at the core areas of the process we are trying to improve
- Improvement solutions and an action plan
- Control: What the results are and ongoing measures to monitor performance of the process and continued effectiveness of our solution and analyzing the before and after impact.

Do you have any data showing tangible results?

Our main guest satisfaction measure, a guest survey completed by guests post departure, has shown a 7% post implementation of our

Guest Experience Manager Roles. We also receive up to 30 guest comments per month from guests reflecting how impressed they are with the service received by these Guest Experience Managers.

Guest Experience Managers themselves gain an increased sense of accomplishment now having the ability to impact a guest's stay through engagement; where in the past they only relied on ensuring their rooms were immaculate in terms of cleanliness.

How has the change impacted finances? Have the costs of implementation been high and have you seen a result in the bottom line?

A dollar figure cannot be placed against the increase of guest satisfaction; however we have seen a 50% increase in enrollments into our loyalty program based on our guests satisfaction during their stay, which is in turn resulting in an increase in the repeat guest ratio. So the increase in guest satisfaction is increasing the number of loyal guests we have and the fact our repeat guests not only will enable us to secure future repeat business, their off spend and average rate is typically higher than average.

The costs involved for this project were very minimal in proportion to the positive impact they have on our guests. By simply adding two additional people to the Housekeeping Floor Supervisor Team, we were able to allocate 50 rooms per supervisor and re-title them to Guest Experience Managers and kick-start the project.

What are the future plans for the Guest Experience Managers? Will the program continue? Are there plans to expand it or roll it out to other properties?

Currently our Guest Experience Managers service our Loyalty member guests. Future plans for this year are to service all arriving guests with the goal to roll this position out to other Langham Properties in the future.

Could this work outside of Hong Kong in the United States?

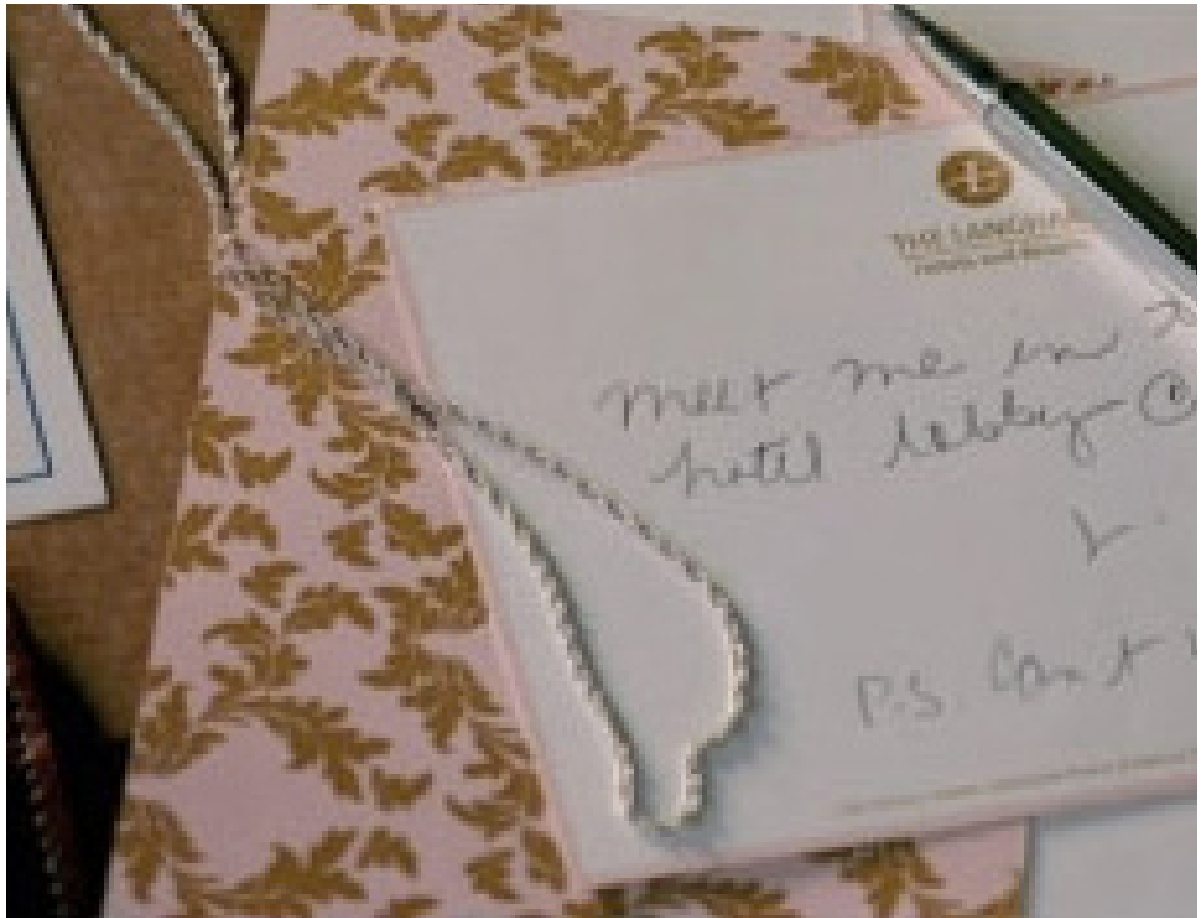
By providing the right training, re-working the job description, re-distributing the workload, and communicating the development opportunities for colleagues and their potential impact on their guests—yes I do think this is possible for any hotel to implement.

Can you think of any anecdotes from customers that demonstrate the impact that the change has made?

A regular guest of ours booked an Italian restaurant in town the second time he visited with positive feedback. Our file for him also shows that he likes outside seating, drinking out of a large red wine glass for his white wine, and likes to eat his ice cream with a soup spoon. Therefore on all future visits our concierge team sends him a pre-arrival email asking whether he would like us to book him in at his favorite restaurant. We also highlight any new Italian restaurants that have opened. We ensure that the restaurant knows his preferences and has his large wine glass, soup spoon for his dessert, and outside seating. We also tailor his guest room with extra soup spoons in his minibar and large wine glasses for his wine. Each time he says he is blown away with our attention to detail.

What do the Guest Experience Managers think about their new jobs and duties?

Lesley, one of our very bubbly Guest Experience Managers feels she is ecstatic with the



fact that the hotel has given her the chance to engage with guests. Prior to the new role there was not an expectation that housekeeping should engage with the guests. Now, housekeeping is guest relations on the floor. I now keep in touch with some guests even after they leave. They just want to feel at home and I make sure they do. One guest was lovely—she called me all day for each item and she was delighted I was like her personal butler.

Can you give some details for the three training areas? Let's start with butler training.

This involves anticipating guests needs, paying unrivalled attention to detail, and providing seamless and distinctive service. We strive for unparalleled service transcending the expectation of guests, indulging guests with thoughtful touches of luxury, and a memorable experience through personal service.

What about engagement training?

Engagement training with regards to various topics of discussion based on guest purpose of visit (e.g. leisure, business, tour group etc.), using guest preferences on file to tailor room setup and leave a little note for the guest. For example, if a guest loves Diet Coke, we place extra Diet Coke in the minibar and leave a note. We also collect notes about the guests' hobbies or personal preferences, for example if they like a specific football team or enjoy going to the theater, we leaving relevant information relating to that in their room

And what about training for guest relations?

Guest relations training involves training on our 1865 loyalty program and how to manage guests profiles in the Opera system. We also train employees in how to ensure guest recognition through the hotel amenity pro-

gram, repeat guest recognition program, special occasions and general adherence of guest loyalty program benefits.

What technology have you used to support the program?

Our Opera system is used to record all out guests preferences as well as our main operating system. The guest preferences also migrate to our 1865 intranet, which has a two-way interface with all our properties to allow the sharing of guest preferences.

How long did it take from original brainstorming to rolling out the Guest Experience Managers?

Brainstorming how to improve the guest experience started in 2012 and addition-

al expenses and payroll was budgeted accordingly for 2013. The process involved the entire housekeeping supervisor team, guest relations team, Chief Concierge, Executive Housekeeper, Club manager, Front Office Manager, F&B Manager, and Rooms Management. Roll out of the new positions took approximately 16 months due to time taken to budget and source the right candidates to fill the two vacancies required to start the new roles.

What was the process or buy-in meeting with the housekeepers?

It is a non-union position and very much involved the buy-in from the housekeeping team. ■



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