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Family, Team or Something Else?

By John Murtha

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Source: Getty Images

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I was on temporary assignment recently at another hotel in our company that was between general managers. This historic property had joined us less than a year before I arrived and one thing that immediately impressed me was how quickly the associates had bought into our way of doing business. They operated like they'd been part of the "family" for a long time.

While still on that assignment, I came across a Harvard Business Review blog posting titled ["Your Company Is Not a Family"](#). It caused me to wonder if using the term "family" about our business was inaccurate and that, as asserted on the blog, we function more like a "team".

This blog posting maintains that successful teams assemble talented individuals into high performance groups with the intent to win games and championships. Team members may come and go over time but the identity and commitment of the team is consistent. There is no assurance of guaranteed employment, yet trust is bred in an atmosphere of "team success" over "individual glory". And, even when team members move on, their alumni status is honored.



David Ortiz, Source: Creative Commons, [Keith Allison](#)

In this model, one thing that's found is continuity of senior leadership, represented by the team's owner, managers, coaches and certain players. Robert Kraft and Bill Belichick of the New England Patriots exemplify this theory. So do David Ortiz and Tom Brady. Between 2001 and 2017, their teams won three and five world championships, respectively, even though in both cases they were the only players left from the first championship season. Every other player changed but winning continued.



Tom Brady after winning Super Bowl LI in 2017. Source: Getty Images

Conversely, families are expected to maintain a “lifetime relationship with a sense of belonging”. While this “sense of belonging” certainly describes what I’ve experienced in some

of the hotels in which I've worked over the years, there were times when change was needed and I've had to dismiss people for non-performance. Would I dismiss a family member? I don't think so. Would I want a family member to leave to join another family that offered them more opportunity? No!

When I initially wrote about this topic on my HOTELSmag.com blog, I received 8 reader responses. Two agreed with the "team" concept, two said it could be both family and team, and four said it was "neither" or something in the middle. No one came down firmly on the "family" side of the debate.

Taking my research a bit further, I found lots of opinions posted on-line about this topic. Edward Kim, co-founder of Gusto, wrote a response that disagreed with the "Your Company is not a Family" blog, stating "unlike a team, which must always optimize decisions that will result in the shortest path to their goal, we'll often optimize decisions to do the right thing for our family."

In contrast, a rather blunt statement from Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, reads: "We're a team, not a family. We're like a pro sports team, not a kid's recreational team. Coaches' job at every level of Netflix [is] to hire, develop and cut smartly, so we have stars in every position." This perspective is reinforced by another Hastings quote: "At most companies, average performers get an average raise. At Netflix, they get a generous severance package".

Stacy French Reynolds of business consulting firm Anchor Advisors believes that you should "treat your team like staff, not family". This requires building and maintaining a corporate culture that incorporates many of the "positive aspects of a family" such as caring for one another, but "without incorporating the negative aspects" like prioritizing individuals above the health of the enterprise. Your company's culture should be based on a set of values that have been identified as essential to success. Integrity, excellence and creativity are examples of corporate values.

In my company, we place great emphasis on responsible financial management, creating memorable experiences for guests and treating each associate as a valuable contributor. These and other qualities are known as our Core Values; they have existed for a very long time and drive everything we do. So, when we interview candidates for positions within our company, we talk about these values. All new associates learn more about them during orientation. Annual performance reviews measure how well each one of us model and promote the Core Values. And, people are rewarded for living them out each day.

Successful companies seem to have an enduring culture with a documented set of values that's extremely well communicated throughout the organization and put into practice every day by all associates. In such an environment, people may come and go, but they'll always feel cared for and appreciated while the company continues to thrive.

<i>Omni Hotels & Resorts Core Values</i>	<i>Marriott International Core Values</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memorable Experiences • Leaders Creating Leaders • Local Market Leadership • Responsible Financial Management • Strengthen Brand Value • Each Associate is a Valuable Member 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We Put People First • We Pursue Excellence • We Embrace Change • We Act with Integrity • We Serve Our World

When I wrote the HOTELSmag.com blog in 2014, it was titled simply “Family, or Team?” Having since had the benefit of learning the opinions of industry colleagues, doing further research and assessing my own experience, I now recognize that “either/or” isn’t enough. It’s really about having a solid culture that incorporates positive aspects of families and teams around a central set of core values.



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