5 Keys to Successful Hospitality Leadership

By Sarah Andersen

Winter 2018

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After completing the senior capstone Hospitality Leadership course at Boston University, I had the chance to reflect on the class topics and apply the teachings to my personal life. The course explored several different levels of leadership, from the head of a major corporation role to developing self-leadership. I learned the importance of a mission, vision, and values in an organization, better understood the components of change management, and worked with a group throughout the semester to develop my teamwork skills. I was able to critically analyze concepts and models presented in leadership literature as well as improve my own leadership skills.
I then interviewed three prominent leaders in hospitality and found connections between their industry insights and my leadership class discussions. Dan Donahue, President of Saunders Hotel Group, Len Wolman, Chairman and CEO of Waterford Hotel Group, and Geoff Ballotti, President and CEO of Wyndham Hotel Group kindly shared their experiences and explained their personal values and company's culture, revealing the five keys to successful leadership.

“Leadership is the capacity to
translate vision into reality.”

-Warren G. Bennis

When an organization wants to achieve its goals, it needs a vision. Effective leadership starts with the ability to recognize and outline those goals and inspire others to follow. Leaders paint a picture of how that vision will affect the company as a whole, as well as each individual. A leader's ability to articulate that vision into a mission statement corresponds to the active implementation of goals and the company's bottom line success. A productive vision goes beyond a written organizational mission statement, but instead permeates throughout all levels of a company and manifests into actions and beliefs.
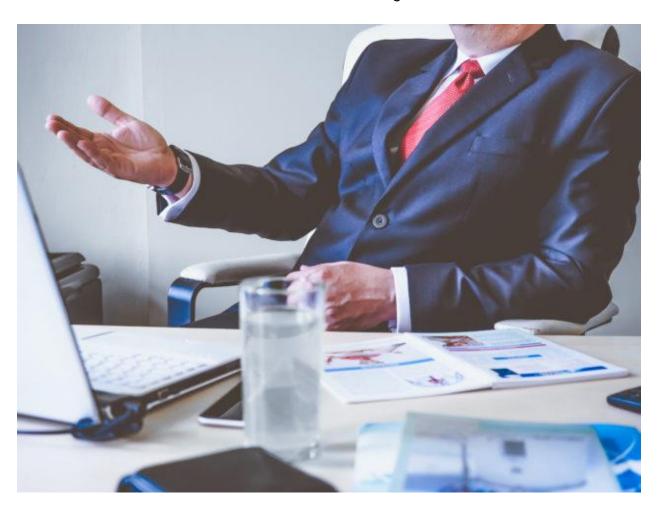
John P. Kotter, author of *Business Leadership*, writes, "A vision says something that helps clarify the direction in which an organization wants to move [and] is relatively easy to communicate, appealing to customers, stockholders, and employees."[1] It is therefore up to hospitality leaders to set and clearly communicate a vision, and to inspire those around them to share and implement it.

A vision does not belong only to a leader. It must be a shared vision that attracts everyone to sustain high levels of motivation and withstand challenges. According to *The Leadership Challenge*, by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, leaders can envision the future by imagining the possibilities and finding a common purpose.[2] In addition, leaders must spark a sense of meaning and purpose in those around them. Dan Donahue agrees that, "My job, as someone who has the vision, is to get you inspired and committed to sharing that vision and sharing that creativity to the point where you have buy-in."

After seven years of rigorous research, a landmark study of the observations from more than 100 CEOs and over 8,000 employees found that "leaders who were clear about their values delivered as much as five times greater returns for their organizations as did leaders of weak character."[3]

So how do illustrious CEOs and successful leaders in our industry shape the parameters for success through a shared vision for a future? How do they empower and inspire those around them to make decisions and work towards their goals?

Balancing Accountability and Autonomy

When asked what his core values were, Len Wolman responded, "First and foremost, our organization has been built on integrity and transparency. We have four core values that we live by on a daily basis which are to (1) to wow the customer, (2) to continuously improve, (3) to be a passionate and committed team, and (4) to share and sustain our bottom line success."
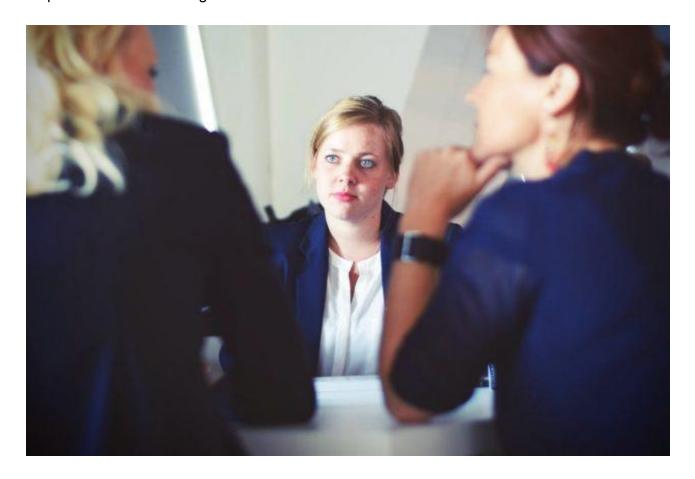
Dan Donahue, established that, "Our values are simple. Our values are people. We allow them the flexibility and latitude to do their jobs under the guide of taking care of the guest, but also taking care of themselves as well." To strengthen others, exemplary leaders increase people's belief in their ability to make a difference. They move from being in control to giving over control. Developing associates into leaders and enhancing self-determination creates a culture of empowerment and confidence. Geoff Ballotti agrees that, "In terms of motivating others, it is letting them make decisions. It's not micromanaging, but rather letting them come up with the solutions."

Geoff Ballotti continues, "Our core value statement is three words, 'Count On Me,' which is all about accountability. It is about people being able to be counted on at any time, for any issue, any question, any decision, and any support that our owners, franchisees, and associates need. It is built on the principal of integrity in terms of taking personal responsibility for your actions." Accountability is important because it results in an extremely efficient and productive team. According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, accountability in the workplace is linked to higher performance and increases in commitment to work and employee morale.[4]

Dan Donahue, states, "A vision has to be fluid. To get to an achievable goal and vision, whether short term or long term, you need to be present, you need to understand that if you want it to be successful you need to be there, you need to be accountable to it, and you need to be accountable to the people that want to share that." When accountability becomes embedded into culture, company's are able to set meaningful goals, develop team buy-in, build trust through support and encouragement, and celebrate successes together. Accountability is about creating a culture where people value responsibility. When associates understand that accountability involves a certain degree of autonomy, mutual respect develops between all levels of an organization.

Mr. Ballotti adds, "The third leg of our values is all about respect. Respecting everyone everywhere both on our ownership side and the community side." When leaders develop mutual respect, associates are more likely to work harder to accomplish shared goals. Harvard Business Review examined employee needs and determined through a query of more than 19,000 workers that most employees desire renewal, value, focus and purpose.[5] Feeling a sense of value and respect can instill an employee with confidence and

motivation. Len Wolman adds that, "I've been in the industry for many years, I was educated in the industry and then worked my way up through the industry, so I'm fortunate in that I have the perspective of having worked in various positions. So I have empathy, understanding, and respect for each position. Everyone needs to be treated with mutual respect and understanding."

Modeling by Example

An important part of being an effective leader is educating others on what the organization stands for and *why* it matters. When leaders sincerely express a commitment to their core values, they're also making a commitment on behalf of the entire organization. Therefore, leaders must make sure there is collective agreement on the shared values amongst everyone they lead.

So how do leaders become a role model for what the organization stands for? The answer is pretty simple. They set the example for others to follow. Holding others accountable to values and standards means leaders must live the values themselves. Dan Donahue responds, "I would never ask an employee to do something I wouldn't do myself." Len Wolman agrees adding, "You always want to set an example and never want to expect anyone to do anything that you wouldn't do yourself." Researcher on behavioral integrity

demonstrates that the alignment between a leader's words and actions has a powerful impact on how much constituents trust the leader and on their subsequent performance levels.[6] Great leaders effectively translate intention into reality by acting on the values they teach and the things they say to those around them.

Showing Vulnerability and Visibility

Confidence is an important skill to possess as a leader. However, having vulnerability as a leader is just as essential to recognize and appreciate. Every leader has vulnerability, but great leaders have the self-awareness to recognize this fact and feel comfortable expressing their weaknesses. Showing vulnerability is a relatable trait and Geoff Ballotti finds that, "The greatest leaders I know out there are very comfortable talking about their weaknesses, about what it is that they need to work on, to improve upon, and to do better." Effective leaders invest the thinking, the time, the energy and are prepared for the vulnerability of connecting with others.

So how do these leaders earn trust, inspire, and build bonds with those they lead? Great leaders inspire their associates and guests by genuinely connecting to them through a consistent presence and visibility. Visibility as a leader not only includes having a physical presence, but also aligning everyone to the purpose behind their shared vision through natural conversations and casual exchanges on a daily basis. When asked how he communicates company goals and the overall vision, Dan Donahue replied, "If you have a presence, it happens organically. It doesn't need to be contrived." The purpose of this sincere visibility is not about the need to "check on employees," but rather an honest desire to interact with associates in order to gauge motivation and learn if employees need support or help. Mr. Wolman agrees that, "It is critical to operate with an open door policy and listen to everyone's perspective and ideas, particularly the people who are executing the day to day functions, and I think you've got to be constantly evaluating that."

Mr. Ballotti adds, "I also think showing empathy is key and the best way great leaders do that is through the art of storytelling when they're up in front of their associate base or leadership team, being able to tell stories that connect and engage and inspire and motivate in terms of the culture your want to set and want to build." Storytelling is a powerful way to share knowledge, push information at people or pull them into a company's vision and mission by reinforcing the intent behind authentic leadership. According to Edgar Schein, Professor Emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management, "[Stories] also strengthen the framework and the importance of an organization's culture by establishing norms and values."[7]Good stories compel, persuade, and unify others around the leaders' vision.

Creativity Breads Adaptability

"Hospitality isn't about a product on the shelf. Hospitality is about creating something that changes day to day, hour to hour, or minute by minute." – *Dan Donahue*
IBM's 2010 Global CEO Study, which surveyed more than 1,500 CEOs from 60 countries and 33 industries worldwide, concluded that creativity is the most important leadership quality for success in business, outweighing competencies such as integrity and global thinking.[8] Geoff Ballotti agrees that, "Creativity is critical, especially in the business that we're in. We're trying to redefine and reposition our brand from a creative standpoint in terms of experience." What defines one brand from another and what makes one brand more successful than another is the creativity that it delivers as well as the experience it delivers to its guests. Understanding how to generate great ideas is a crucial leadership trait in hospitality's innovation-driven industry. Successful leaders create an environment where associates can contribute their imagination and insight, which is critical because most innovations draw upon the contributions of many.

Today's business environment is unpredictable, changeable and increasingly complex. Therefore, the ability to create something that is both innovative and applicable is on the top of leader's minds. Mr. Donahue states, "Nothing in our business can be or should be cookie cutter. It's about curating an experience for each person who spends to be with you." Len Wolman adds, "If you're not creative and open to change in todays world with the disruptors that exist in our industry, particularly with technology, you will not be successful. You need to be creative in terms of staying ahead, staying current and relevant, and get managing the costs associated with change in a way that your organization can still be successful and profitable."

In an industry of constant change, great hospitality leaders need to capitalize on the opportunities that are ripe for the present context and plan for the likely future state. Change requires creating a new system, which demands effective leadership. It is crucial that leaders first acknowledge how hard it can be to drive others outside of their comfort zones and push for change. When asked how he responds to change, Len Wolman replied, "A crucial element is feedback. We get daily feedback that is current and relevant, whether it

be Trip Advisor, direct contact with our guests, or direct contact with our associates. We need to listen to it, we need to respond to it, and we need to adjust to the things that people are looking for whether it be the consumer or the work environment." Those who create new initiatives, programing, design, and brand essence are the ones who succeed. By supporting creativity and commanding change, leaders can increase workplace satisfaction and build driven teams that craft original, valuable ideas.

Figure 1: Interview Questions

1. When associates are inspired by their leaders, they are more confident, they know what's expected, and they feel empowered to make decisions and work toward their goals. So with your vast experience in the hospitality industry, what are some ways *you* empower and inspire those around you to make decisions and really motivate others?
2. Do you have a specific set of core values? They can be personal or related to your company.
3. How do you hold others accountable to those values and standards as a leader? Are there specific tools or methods you provide your associates to help them work towards that unified goal?
4. Confidence is obviously an important skill to possess as a leader, but do you think showing vulnerability, as a leader is important as well? This can be shown through being more visible to others around you, taking risks, being vocal and clear about your specific goals as a leader….
5. Creativity is essential to the entrepreneurship that gets new businesses started and that sustains the best companies after they have reached a global scale. Do you consider creativity to be a manageable trait? Is creativity a focus of your attention as a leader?
6. How do you adapt to various situations in an age of rapid change (with technology and this millennial "mindset" emergence)? What are the key components to having an adaptable mindset?

Closing Thoughts

It has been made clear through the interview process of these three prominent industry leaders that establishing shared values, balancing accountability with autonomy, modeling by example, showing vulnerability through visibility, and having a creative mindset that is open to change are all essential factors to being a successful leader. The common theme amongst all these traits and elements to successful leadership, however, is each leader's dependence and trust for their associates. At one point during the interview, Mr. Ballotti pointed out that, "Great leaders are those who surround themselves with great people…who are brighter, and smarter, and more diverse in thought than they are. And who are able to

build a team that knows how to support and trust each other." It is clear that effective leadership boils down to a leaders ability to unlock the full potential in those around them. Len Wolman adds that it "We take care of our associates so that they take care of our guests, which keeps the guests coming back and is the reason we are in business." Dan Donahue also notes, "You have to realize each individual employee's needs. Make a connection with your employees every single day." All good leaders were once followers themselves and have learned to establish and foster trust over time. A true leader passes praise and shares the blame, lifting up those around them.[9] Without followers, great leaders cannot lead.

Sarah R. Andersen is a senior at Boston University's School of Hospitality Administration. Her areas of interest include integrated marketing communications and real estate development. Beyond her studies in hospitality, she is a member of the BU Women's Lacrosse team. She plans to continue her studies at Boston University after graduating with her bachelor's degree by enrolling in the School of Hospitality's Master of Management in Hospitality program.

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