The Necessity of Error Management Training in the Hospitality Industry

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Mistakes and errors come in all shapes and sizes. In 2015, a number of major hotel corporations fell victim to cyber breaches. Hyatt Hotels Corporation's payment processing system was breached and affected 250 hotels in about 50 countries. In that same year, data security incidents also occurred in Hilton Worldwide Holdings Incorporated and Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Incorporated. Similarly, 2015 was also not kind to the restaurant segment of the hospitality industry (Chipotle Mexican Grill) where a series of outbreaks, including Norovirus, *E. coli*, and *Salmonella* Newport, sickened more than 490 people. While these negative incidents sound extreme, they often occur as a result of ignoring minor mistakes and errors that occurred earlier.

What is more damaging is that such errors and mistakes are not always reported and documented, and thus no measures are taken to prevent them. As a result, over time, these problems become bigger and bigger, leading to critical incidents with extreme negative consequences. While these more critical incidents make it to the news and tarnish the reputation and business of the companies, there are many other seemingly smaller mistakes and errors that occur in the hospitality industry very frequently such as overbooking, dirty rooms, incorrect reservations, incorrect billing, serving the wrong food, food safety errors, recipe errors etc. If

these problems are not managed, these small mistakes and errors will become more critical and damage the good name or ruin the business of companies as well.

The Need for Error Management Practices:

Hospitality organizations are faced with the possibility of errors, mistakes, and failures every day. The negative consequences these can produce include stress, accidents, loss of time, faulty products, quality and performance problems, negative word-of-mouth, customer dissatisfaction, increased costs, and loss of revenue. Since it is the duty of managers and owners to protect the profit margin, taking a proactive approach to mitigate these mistakes and errors is often attempted in organizations by the use of sophisticated technologies, rigid systems, and strict policies focused on controlling employee behavior.

However, the truth is that total elimination of errors is impossible, and it is very difficult to predict what and when specific errors will occur. Error results from physiological and psychological limitations of humans. In hospitality organizations, often times errors occur because of the very nature of the work (high work load, time pressure, fatigue, poor interpersonal communications, imperfect information processing, and flawed decision-making). Errors may also occur due to equipment malfunction and through no fault of an individual, but still the individual may be responsible to resolve the error. Errors can also happen anywhere in a hospitality organization, with external errors involving customers – both front of house (e.g. checking guests into rooms that are not cleaned), back of house (housekeepers forget to report items that need repairs) – and internal errors involving employees, managers, and department (incorrect accounts billings and payments, or scheduling errors resulting in inferior customer service). Therefore, it is important that hospitality organizations not only focus on error *avoidance,* but also on error *management. In other words, management and owners need to start*

*asking the question of "*what needs to be done after an error has occurred." Error management is an approach that attempts to deal with errors and their consequences after an error has occurred. It is essential that organizations, managers, and employees develop this mindset that even after meticulous planning and training, things can still go wrong, and people need to be prepared to contain and resolve the problem, continue to provide the best service to guests, and learn how unexpected events can cause errors.

Minimizing Negative Consequences; Increasing the Positive:

Error management is both error prevention and error containment as it focuses on minimizing the negative consequences of errors by early detection, quick error correction, and on preventing similar errors in the future by analyzing the causes and learning from errors. Open communication about errors is a critical error management practice, as it allows for the development of shared understanding about errors, potential error situations, and effective error handling strategies. Many quality-award winners such as Ritz-Carlton use error management strategies – first, they make efforts to identify the errors (service failures) and then resolve the customer problems (service recovery), next they use error data to make decisions on process improvements to increase customer satisfaction in the future.

Therefore, for a successful operation, error management is crucial as it focuses on decreasing negative consequences (e.g. time loss; customer dissatisfaction) and increasing positive consequences (e.g. learning and innovation). The goal of error management is for employees to exhibit positive behaviors to handle the situation rather than panic, get stressed, blame others, or freeze, so that they can correct errors quickly and effectively, learn from the situation, seek feedback, share information so others can learn, and anticipate errors to handle it proactively in the future. However, while error management has proven to be prevalent and useful in aviation, manufacturing, and medicine, it has a notable potential positive impact in the hospitality industry. Research has demonstrated that error management practices influence organizational performance positively, irrespective of industry, and it also affects employee outcomes such as reducing job stress, increasing service recovery performance, exhibiting more helping behaviors, increasing engagement and creativity, and lessening turnover intentions in the lodging and food-services contexts/industry.

Advocating for Error Management Training:

Conventional training usually focuses on teaching the correct way to perform skills during training. Traditionally scholars and practitioners have focused on two types of training which are based on a negative perception toward errors, which considered as consequences of poor analysis, design, and lack of prerequisite behavior. The first type is errorless training. Errors are not mentioned in the errorless training process, because it is believed that error is not necessary for learning to occur. Instead, the focus of the training is to train employees to strictly follow the rules. Information regarding how to handle the potential error situation is not mentioned in the training process. In other words, the trainees are not exposed to any error-related elements as if errors didn't exist in the workplace.

The second type of training is error avoidance training which is designed to prevent errors from occurring, and participants are not informed about the positive functions of errors. Trainees are encouraged to avoid making errors during the training process. Step-by-step instructions are provided to guide trainees to learn in an error-avoidant way. In both these training types, errors are framed as indicators of failure and lack of competence. Since errors are interpreted as having a negative effect on learning, it leads to self-doubt, dissatisfaction, stress and frustration among employees.

Researchers have recently become interested in investigating the effectiveness of error management training (EMT). This training type considers errors as a natural by-product of active learning and recognizes the potentially positive functions of errors. EMT acknowledges that workers will invariably commit errors for a variety of reasons. Errors are inevitable in the hospitality industry and often service providers do not know how to manage the error once it occurs. Error management training prepares employees to anticipate error occurrence and take preventive measures proactively to stop errors from happening and also prepares employees on how to manage and resolve errors effectively and efficiently once it occurs. According to EMT principles, training programs should not be designed to restrict error occurrence but rather should incorporate errors and train for them. EMT is predicated on the assumption that *trainees should learn how to deal with errors rather than to avoid them.*
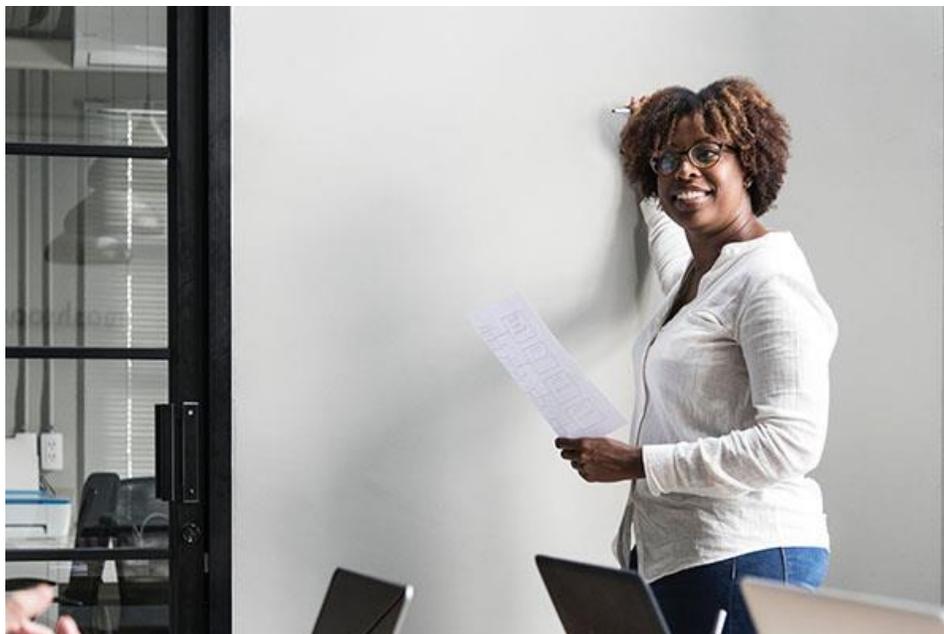
The goal of EMT is to help trainees redefine errors as learning opportunities for which emotional and cognitive coping strategies are available. Errors are reframed as beneficial occurrences rather than stressful calamities. Errors are especially important in the training and learning process in that error can have an informative function for the learner, as they pinpoint where knowledge and skills need further improvement. The central premise of EMT is that the learning of complex cognitive skills is best accomplished in environments where trainees can actively engage in exploration, problem solving, hypothesis testing, making mistakes, and learning to recover from mistakes. EMT is likely to increase employee knowledge and by attending to errors and learning error management techniques, trainees are likely to have a deeper understanding of the job, process, and task knowledge than would otherwise be possible. Increased knowledge and understanding may reduce the risk of committing similar errors in the future.

Error management training leads to transfer performances. Transfer implies that knowledge, skills and attitudes are transferred from one task or job to another. Two types of transfer can be distinguished: (a) Analogical transfer refers to problem solutions that are familiar or analogous, and (b) adaptive transfer entails using one's existing knowledge base to change a learned procedure, or to generate a solution to a completely new problem. From a practical perspective, adaptive transfer is more relevant in the hospitality industry because of the characteristics of the service products (e.g. simultaneity of service product production and consumption, coproduction of service product between customers and employees) and because errors are inevitable. For example, in a hotel, not all complaints of guests could be foreseeable during orientation. Back on the job, however, employees (trainees) may encounter unexpected problems while dealing with guests' complaints and, in contrast to the protected training situation, might not have any Passistance at all. Therefore, employees are more likely to come up with unique solutions to unique problems and be more prepared and competent to handle difficult situations.
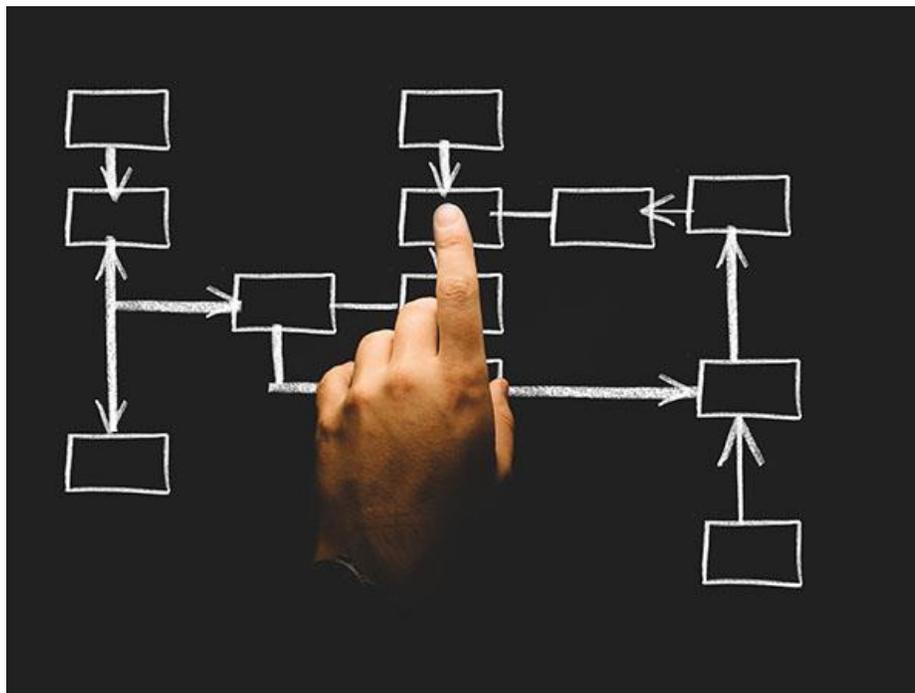
Scholars have noted three processes through which EMT can impact performance: emotional, cognitive, and motivational. Researchers found empirical support for the notion that EMT increases employees' tendency to use two self-regulatory skills: Employees learn to exert "emotion control" aimed at reducing negative emotional reactions (e.g., stress, frustration) to

errors and setbacks, and they engage in activities that involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's progress during task completion and revision of strategies. Such activities are instigated because errors prompt learners to stop and think about the causes of the error and to experiment with different solutions. Finally, EMT creates a mind-set of acceptance of errors (high error tolerance) which can help to increase employee motivation.

EMT will be more effective in improving task and recovery performances (error identification, resolution, containment) compared to error avoidance or errorless training. Compared to employees who receive errorless or error avoidance training, employees who receive EMT will demonstrate high task and recovery performances because these employees are more likely to: (a) control negative emotions after failures/errors/mistakes and stay focused on the task (emotional process); (b) understand sources and causes of failures and come up with new solutions and improved procedures (cognitive process); and (c) be intrinsically motivated to deliver superior task and recovery performances (motivational process). Therefore, employees who undergo EMT are more likely to demonstrate increased knowledge, better task and recovery performances, and enhanced motivation and moods compared to traditional training methods.

Lessons for Hospitality Leaders:

Managers/trainers need to note some characteristics of EMT. Error management training aims to improve transfer performance, not training performance. In fact, training performance may be worse in error management training in terms of error rate, efficiency, or training time because participants are not directly guided to correct solutions. Instead, employees experiment, explore, make errors, and sometimes arrive at wrong solutions. Thus, managers need to hold a more positive view towards errors during the training process. Finally, when assessing the training effectiveness, the managers should not only focus on the evaluation at the end of the training process, but also how the training results have been applied to the work setting in the future. Compared to errorless and error avoidance training methods which concentrate on the problem solutions that are analogous to training process, the error management training focuses on the generation of new solution to new/unexpected problems.

Priyanko Guchait, PhD. is a tenured Associate Professor in the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management at University of Houston. He is an innovative researcher and hospitality educator. Dr Guchait is the author of more than 40 peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, conference proceedings and magazines. *Dr. Guchait* currently teaches Human Resource Management, Leadership, and Organizational Behavior at the undergraduate level, and Multivariate Data Analysis at the Ph.D. level. He taught at the University of Mississippi and The Pennsylvania State University before joining Hilton College in July 2012. Dr Guchait currently serves as the dissertation/thesis chair and in committees for Master's and PhD students. He serves as the faculty advisor of Eta Sigma Delta—the International Hospitality Honor Society. Dr Guchait also serves as the Chair of Innovation lab in the Hilton College. He serves on the editorial boards of journals including IJCHM and reviews for several journals. Additionally, he is currently serving as Director of Marketing for WFCHRIE. Dr Guchait brings three years of work experience in hospitality management to his classroom.

Highlights

- University of Houston's 2012-13 New Faculty Research Award
- Best Paper Award at the Southern Management Association conference in 2013
- Provost's Excellence Award in 2015
- Stephen Rushmore/HVS Faculty Research Award in 2016
- Best Paper Award at the ICHRIE conference in 2016
- Best Paper Award at the WFCHRIE conference in 2018
- Eta Sigma Delta Chapter Distinction Award

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