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5 Skills for Leadership in the New Era of Hospitality

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Abstract

ESSEC Business School’s Johanna Wagner and Carina Hopper call on current and future hospitality leaders to drive the transition to a sustainable hospitality industry by becoming “purposeful self-explorers” with strong self-awareness, “status quo fighters” who can distinguish between valuable and detrimental habits, “impact trackers” who understand how complex systems work, “responsible pathfinders” who envision desirable futures, and “accountable solution designers” able to apply their knowledge with purpose.

Keywords

Leadership, sustainability, climate change, management, soft skills, competencies, change management

Article

A new era of sustainability is at our doorstep, in which the hospitality industry has the potential to become a model as an open window to some of nature’s most beautiful gems, a source of unique experiences for guests and a major provider of local jobs. Living up to this potential requires some changes in operational practices, management styles, decision-making criteria and relationships with all stakeholders. And these changes undoubtedly require leaders with the right set of skills. Inspired by UNESCO, by studies on great leaders, and by our own professional experiences in the

workplace and as lecturers in business and hospitality management programs in Europe, we have highlighted the five roles that leaders need to play for our industry's sustainable future.

Purposeful Self-Explorers

Research suggests that we very often overestimate our own self-awareness, which can be described as our ability to put ourselves into the context of our society and monitor and evaluate our feelings, actions and motivations. This is bad news for sustainability, as change requires individuals to understand the significant impact they have on a broader evolving system and to monitor their emotions in unprecedented and uncertain situations. In other words, it requires them to be what we call "purposeful self-explorers." Due to the key role of frontline staff in ensuring guest satisfaction in our industry, change is dependent not only upon the top-down approach put in place by management but by the individual actions of countless staff members and their ability to connect their personal motivations with the greater good. Students can be led to greater self-awareness through social and emotional learning activities in the classroom. As professionals, self-awareness can be cultivated through self-reflection exercises such as journaling and regularly seeking feedback from peers. To promote self-awareness in their companies, leaders must actively create safe psychological environments for their staff, without which there will not be space for the necessary emotional work that leads to greater self-awareness. Tools such as mindfulness and 360-degree feedback, when used effectively, can also help foster self-awareness throughout an organization.

Status Quo Fighters

All our professional and personal actions are driven by a complex combination of cultural habits, values and norms that we acquire and build throughout our education and life experiences. Some of these are conscious while others are not; some we share with our peers and others we don't. Transforming our industry in the context of climate change requires us to better understand these values and norms to either leverage or replace them to achieve sustainable targets. For example, under the leadership of Hervé Houdré, the 5-star Willard InterContinental in Washington, D.C., shifted in 2005 to water-free urinals, a change that was unexpected in a luxury hotel and that has led to savings of nearly 400,000 liters of water per year. This normative competency encompasses the capacity to understand both our own value system and those of others as well as intercultural management skills, which both rely on our self-awareness. Teamwork both at school and in companies, dedicated HR training, and notions of psychology are very useful when it comes to preparing what we call "status quo fighters." Building the habit of questioning the way things are being done until the answer is satisfying (and not "because it's the way we've always done things") is a good way to better understand the norms at play in order to better prepare the change toward more sustainable approaches for all managers and leaders.

Impact Trackers

The ability to understand complex systems and the relationships between their moving and changing components is becoming increasingly critical as the effects of human activity and business are themselves becoming more complex and interrelated. This skill is called systems thinking and it also encompasses the ability to deal with the uncertainty inherent to systems and their cascading effects. For hospitality managers, this includes understanding the impacts of their procurement processes, their recruitment and management practices as well as their position as role models for guests and other stakeholders. Six Senses and its “impact-tracker” CEO Neil Jacob epitomize this constant search to operate hotels with less negative and greater positive externalities with a sustainability fund (\$627k in sponsored projects in 2019) and an organic garden on every property (74,764 kg of organic produce grown on site in 2019). It is possible to train what we call “impact trackers” by developing this skill early on with students thanks to classes or site visits relating to the industries on which their activity depends (agriculture, transportation, FF&E manufacturing, etc.). Today’s professionals should also take a step back from their daily activities and adapt some of their decision criteria to reflect the integration of such systems. Current leaders can highlight the issues at stake in relation to these systems in their internal and external communication in order to raise awareness on topics that go beyond short-term profits, quantitative performance measures and visible results.

Responsible Pathfinders

While anticipating the future should not take our eyes off the present, becoming what we call “responsible pathfinders”, people able to evaluate possible, probable, and desirable futures and the steps leading to them, is key for leaders and decision-makers. Known as the anticipatory competency, this skill helps us choose the right path and avoid actions that do not contribute to the construction of desired outcomes. It also helps us find purpose in what we do. In an industry that relies on nature’s marvels to thrive, grasping the full extent of what biodiversity loss means, for instance, and how we can prevent it – even at a very local scale – is becoming critical. Anantara Dhigu & Veli, Maldives, and their Holistic Approach to Reef Protection (HARP) program is a good example of how a hotel property can respond to a major environmental issue with a global and long-term perspective. When a severe bleaching event that began in 2015 killed 30% of all coral worldwide, Anantara partnered with Coral Reef CPR and financed protected coral nurseries around their resorts. To make this way of thinking more mainstream, researchers are currently investigating the relevance of introducing biology classes in hospitality management curricula. Current professionals have access to extensive online resources on these topics as well as local and international associations providing both practical and theoretical training. Today’s leaders need to support and encourage future forecasting exercises with their teams both to provide them with a vision and raise their awareness on major potential issues.

Accountable Solution Designers

The skills recommended in this article are mutually interdependent, and that is particularly evident in the case of integrated problem solving, which can be described simply as the ability to apply

different techniques to solve complex problems. To provide solutions for a sustainability problem, the problem must first be acknowledged (by way of self-awareness, for example), then understood (drawing on, among others, systems thinking), and, finally, made sense of and prioritized (such as through normative and anticipatory skills). Only then can we approach the solving of the problem. To create a sustainable hospitality industry, we must be willing to take responsibility for our role in the problems we are facing and try to solve them from the inside out, identifying ourselves as what we call “accountable solution designers,” while drawing from a wide range of interdisciplinary knowledge. Students can be introduced to case studies on how sustainability challenges are being met not just in hospitality but in other industries from which relevant innovations and inspiration can be drawn. Professionals should welcome new challenges with curiosity and an eagerness to see how to apply their knowledge in new ways. And leaders can promote integrated problem solving by setting a clear definition of the problem and a clear goal while encouraging out-of-the-box thinking in terms of how to get to the finish line.

Conclusions

We believe that a sustainability mindset is rooted in habits such as purposeful self-exploration, fighting of the status quo, impact tracking, responsible pathfinding, and accountable solution design. Demand for these five roles, which go beyond traditional soft skills, will only increase in the coming years, and students, professionals and current leaders alike will do well to cultivate them in themselves and in those they are in a position to influence. If hospitality is going to become a model in sustainability – which, while ambitious, is the only worthy goal for us to move towards as an industry – we must look at the root of our impact: ourselves. It is through the development of our competencies that we can then shine a light for others through effective action and leadership.

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