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The COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed our world and its parts, especially for the hospitality industry. At worst, many businesses have been decimated and run entirely out of commission, with operations such as spas and restaurants closing their doors indefinitely, perhaps forever. Despite the drastic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our industry, one constant will always remain. Whether working remotely, in person, or combining the two, employees want regular feedback on their performance (Lewis, 2020). Providing feedback to employees through regular performance management will help attract and retain good employees, giving hospitality leaders a competitive advantage (Eyouun, et al., 2020). Working in person or remote (online/hybrid) poses challenges for leaders to provide regular and ongoing feedback. Without feedback, employees generally suffer from job burnout, low job satisfaction and will likely quit their job in the future (Lu & Gursoy, 2013).

The costs associated with employee turnover are detrimental to profitability as well as sustainability. According to The Bureau of Labor Statistics, the hospitality industry's employee turnover rate is almost 75 percent, a nightmarishly high figure compared to the annual average of 10 to 15 percent that is the case across many other industries (Hayton, 2019). As we begin to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and reassess how the hospitality industry operates, employee performance management should transition from traditional approaches to a more holistic focus on employee development.

Performance Reviews: Thinking Differently

Employee performance appraisals are widely used to differentiate between workers, define strengths and disadvantages, assess H.R. processes, record personnel decisions, and enhance employee performance (Cleveland et al., 2003). Performance reviews are predominantly thought to make employees more productive and should be designed as such. The typical way performance reviews are conducted is not very beneficial and could even be described as problematic. They are often demotivating and rarely lead to the organization's hoped-for results (Lewis, 2020). This raises the question – if performance reviews have the potential to be so damaging, why do we continue to casually and passively consider performance reviews a good thing? Although performance reviews certainly *can* be a positive contributor to employee development, they are not automatically so (Udemy, 2018).

A key contributor to the problem is perceptions of feedback and how it is given and received. The process around feedback is inherently unpopular. Generally, managers typically don't enjoy giving feedback, perhaps due to lack of training (Rudman, 2020). Also, as feedback often focuses on negative aspects and the things that can or need to improve, employees have come to dread them because of that emphasis on the negative. As a result, they get little out of the process to bolster further development. Moreover, COVID-19 has forced some employees to work remotely and they are likely not receiving regular feedback from their leaders. When discussing this topic with several hospitality leaders, they shared that between added job duties, Zoom fatigue, and difficulty working from home, they are not providing regular feedback or personal one-on-one engagement with their employees.

People want to work in an environment where they can grow, where they can contribute to the organization, and enjoy themselves in the process. There is no doubt that feedback is a critical aspect: letting employees know how they are doing and bring value to the organization. However, when we predominantly use these reviews to look in the rearview mirror and focus on the negatives, ample opportunity is missed. Thus, we must think carefully about how we can turn this situation around and ensure that performance reviews become a force for change, leading to more productive teams and acting as a key driver in employee retention.

A Better Way to Do Performance Reviews

Among the main issues with traditional performance reviews are how infrequently they are carried out. Can we genuinely expect a once-a-year review to have a lasting, positive influence on employee development? It is hard to envisage how something conducted so infrequently can result in meaningful changes—for example, motivating employees to be more productive or encouraging increased staff retention.

So, what is the solution? One recommendation is simply sitting down together with employees more regularly. With more frequent meetings (whether in person or virtually), leaders will be better able to help employees work through their areas for improvement and push their productivity. It will help nurture stronger leader/employee relationships and decrease the potential for tension or conflict between the two parties. Plus, it will become easier to pick up on

any red flags and address them well before the employee's undesirable outcome of quitting or being terminated. These are red flags that you otherwise never would have noticed in more traditional approaches to performance reviews.

From the employee perspective, having more regular sit-downs in a one-on-one setting gives employees a better feel of what is happening in the organization and expected. They would no longer be operating with blinders on, focusing only on feedback that takes the form of criticism or working points but ignoring everything else on the periphery. When leaders and managers meet with employees more often, it can become less about “reviewing” their performance and more about developing them holistically as individuals and employees. The reviews themselves should be renamed *Employee Development Consultations* to emphasize the holistic approach to employee performance management.

Recognition and Acknowledgment of Employees

It is essential to understand the difference between recognition and acknowledgment (Kiisel, 2013). Judith Umlas, senior vice president at the International Institute for Learning and author of *Grateful Leadership: Using the Power of Acknowledgement to Engage All Your People and Achieve Superior Results*, has worked with the U.S. Army on how to train their leadership team and their officers better. From this, she has learned two big lessons about leadership.

First, it is less about what someone does, which a good leader would recognize, and more about who they are, which a great leader would acknowledge. An example of a display of recognition might be: “Dommie, thanks for handling that order error so well. You saw the mistake and corrected it by following the restaurant policy. The customer was happy before they could get upset and without having to involve the manager.” On the other hand, acknowledgment might look like this: “Dommie, every time you start a shift, the stress levels of the employees around the restaurant seem to drop.”

Second, acknowledging someone to their face can feel uncomfortable, but only at first. In many ways, leaders don’t have to care if their employees think it is saccharine to hear, “You bring a calming presence to the dining room,” or “Guests noticeably relax if you’re on shift when they arrive.” Umlas states, “grateful leaders create a culture of appreciation” (Kiisel, 2013), and this is undoubtedly true. Leaders speaking positivity will pave the way for others to do the same. Also, the more leaders acknowledge their employees, the more they will extrapolate what they notice and say. Dommie won’t be just a stress reliever when they come on duty but will come to be considered by management as an incredible employee who must be retained for their role in staff morale.

We all have our routines and busy schedules, but it can be very uplifting to break away from these sometimes. Workers who engage in frequent meetings or mundane tasks could begin slowing in their productivity. Still, small changes can help remedy this situation. Meetings could be staged outside the office, whether at a coffee shop, the park, or the beach. Some companies even engage in walking meetings (Levin, 2017) to get the creative juices flowing with fresh air and physical activity. Management could surprise employees with snacks or lunch to ensure that

they are well fed for the day. The smallest switch-ups can help boost a team's morale and productivity.

It can require a few changes to create a fun company culture, but the dividends are potentially massive. Employees will be happier to come to work, more productive, more likely to stay with the organization, and more willing to help elevate business results. Some staff may even spread the word about the fun jobs they have, leading to potential new hires in the future, which can join the positive, productive environment that has now been created. All leaders have to do is shift their mindset by acknowledging employees regularly and providing feedback.

Rewarding Hardworking Employees

An employee who works hard and is productive should be recognized and rewarded. This does not always have to be a massive celebration but could be as simple as giving them an extra day off or praising them publicly for a job well done. Also, such celebrations and rewards can contribute to a sense of community and camaraderie within the organization. Managers should consider moving beyond generic acknowledgments such as "housekeeping appreciation week" and inject some spontaneity and surprise for staff. For example, why not recognize a specific department once a month for their performance while building camaraderie across the hotel?

While acknowledgment of success is encouraged, it also needs to be calibrated to be appropriate. Some achievements require light applause, others a standing ovation. The same importance should not be assigned to everything. It doesn't motivate people to have big wins if everything receives a mediocre response. Similarly, a big celebration of an everyday achievement can feel inauthentic and diminish big wins' response. Furthermore, leaders should consider monitoring and measuring achievement and recognition. Having data that links celebration to productivity and retention can be valuable and help refine and develop a management strategy.

Conclusion

Leadership is a performance sport that blends an individual's capacity to *think* and *do*. Even in one's grumpiest moments, it would be wise to remember what Peter Drucker wrote: "Employees may be our greatest liability, but people are our greatest opportunity" (Drucker, 2002). This is an eloquent reminder that humane, compassionate leadership offers a lot of bang for its buck. Leading means caring about employees' wellbeing, and this is something that is even more significant at present as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic in which both our wellbeing and our industry have suffered substantial damage. Caring for employees means offering acknowledgment combined with honest and valuable feedback regularly. Genuine care for employees will pay dividends in terms of employee retention, productivity, and morale. A leader should endeavor to be someone that employees want to follow rather than someone they obey out of fear or obligation. As a leader, you can genuinely make a difference in the lives of those around you. How do you want your legacy to be remembered?

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