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Cultivating Hospitality Leadership Identities

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About the Author

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Cultivating Hospitality Leadership Identities

As the world continues to process the devastating impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, continuing human demands to gather with others and engage in designed experiences have spotlighted the necessity of hospitality service provisions. Pent-up consumer demand for outings at restaurants, stays at accommodations, and attendance at events is coming back like wildfire in the United States. Nonetheless, cycles of business closures and reopenings linger across the globe pressing the hospitality industry to face unprecedented downturns in revenue, employee recruitment and retention, and business innovations (Breier et al., 2021). As a result, the past two years have left hospitality organizations and their workforces disoriented and exhausted. With indoor mask mandates lifting across the U.S. and the economy gearing up for recovery, it is time for hospitality leadership to recuperate and revitalize what we do best: caring for people.

Unifying hospitality leadership identities

With the multi-sectoral nature of hospitality operations and organizational uniqueness in its service offerings, ranging from multinational hotel corporations to sole owner-operator restaurants, the hospitality industry has struggled to embrace a unified

forefront that captures the value hospitality brings to individuals, communities, and societies. The challenge may be that under the umbrella of “hospitality,” varying service provisions such as food and beverage, lodging, meetings, leisure, and others are included to represent the industry. Perhaps this ambiguity in “who we are as an industry” resulted in unclear and inconsistent government policy during the Covid-19 aid package rollout. While recognizing the uniqueness of each sector within the industry is crucial, sharing narratives around service provisions such as creating memories and enjoyable customer experiences may be a way to crystalize “what we do” as an industry. Thus, it is more crucial than ever to consolidate a collective belief, shared by all industry stakeholders, to raise the resilience and significance of the hospitality industry.

This can be done by solidifying shared hospitality leadership identities that characterize the central, enduring, and distinctive elements to reflect on “who we are” (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Dhalla & Oliver, 2013) as professionals and organizations. Studies such as Bavik (2016) explained that the hospitality industry is positively distinctive in that (1) group cohesiveness is required to produce quality hospitality experiences, and (2) hospitality employees are generally motivated by social relationships. Cultivating such identities developed by internal stakeholders can raise industry performance and economic significance (Dhalla & Oliver, 2013), and more importantly, increase employee engagement and work satisfaction (Wang et al., 2020). Strong leadership identities constructed by professionals and organizations can lead to industry dedication and commitment. For example, facilitated by professional associations, individuals in medicine script their industry leadership identities by responding to local change (Hotho, 2008). Teachers also develop the identities of their profession by studying their job satisfaction, motivation, and commitment (Canrinus et al., 2012).

Professional identification: centralizing pride in what I do for work

Above all issues that the pandemic has brought to the industry, the precarious state of talent recruitment and retention, already prevalent in pre-pandemic times, has been exacerbated by fluctuating employee emotions and uncertainty towards the industry (Park et al., 2020). Triggered by government-mandated business closures and restricted gatherings, thousands of employees have experienced fewer work hours, furloughs, and layoffs. As a result, some have left the industry to pursue other careers, but some have endured the ups and downs of the hostile pandemic environment and stayed committed or have returned to the hospitality workforce. Hospitality leaders and organizations need to capture these talents and identify what made them stay or come back to hospitality. In essence, the question is: what are the dimensions of hospitality leadership identities? This information can be used to build professional role identification in hospitality and instill employee confidence and dignity in what we do for

work. When people take active roles in understanding their professional identities, “who I am” and “where I belong” in the context of work, they are able to take agency and pride in their professions (Caza & Creary, 2016). Leadership efforts to help employees find congruence in their self-perceptions and feelings of membership through work can stimulate individual self-esteem and well-being (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

Organizational distinctiveness: building joint leadership

A side effect of the financial downturn the pandemic has pressed on the industry may be the withering organizational commitment of employees. Indeed, within reason given the financial crises, organizations had to furlough and lay off thousands of employees in the midst of the pandemic. Although these decisions were inevitable, even from the employees’ perspective, loyalty and commitment toward hospitality organizations may have dwindled significantly. How these furloughs and layoffs were communicated and operationalized in times of crisis may have a lingering effect on employee loyalty and commitment towards not just the organization, but the industry as a whole. The current shortage of hospitality workers experienced across the U.S. points to the vulnerability of the industry that has been amplified by the pandemic. However, the new workforce is also looking into how organizations treated their employees during the pandemic. This may be another reason why workers are not returning to organizations quickly to meet the rising demand for hospitality services. An exemplary organization that has shown its care for its employees in times of crisis is Union Square Hospitality Group (USHG). This restaurant group “recognized the financial hardship for so many [employees] and immediately got to work to create a 501c3 employee relief fund … raised and granted nearly $2 million dollars” for their employees (Wade and Simpson, 2021). In this context, it is time for hospitality organizations to take leading roles, such as USHG, in building and representing “who we are” as an industry and how we distinctively care for our colleagues and their professions.

As an industry historically disadvantaged with low wages, high physical and emotional stress, and grueling working hours (Wang et al., 2020), a complete shift in the way organizations support human resources is necessary. Attracting passionate employees with leader qualities away from other industries that have quickly accommodated the demand for remote work environments, which allow greater lifestyle flexibility, is going to be more challenging than ever. Especially with the rising awareness of health and wellbeing in work environments (Ponting, 2020), hospitality organizations should authentically embrace the push for higher wages, flexible work hours, and professionalization. Regaining and promoting what we do in hospitality must begin with showing our care for the workforce. Similar to leaders assessing employees by their

performance levels, employees also evaluate their identification with leaders, organizations, and an industry. A deeper dive into what makes our people, organizations, and industry distinctive to secure and retain talent must be addressed. At the core, amplifying the altruistic professional passion for making people happy needs to be at the forefront of the industry identity.

Industry resilience: enduring the work

Although recovery will be a long journey, lessons learned from the pandemic can pose promising opportunities to revisit and reimagine industry practices (Liu et al., 2021; Ntounis et al., 2022). For instance, unlike other industries that have accommodated their employees to work remotely, and perhaps forever, many hospitality positions require employees to be physically present in their work environments to create face-to-face employee-consumer interactions. For customer-facing positions that cannot be performed remotely, flexible work arrangements may involve non-traditional work schedules (e.g., working four ten-hour days instead of five eight-hour days, or starting shifts earlier in the day so they end earlier).

Taking considerable efforts in reflecting “who we are” and thus “what we do” can curate realistic pathways to shift historically challenging and unstructured work environments. Consider human resource practices that instill empowerment and work pride undergirded by mechanisms that allow professional growth, flexibility, and ownership. The spirit of hospitality must be present in all we do, especially for our workforce and organizations. As Harvard Professor Bill George shares, by “turning your wounds into pearls” in crucible times we are able to truly reflect on who we are by what we do. The question becomes: who will lead the process of activating the hospitality identity?

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