Boston Hospitality Review

Rebuilding #HospitalityStrong

By Quendrida Whitmore, Ed.D.
Quendrida Whitmore Coaching & Consulting

Leadership - May-June 2023

About the Author

Quendrida has gained experience in executive positions by leading teams for over 25 years. She received her Ed.D. from the University of Southern California with a focus on Organizational Change and Leadership. Additionally, she has a passion for empowering great teams to drive excellent results

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Hospitality is a multi-billion-dollar industry commonly identified with hotels, travel, and care sectors. Hospitality and customer service connect with aspects crossing both segments. For example, numerous companies call their customers guests, striving to provide exceptional service driving profits and revenue. Over the last few years, however, Covid-19 has offered a tremendous challenge to the hospitality industry. This article will give tips to help us rebuild #HospitalityStrong!

Hospitality Defined
Interestingly, there is not one definition widely used across the industry. Carol A. King of Fairleigh Dickinson University recaps the history of hospitality, its language, and its goal in a 1995 paper. King points out that historically multiple actions or behaviors make hospitality, hospitality. Specifically, these actions are knowing your guest to deliver an exceptional experience, a reciprocal interaction, and leveraging norms such as greeting, acknowledging, and saying thank you (King, 1995). What stood out as I searched for a commonly leveraged definition for hospitality is that there must be physical and psychological safety to make people feel comfortable, content, and at home. For this article, I define hospitality as creating a welcoming, safe, homey experience by

addressing the needs and wants of the customer and encouraging repeat visits. This definition indicates the best hospitality employees are service-oriented. They are human-focused, lead with their hearts, and care about others. With the appropriate support, these frontline employees are the heartbeat of the business and create repeat customers and extreme commitment. Without these essential workers, hospitality becomes a transactional operation with little loyalty and limited long-term growth for employees and companies. Today, Covid-19 has compounded the challenges some companies face when striving to offer exceptional hospitality.

Hospitality Today
Covid-19 presented new challenges for the hospitality industry, causing an increase in employee turnover, challenging customer interactions, and decreasing workers' morale. These years have stretched and strained everyone, and hospitality workers are no different. In many instances, the people attracted to hospitality are empathetic, and the stress of their everyday job is tremendous. Covid-19 intensified this anxiety through challenging customer interactions, concern for workers' health and safety, and high turnover, creating more work and longer days. According to De Smet et. al (2022a), the rate of people voluntarily quitting their jobs is 25% higher than before the pandemic. Additionally, these authors point out that many industries saw high turnover rates, and many who voluntarily left did not return to the same industry. Specifically, of the survey's respondents, 55% of travel, transport, and logistics employees quit, and 45% did not return to the same sector (De Smet et. al, 2022a). Moreover, consumer/retail faced a 76% quitting rate, with 24% not returning, and healthcare and pharmaceuticals experienced a 54% quitting rate, with 46% not returning (De Smet et. al., 2022a). All these industries have a connection to hospitality, showing the current staffing and retention crisis.

Many call the increase in turnover the great resignation, but I refer to it as the great reflection. During Covid-19, many employees reflected on their values, understood they were not in the right industry, company or job, and decided to leave. Numerous employees understood they were not living their values, and that flexibility, autonomy, and family were vital to their happiness. The power dynamics shifted; employees had the leverage to decide what was suitable for them and their families. They could determine precisely where, when, and how they wanted to work. This power shift from employer to employee is reflected in the turnover percentage. Another great example is the increase in union activity across hospitality and customer service businesses. Every week there is another company in the news reviewing a union vote. These events indicate that employees are demanding change. The workers that stayed are leveraging their power by requiring better leaders, inclusion, development, and support from the company. Corporations can no longer only focus on the what of the company; they must fix the how. Specifically, they must address the culture. An organization can continue

focusing on getting results without engaging the team, but it will only result in short-term achievements.

De Smet et. al (2022a) reported that quitting employees fit into three categories: reshuffling, reinventing, and reassessing. Specifically, the reshuffling workers are staying in the same industry but switching companies, the reinventing are creating their own business or doing part-time roles, and the reassessing are leaving due to life demands (De Smet et. al, 2022a). Companies must assess their operations and culture to capture these fleeing workers. Additionally, countless employees that have stayed are "quiet quitting." These employees are still at their jobs but performing the minimum requirements while collecting a paycheck. Thus, employees are either physically or mentally leaving; both are detrimental to the organization. Individuals are yearning for an inclusive company that is purpose-driven and supportive. Workers are leveraging their newfound power, and organizations must listen if they strive to find great talent, keeping the company competitive and growing in a challenging market.

Rebuilding Hospitality
More than just the importance of pay and benefits, the last few years also taught us essential leadership lessons valid beyond the pandemic. According to De Smet et. al (2022b), companies must address the pay and benefits gap through a creative total compensation package. Steps such as tuition pay, extra days off, mental-health programs, and professional development are examples of flexibility in addressing employees' concerns. Numerous articles have covered the pay and benefits gap and solutions to resolve the issue. I acknowledge that pay and benefits issues must be addressed, or companies will continue to see high resignations; however, this article focuses on addressing the how, and that is the culture. It is time to rebuild the hospitality industry to be stronger than before, concentrating on inclusion, community, development, and leadership support. These tips will help you build a great culture and get out of the staffing game and into the inclusion and retention game.

1. Focus on Talent: Attract, Train, Engage, and Develop

Focusing on great talent involves recruiting superior ability, training, developing, and engaging these workers. These steps are vital to building a solid culture and retaining top talent. Hiring right, keeping, and promoting internal talent sets an organization up for success. According to De Smet et. al (2022b), the top three reasons people left their company without another position were uncaring leaders, unreasonable expectations at work, and lack of development and promotion. Growing internal talent is essential to retention and, thus, the stability of a company. External talent is necessary to inject

fresh ideas, but growing internal talent is vital to upholding culture, reducing search costs, and ensuring a higher chance of success. Particularly, internal talent knows the company, and the organization understands them, leading to a higher percentage of execution. An intentional succession plan with deliberate development strategies ensures leaders see the talent and implement tactics to keep and advance individuals, reducing the time to fill vacancies, which can strain other employees covering open positions.

Likewise, attracting the right external talent takes time, intention, and creativity. According to De Smet et. al (2022a), 18% of survey participants in the travel, healthcare, and consumer retail sectors left their current job without having another position. This statistic indicates that talent exists; companies must entice workers to identify their values and capabilities. Organizations fighting to attract a diverse talent pool must change tactics. Recruiting from the same networks will get similar results. There are varying strategies you can leverage to change your network. Particularly, employee referrals, social networks, and even revising stringent requirements for a job can expand the network. For example, review if a job requires a four-year degree or if there are specific skills you can hire to find a successful candidate. Many potential employees in the market may not fit traditional requirements like a degree or full-time role but may have the capabilities needed for the position. For example, based on the definition of hospitality I offered in this article, you should look for people who can create a welcoming environment where customers feel safe and at home. Additionally, you must find talent with the aptitude and desire to address the needs and wants of the customer. Nothing in this definition says they must have a four-year degree or 15 years of hospitality experience. Unless there are technical requirements for a role, reconsider the skills needed and use an intentional interview process to hire for the abilities.

Another part of focusing on talent is to train, engage, and develop the team. According to De Smet et. al (2022b), the top six reasons individuals have accepted or stayed at their current role are development and advancement, meaningful work, and support in the workplace. Training is a critical part of support. Many companies are in crisis around staffing which can create a desire to get people in quickly and give them the job immediately. Skipping onboarding and training increases turnover in the first 90 days of employment. Great talent wants to feel and be successful. Training the new person on expectations, roles, and culture is vital to helping them succeed. Development and engagement are also imperative to a strong culture, specifically, supporting an employee's growth and thriving in the workplace. Refrain from assuming leaders know how to engage and develop a team. Ask the questions, model the expectation, and create great leaders. Competency and performance-based development are essential to growth and next-role readiness. Employees demand career development and

advancement; accordingly, leaders must be skilled at engaging and developing their teams to attract and retain talent.

2. Build Great Leaders

One of senior leadership's most critical jobs is ensuring people have great bosses. It has been said countless times great talent strives to work for great leaders. Again, according to De Smet et. al (2022b), uncaring leaders are the number one reason people leave their jobs without another job. Companies control the leaders they employ to take care of teams. Many leaders think the most important characteristics of leadership are aggressive words like "assertive" and "decisive," connected to historical definitions of management. However, in my research, eight C-suite leaders said leadership's most important characteristics are those aligned with empathy, communication, listening, and inclusion (Whitmore, 2021). This indicates a new description for leadership leveraging soft skills to engage a team. A leader must communicate, develop the team, and have self-awareness and humility to build an inclusive culture. Specifically, self-awareness, and humility are the ability to reflect, understand, and admit how leaders can improve. Understanding the self and being vulnerable allows a leader to admit to mistakes and create a psychologically safe environment for others to fail and try again. A secure environment creates a culture of authenticity which brings out the best in employees.

Communication includes listening to the team, seeking feedback, and acting on credible views. Additionally, humility plays a role in listening. Seeking others' perspectives and applying them to the solutions shows that a leader understands they do not know all the answers, values the team's input, and is willing to act on feedback received. According to Cockshaw, Shochet, and Obst (2013), belonging is an intrinsic human desire and can lead to depressive symptoms when unavailable in the workplace. Wanting to be included in a community, be seen, and be heard is human. Hospitality industry employees lead with their hearts; thus, there is an even more significant need to create community and belonging. Organizations must create a culture that inspires inclusion and allows team members to thrive. Leveraging every team member's strength is essential to execution and shows a leader values every person on the team. Engaging and developing a team to encourage them to perform up to their potential is what a great boss does. If your leaders are self-aware, engaging, developing, and communicating, you can avoid losing talent due to a deficient culture.

3. People-Centric Decisions

Some say you should have a customer-centric culture and others a team-centric one. I argue that if companies treat the team right, the team will treat the customer right. The frontline group is closest to the customer; when you make things easier for them to

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execute, you create a better customer experience. As mentioned, people attracted to the hospitality industry usually like to serve and care for others. Many companies need to be genuinely customer-centric and solve issues for the people closest to the customer. Creating processes that are best for the corporate office may ignore what is most efficient for the frontline worker and, thus, the customer. Organizations must solve problems through a people-centric lens allowing teams to focus on the customer's wants and needs. Additionally, companies must remove distractions and inefficient administrative work to enable employees to focus on creating a customer experience that meets and exceeds hospitality expectations.

Another people-centric approach is creating ownership. Taskiran (2019) talks about organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and entrepreneurial orientation (EO). OCB is a culture where employees go above and beyond without obligation or the expectation of a reward. Taskiran points out that OCB employees show ownership of their roles and decisions, ensuring their behavior is in the company's best interest. EO also indicates ownership. EO is when an employee owns their role enough to be proactive and innovative in solutions. They feel safe enough to take risks and know they have the autonomy to make decisions and take actions to ensure the company is competitively aggressive, striving to be the best in class (Taskiran, 2019). Imagine a culture where your employees go above and beyond for the business, making decisions and executing results for the company's interest. This culture is possible, but the company must put in the work to build a culture that creates ownership. Expecting the employees to be bought in when they lack the best bosses, an inclusive culture, and input on decisions is unrealistic. Organizations must start with building the right culture to attract and retain top talent; then, they can encourage an OCB and EO culture. OCB and EO employees love what they do, so they will perform above expectations; this will only materialize if an environment allows them to perform at their best and do what they love, serving the customers.

Summary

Customers, especially repeat customers, develop relationships with employees who offer great hospitality. Our job as employers is to support, inspire, and empower this connection. Retaining top talent increases stability, performance, and profits. Focusing on talent, leaders, and people-centric decisions helps create a culture that attracts and preserves great workers. Creating a sense of ownership enables a hospitality employee to be the best for the customer. Consequently, an inclusive culture is essential to rebuilding the hospitality industry to be better than ever. Establishing a culture where hospitality creates a welcoming, safe, and homey experience that addresses the needs and wants of the customer encourages repeat visits and drives excellent results.

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