

## Tips for Creating Culture

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By Stephen Field - Synergy Hospitality Inc.

Recently, many in the hotel industry have had an epiphany regarding the importance of employee engagement and the benefits of developing healthy and successful operating cultures. The advantages of employing an engaged hotel operating team have been well documented in a plethora of articles in HNN and other industry publications. However, many hotel owners and operators struggle with *how* to develop and implement strategies to improve the operating culture at their hotels. Accordingly, my objective here is to provide some helpful tips from our experiences at Synergy Hospitality Inc., to plant the seeds of change in the creation of a positive hotel culture.

### All or nothing

The single most critical factor in the development and growth of a great culture is that it requires the 100% buy-in and commitment of the entire hotel team, from ownership to housekeeping and everything in between. The burden of this endeavor cannot successfully be placed on the HR department to create and roll out the "new" culture. It must have deep roots and constant nurturing. Take the time to solicit feedback from all perspectives within your hotel or organization, determine what your values are or should be, and stick to them.

### Walk the talk

I have witnessed many organizational leaders paying lip-service to this concept, either not wishing to appear out of step with the trend, or worse, viewing it as a manipulative tool to drive greater productivity from hotel staff and profitability from their hotel(s). The fact of the matter is, if a leader is not fully in support of the creation of a positive culture, in both words and actions, any effort to deceive in this regard will likely do more harm than good. It is therefore critical for owners or organizational leaders to demonstrate their commitment to the success of their teams and their organization's goals. In addition, they must have an understanding of the operational obstacles, and show that they are working hard in support of their teams in order to pave the way for success at all levels of the hotel's operation. This is NOT a once a year event where hotel leaders walk into the back of the house and dispense hollow platitudes, but rather a consistent exercise that demonstrates sincerity, support, and care.

### Communicate, communicate, communicate

In the ever changing environment in which a hotel operates, it is easy for the best intended leader to forget to keep people informed. Making time on a regular basis to ensure understanding and alignment of organizational goals, and any organizational changes, is helpful and appreciated by the operating team who often feel disconnected from higher-level and longer-term goals. Clearly, the more open the communication, the better. "Need to know" environments are toxic to the development of a positive culture. Newsletters and regular team meetings are a proven method for this type of information sharing. At Synergy, we also utilize less formal methods such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, which encourage two-way communication.

Two-way communication is critical, so ensure that there is an effective conduit for open and honest input, from the hotel operating team to upper management and ownership, and that management is responsive to this feedback. We facilitate an annual, anonymous, employee culture survey that lets us know how we are doing and holds us accountable for "walking the talk". Further, management makes the time for one-on-one meetings with every team member, at least quarterly, to provide and solicit feedback on job performance and other concerns.

### Create Goal Alignment

All successful businesses set goals. Ideally, these goals are SMART (a commonly used acronym for Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic and Timely). In the hotel industry, we typically do this each year in the creation of a hotel's annual budget. When setting goals, it's important to identify the specific items which will lead to the desired results that are within your teams operating control, and are clearly understood and supported by all involved. Meaningful incentives are often a great tool to ensure goal alignment. If you can't get enthusiastic buy-in from your team, it is likely that either your goal is not realistic or properly communicated, or your team's interests are not aligned with yours.

### Stomp out negativity

Achievement requires an optimistic outlook. Unfortunately, human nature dictates that misery loves company. When leaders are perceived to be out of touch with the needs of the team, it is very easy for individuals to become disenchanted, slipping into a spiral of spreading negativity from which escape is nearly impossible. Trust is said to be the emotional capital of leadership. It must be established early on and reinforced regularly and consistently.

At Synergy, we are continually looking for positive events and achievements to recognize and celebrate. For example, in the dark days of the recent recession, rather than dwell on the depressing state of the industry, we set market-appropriate goals based on achievement of STR RGI indices, and

celebrated their achievement. Consider that in our 24-7-365 industry, our focus is always forward looking to tomorrow, next week, next month or even next year. For this reason, it is important to regularly make time to pause and celebrate intermediate achievements, whether team or individual.

Another great way to create an atmosphere of positivity is to provide a common purpose outside the normal job duties, such as a community service project or charity event in which your team is motivated to play a role. Synergy annually chooses such an event based on team member input, and facilitates and encourages team participation that includes involvement at the highest level of our company.

In short, the more positives you make time to recognize and celebrate, the less time there is to focus on the negative.

### **Delegate effectively and get out of the way**

We have all heard the adage "Too many chefs spoil the soup". It is critical to the well being of a successful team culture that there is a clear chain of command, and that there is agreement between the hotel's ownership, management company (if applicable) and General Manager on the goals and operating philosophies upon which the hotel operates. Presumably, ownership has invested the appropriate resources to identify, hire and train a capable General Manager who understands and supports those goals and philosophies. It is then critical to let the GM have the autonomy to manage within those guidelines. Micro-management and direct circumvention of the GM's direction is highly destructive to an operating culture. (This obviously does not mean that an owner or regional VP cannot voice a conflicting opinion, however, such redirection should occur privately and constructively, with the goal of reaching agreement on a desired outcome.) Naturally, any positive support of a team's efforts and actions strongly serve to reinforce the proper message.

### **Nurture Empowerment**

As a more successful culture develops within your hotel, team engagement will naturally increase. It is important to reward that engagement with greater empowerment, particularly in the area of responsibility for guest satisfaction and service recovery, as this is where the benefits of a successful culture pay dividends. Be certain to provide clear parameters for what team members are empowered to do to provide for a positive outcome, and encourage them to use the resources available for them to do so.

### **Be Accountable**

Accept that with a higher level of engagement and empowerment comes greater individual accountability for the hotel's goals. Some members of your team will likely be unable to adapt to this higher level of accountability from management, their teammates and the organization as a whole. Consistent with the All-or-Nothing principal above, do not accept half-hearted commitment to your values and goals, even from long-tenured team members. To use a boating metaphor, anyone that is not willing to grab an oar to move the boat towards its goals needs to get off and swim for shore. As you replace those individuals, where possible, involve your team's cultural captains to evaluate prospective new team members. Use your organizational values as a measuring stick to ensure that you hire only those who share them.

### **About Stephen Field**

Stephen Field is President and Chief Culture Officer of Synergy Hospitality, Inc., a regional hotel development, management and consulting firm based in suburban Philadelphia. Synergy was recently recognized as one of the 100 Top Workplaces in the Philadelphia region by The Philadelphia Inquirer & Daily News based on their focus on the creation of successful hotel cultures.

Stephen serves on the Board of Directors for Delaware County's Brandywine Conference and Visitors Bureau, and on the Staybridge Suites Committee of the IHG Owners Association.

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