

case study

Energizing the Brand from Within: Kimpton's secret sauce for success

By Ceridwyn King and Leah Callaway

Every Thursday at 12pm Nick Gregory, General Manager of the soon to be new Kimpton property, Hotel Monaco Philadelphia, and his team of pre-opening managers, prepare for a meeting with their public relations firm, Cashman & Associates. After the meeting Nick is challenged with drafting the story line for Hotel Monaco and what it will mean to the city of Philadelphia. Since starting his Kimpton career 22 years ago, Nick realizes that no two properties are ever alike. He must decide how the Monaco will not only stand apart from their sister property Hotel Palomar, but also every other hotel in its competitive set.

Kimpton Hotels & Restaurant Group

In 1981 Bill Kimpton decided what was being offered in hospitality wasn't all that hospitable. The impression that the industry left on him from the road warrior's perspective was cold, unwelcoming and rather bland. His inspiration came from his travels abroad and the experiences he had at intimate European-style hotels. However, over time, Bill Kimpton also realized that introducing a new product to the market wasn't enough. He believed in the reuse of infrastructure as his way of giving back to the environment through buying old buildings in downtown urban cities and converting them into the beautiful properties we see today. Bill Kimpton completed the first adaptive reuse transformation in July 1991. The San Francisco Embarcadero YMCA was converted into Kimpton's Harbor Court Hotel.

Kimpton hotels & restaurants are spread throughout the most popular and exciting cities in the U.S. Each property under the brand is a reflection of the personality, energy and the vitality of its location, history and architecture. Every boutique hotel is truly one-of-a-kind and designed to reflect a distinct, individual style, location and experience. With a fabulous collection of more than 60 properties, the brand thrives on its personalized service and unique design. Kimpton, owner and manager of the chic Monaco collection, was the first US based hospitality brand to offer the lodging market an individualized, unique experience that boutique hotels have come to be known for. This reputation has provided the hotels associated with the Kimpton brand their most significant competitive advantage within their respective

markets. As brands continue to play a major role in how people identify themselves and how they identify with others, the Kimpton brand, with its unique designs that reflect not only the sophisticated well-to-do guest but also the artistic, whimsical, educated and experienced guest, becomes a beacon for those wanting to create truly memorable experiences.

Kimpton's Philosophy

Despite the importance placed on finding that right location and breathing new life into the community and the historical architecture, Bill Kimpton believed early on that there was more to the hospitality industry than the bricks and mortar that made up the product. He believed in offering the guest an experience, one that could be compared to relaxing and simply relishing in good conversation and a glass of wine on a comfy couch with an old friend and believed that employees were central to this.

Kimpton is committed to seeking and retaining diverse and inclusive employees who can connect to others. It is vital to our day-to-day business, growth and culture that our employees mirror the diversity of our guests, while providing the type of personalized care on which Kimpton was founded. We pride ourselves on Kimpton's unique culture and employees who are committed to providing heartfelt care to our guests and to each other. (Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants, n.d.)

Though the Kimpton brand is committed to delivering care, comfort, style, flavor and fun to its external guests, they have a strong commitment to their internal guests as well. Employees, though hired in one department, are highly encouraged to grow and advance within the company. Kimpton University, Manager in Training and the Self Insight programs are just a few ways in which Kimpton offers career development and advancement for their employees. In 2009 Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants was named to Fortune's **100 Best Companies to Work For**. Starting out at number 95 and moving up to 83 in 2011 and number 16 in 2012, Kimpton has proven that it knows how to satisfy and grow their employees. While dropping back to 21 in 2014, Kimpton consistently outperforms other lodging companies that also make this exclusive list. In the same year Marriott was ranked 57th, Four Seasons ranked 91st and Hyatt ranked 95th. Every Kimpton property holds a unanimous commitment to employees and their growth. This is evident in their 'well-crafted initiatives' that Rohman (2013, p.4), attributes to their consistent top rankings. From the Kimpton Road Shows where

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senior leaders invest time and energy to visit each property to ensure all employees are aligned with company goals, to celebrating 'Kimpton Moments' by recognizing, rewarding and reinforcing employee actions that champion the brand, Kimpton employees are treated the same way as their guests are treated. In recognition that such a servant leadership approach is not the norm in other lodging companies, Kimpton also invests heavily in their emerging leaders through the Journey Leadership Academy which reinforces the company's culture and what it means to lead, inspire and, most importantly, value their Kimpton employees (Rohman, 2013). The brand strongly believes in building teams and acquiring individuals with charisma and energy that can deliver Bill Kimpton's ideal experience for each guest. The Kimpton brand is built on a culture that values the individuality and creativity of its employees just as it aspires to build individuality amongst its properties.

Internal Brand Management

Customer facing employees have been shown to play an influential role in customers' perceptions of the organization (Pugh, Dietz, Wiley and Brookes, 2002). As such, Kimpton values and respects the significant contribution their employees play in their success. With this in mind though, Kimpton understands that a sustainable competitive advantage is not just about being a good employer with great remuneration and benefits. While happy employees bode well for low turnover, a pleasant work environment and high levels of customer satisfaction, such outcomes do not necessarily lead to a competitive advantage (King, So and Grace, 2013). To sustain a level of differentiation that is both meaningful and relevant to the customer (i.e. a competitive advantage), what is communicated to customers through various external branding initiatives, ultimately must be delivered (King and Grace, 2009). When service is central to that brand promise, and not just any service, but service that is not stuffy, yet stylish, is not the norm, yet perfect for the savvy traveler, is not predictable, yet full of serendipitous delights, all elements that are reflected in the Kimpton brand, employees need to be willing and able to deliver on that promise.

External brand management is implemented to shape customers perceptions of what that organization stands for. While internal brand management is also implemented to shape perceptions of what the organization stands for, the focus is on the employee. Such a focus is motivated by the desire to ensure employees are committed to delivering the externally communicated brand promise (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001). Understanding the brand, being able to internalize the brand's values and deliver the desired experience to the customer requires commitment on behalf of the employees that can only come from a concerted and deliberate internal brand management effort (King and Grace, 2009). Service employees that lack a desire to champion the brand in their work related thoughts and actions may contribute to inconsistent messages or negative word of mouth that will ultimately impact the clarity and meaning of the brand in the cus-

tomers' mind (Miles and Mangold, 2004).

Therefore, Kimpton, being mindful of the need to nurture their employees in a way that not only ensures employee satisfaction, but also in a way that realizes business goals through customer satisfaction and loyalty, emphasizes an internal brand management philosophy. In doing so, they ensure a level of consistency in exceptional service delivery that is aligned with the communicated brand promise. While other hotel brands may share their brand values with new employees in orientation, Kimpton's innovative marketing approach to managing their human resource ensures that employees not only know what the brand values are, but more importantly, openly, willing and enthusiastically embrace the brand so that exceptional experiences, and therefore a competitive advantage, can be realized.

Hotel Monaco Philadelphia

The Lafayette building in Old City, right across from the Liberty Bell, was identified as the perfect location for a Monaco because of the history and the architectural design. After reflecting on his career with Kimpton, Nick concluded though that there was only one ingredient that would make this new property thrive, the secret sauce of their success - our employees. In calling together his pre-opening team, Nick reinforced the importance of human capital to delivering on the Kimpton brand promise.

"Hiring the right people to open this hotel is the only way to be sure that we can open successfully and hit the ground running. There's so much more to running a hotel than checking people in and checking people out. The true experience and the true value of what we do can only be experienced through the service, the care and the compassion communicated by our employees."

Nick understood that the Hotel Monaco Philadelphia would not be about ladies and gentleman serving ladies and gentleman. He wanted his internal stakeholders to build personal relationships with the guests. "When our guests come and stay at the Monaco Philadelphia I want them to experience Philadelphia like a true Philadelphian. From the housekeepers to the front desk, our goal is to make each guest feel as though they aren't departing from a hotel. Instead they're saying 'see you later' as they leave the home of a new friend."

Nick knew that the design of the hotel, or more specifically the story behind it, played a very important role in delivering a unique guest experience. Inspiration was drawn from the historic district, traditions native to Philadelphia and the founder of the building, Stephen Girard, as well as General Lafayette. Maintaining the whimsical style of the worldly traveler, Nick understood that the hotel's design was also the starting point for engaging and exciting his employees. It was a source of inspiration and a sign that working at the Hotel Monaco Philadelphia was no ordinary job and that the hotel was like no ordinary hotel. In walking around the new property, Nick and his management team

appreciated that the foundation for a truly memorable Hotel Monaco experience had been laid – the hotel looked exceptional – the designers had done an amazing job. But for Hotel Monaco Philadelphia to be a destination unto itself in an exciting city that has much to offer, Nick and his team realized that their secret ingredient had yet to be added.

The ‘Secret Sauce’ for Success

Nick and his preopening team got to work on sourcing the most important element for the Hotel Monaco’s success, the employees. In most organizations, hiring managers are looking for the candidate that is most qualified on paper, the one who has the most experience and/or the most impressive titles. This was not though what the Monaco pre-opening team emphasized when recruiting for their Philadelphia property. The management team looked for employees that were willing to learn and who genuinely enjoyed being around people. Every time that type of person presented at an interview, they were hired because that that’s the type of person who was going to thrive and be successful with Kimpton. After approximately 250 telephone interviews and seeing over 500 candidates, the pre-opening management team had selected 129 individuals that they believed would be the secret sauce for success for the Hotel Monaco Philadelphia.

Having identified what management considered being high potential candidates that could bring the Kimpton experience to life, attention shifted to gaining buy-in from these essential internal stakeholders. Nick and his team understood, believed and lived the Kimpton brand promise, but they knew the property’s success was contingent on these new recruits embracing it with the same such vigor. In reflecting on their mammoth recruitment effort, Nick commented to his team, “If I can’t get my employees to buy into the culture and the brand, then I’ve failed as a leader and I’ve done a disservice to my product. We emphasize our high level of service, our people and not only that, we value them. Who we are as a brand, as Kimpton, and why we do things the way we do has come to be what we’re known for within our niche market. Our brand connects who we are, what we do and, more importantly, why we do it and I want that to resonate with new employees.” Kimpton’s brand image is its people and to be able to capitalize on this in the opening of the new hotel, attention turned to exciting, empowering and challenging the new hires to champion the brand.

Internalization of the Kimpton Brand

As an organization, Kimpton considers it employees to be at the heart of everything they do, attributing their success in the boutique hotel market to its high level of responsive customer service, for which employees are integral. To ensure that the new Hotel Monaco Philadelphia embraces this legacy, Nick and his preopening management team appreciated the importance of energizing the employees to champion the brand’s seven core values namely, focus, passion, personality, individuality, integrity, creativity and continuous improvement.

Focus represents the attention all employees should have when serving the guest so as to make that special connection

Passion is about making a difference in someone’s day

Personality reflects the authenticity of the experience – being oneself. Kimpton understands that as a brand, it is not perfect and it doesn’t pretend to be.

Individuality emphasizes the uniqueness, ‘out of the box’ way in not only the design of the hotel, but in how the guests experience the property.

Integrity involves accountability as well as conscious ethical thoughts and actions

Creativity is about having a flare for being different and daring to shake things up, after all, this is what keeps life interesting and it makes the Kimpton experience fun for all.

Continuous Improvement is a commitment to constant reflection, observation and growth through living the Kimpton values.

Acknowledging that most new recruits, whether they have worked in a hotel previously or not, will have some pre-conceived idea about what it means to work in a hotel, the management team discussed the importance for the new recruits understanding how working in a Kimpton Hotel is different [and more exciting] than any other hotel brand.

“We’re not like most brands Nick,” commented Brian Covington, Director of Revenue Management. “Kimpton isn’t as cookie cutter like the larger global brands. It embodies this entrepreneurial spirit that isn’t presented throughout the industry right now. Buying into that aspect of the culture will be easy for new employees because we are busting with energy and a level of authenticity that they [new recruits] are going to want to be a part of.”

Nick appreciated this comment, after all this would be his 22nd year working for the brand. Kimpton was successful both from a customer and an employee perspective because it was authentic. Kimpton encourages employees to be themselves and to really connect with each guest on a personal level, with sincere heartfelt care. Ultimately, Nick reflected, hospitality is all about engaging with the guest, making a connection and creating an experience – yes that is what it is all about. “We need to be confident that these new brand ambassadors are comfortable not reading from a script and doing whatever they deem is necessary to make a guest’s experience a truly memorable Kimpton experience”

Nick and his team set to work to create an orientation program that would not only afford the new employees the opportunity to buy into the Kimpton brand but also provide them with the knowledge and the confidence to be able to anticipate the needs of the guest and make the necessary, yet non-scripted, decisions that would result in truly exceptional Kimpton experiences. Given the emphasis on personality, as opposed to technical skills, in the recruitment phase, the

management team was keen to ensure that the new employee orientation left nothing to chance. While authenticity and 'being you' was key to employees delivering unique Kimpton experiences, such freedom needed to be defined within the parameters of the whimsical, home away from home concept. At the end of the three week orientation program, employees needed to have internalized the Kimpton brand values, and not just so that they could recite them when asked, but could live and breathe them in their thoughts and actions as a Kimpton employee. If they couldn't achieve that, the future success of the new hotel was uncertain.

With the assistance of the Kimpton Transitions and Development team, Nick would spend three weeks energizing the new employees with the Kimpton philosophy. He wanted the training to be high energy, interactive and dynamic and so recruited the efforts of a myriad of high performing Kimpton employees to engage with the new recruits, sharing their experiences and perspectives of what it means to be a Kimpton employee - their own personal Kimpton story. Storytelling is a big part of internalizing the Kimpton brand. Employees wouldn't be just told how to check in guests, clean rooms, serve food. They would be taken on a journey to understand what makes a truly exceptional Kimpton guest experience. From the variety of calligraphy brushes that line the back wall of the reception desk paying a stylish, yet subtle, homage to the property's location across from where the Declaration of Independence was signed (Refer to Figure 1), to the boat shaped crystal chandelier hanging in the foyer (Refer to Figure 2) and other small design details like ship mast rope and nautical wallpaper leading into the lounge room, or the ship porthole inspired design of the interior of the elevators all being a tribute to Stephen Girard - French born Philadelphian philanthropist, merchant, mariner and banker who was the originator of the Lafayette Building, now home to

Figure 1

Calligraphy Pen homage to the signing of the Declaration of Independence



Source: <http://travelwithlaughter.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/20130124-180151.jpg>; http://www.justluxe.com/travel/philadelphia-news_1952068.php

Figure 2

Crystal Boat Chandelier in Hotel Monaco Foyer



Source: <http://askmissa.com/2012/10/12/recap-hotel-monaco-grand-opening-in-philadelphia/>

the Hotel Monaco, employees would learn to appreciate the intricacies of designing a Kimpton guest experience. While appearing serendipitous to the guest, a Kimpton experience is the result of very deliberate thoughts and actions that focus on attention to detail (particularly the small things), the ability to connect with the guest through meaningful design, and most importantly, through meaningful interactions.

From this perspective, empowerment would be the key theme throughout the three week preopening training program. It was important that the employees, irrespective of their position in the organization, understood that they were charged with the responsibility of facilitating these exceptional guest experiences and that they were going to be held accountable by both their immediate supervisors as well as their co-workers. Programs like *Surprise and Delight*, which allow employees to use petty cash for guest amenities that might make their stay better without seeking prior approval, would be introduced. While this initiative speaks volumes to the level of trust management has in their employees to do the right thing, the training team would work tirelessly to ensure that the new team members appreciated the significance of this freedom. Empowerment gives the employees permission to be creative in seeking customer solutions, but it is important that they understood how to make sound decisions. After all, while delivering on the Kimpton brand promise relies on employees going above and beyond, employees needed to appreciate the impact that their decision making would ultimately have on the hotel.

Throughout the three weeks, discussions about the brand values and organizational culture were broken down for each employee so that they understood what Kimpton does and why Kimpton places so much emphasis on employees as brand ambassadors. They em-

phasized to the employees that the three week training program was more than just understanding their day to day job and how to fulfill their job description. For Hotel Monaco to be successful in the competitive Philadelphia lodging market, the employees would have to consistently go above and beyond their job description. As such, the three week program was about employees getting a feel for the Kimpton way of doing things and finding if they did, or did not, fit in.

From day one, management actively observed and interacted with all participants to evaluate their dedication to delivering Kimpton experiences and assessing their future potential with the hotel initially, and Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants ultimately. Occasionally, employees would break off into divisional areas (e.g. front office, housekeeping etc.) to receive targeted training, however for the majority of the time in training, the preopening team, both management and front line employees across the property, interacted on a daily basis. For Kimpton, teamwork is considered a very important aspect of not only crafting a guest's experience, but ultimately, in a 24/7 operation, realizing customer satisfaction. In such a high interactive service environment, guests can feel the emotions and commitment that employees have towards the brand as well as the sense of camaraderie, or lack thereof that exists within the organization. It is for this reason, that for the Hotel Monaco management team, it was important that the three weeks of training resulted in not only a shared understanding and 'buy in' to the Kimpton brand from all employees, but just as importantly, that a connection was forged between the workforce that was required to great truly memorable experiences. They believed that when all the members of the team were committed to the same goal as well as to each other, the guest experience is that much greater.

In looking around the room on the last day of training, Nick was excited by the level of energy in the room. He had opened many properties before and could tell that this new team understood that they were going to be part of something special and were keen to start their journey in becoming part of Kimpton's legacy. The process of energizing the brand from within had begun and it was now time for Nick to let the employees do what they were hired to do. "On October 4 when we open those doors they will never be closed again and you need to be prepared for that. After these three weeks of training we hope that you are eager and ready to both meet and exceed your guest's expectations. You are the voice of the brand, you are the experience. Our customers will learn the Kimpton culture through you, our employees. You will be the ones to establish brand identity for the Monaco Philadelphia because you are our secret sauce for success."

Looking Ahead

It is a Monday morning and as Nick Gregory looks over the reports from the weekend, he reflects on the last few months and the great momentum they have achieved. Since opening, business can

only be described one way - fantastic. Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants couldn't have picked a better location to expand the Monaco line and the experience of the worldly traveler. Selling-out almost every weekend since opening in October 2012, the hotel has achieved record breaking status as #1 on Trip Advisor in the city of Philadelphia in just a brief time. The impact that unsolicited guest feedback that sites such as Tripadvisor generates could not be underestimate. It not only helped explain in a diverse, yet authentic and relatable manner, what a Kimpton experience is to those that have not previously had the pleasure, but it showed Nick that the investment required for each and every employee to understand and 'buy in' to the brand was well worth it as evidenced in a recent guest comment:

This was my first time at a Kimpton hotel and the experience could not have been better. The level of service far exceeded anything I encountered on my latest hotel experiences. Every employee I interacted with was very professional and seemed genuinely happy to help... It was quite a refreshing experience, and I've been to several brand name 5 star hotels that can learn a lot from this Kimpton. I would definitely recommend this hotel and would stay here again if I'm back in Philadelphia.

In reading comments like this day in day out, it was evident to Nick that his employees were living, breathing and delivering uniquely Kimpton experiences each and every day.

For a new property entering a highly competitive market, there were remarkably few complaints and guest issues. Despite the ones that

Table 1

Customer Survey Overall Property Rank YTD 2013

Kimpton Property	CS Score for 2013
Burnham	96.46
RiverPlace	96.25
Marlowe	95.56
Nine Zero	95.47
Palomar- Chicago	95.46
Monaco- Denver	95.27
Monaco- Portland	95.26
Vintage Park	95.09
Eventi	94.93
Morrison House	94.81
Palomar- Philadelphia	94.66
Harbor Court	94.60
Alexis	94.59
Lorien	94.55
Topaz	94.50
Onyx	94.49
Monaco- Chicago	94.43
Palomar- DC	94.33
Monaco- Philadelphia	94.17

did occur, the solution that was delivered made up for the initial incident. The preopening training was about instilling in the employees the importance of making a difference in the guests stay, being creative and using their own problem solving capabilities to resolve issues, to feel empowered to never have to say 'let me check with my manager.' Consistently, guests' ratings of Hotel Monaco, Philadelphia's performance were high. At the conclusion of their stay, guests are invited, by email, to participate in the Market Metrix Survey, a Kimpton wide research initiative that benchmarks performance across their properties. Six months after opening, Monaco Philadelphia had an overall customer satisfaction ranking of 19 out of 63 properties (refer to Table 1).

As the boutique hotel experience prides itself on the uniqueness of hotel design and location, creating exceptional Kimpton experiences requires employees being able to respond to guest questions with regard to characteristics which are unique to each property. Thus the focus of the initial training was very much about instilling within the employees the story of the Monaco, the history of the building and feeling confident and informed to be able to give their personal impression and recommendation about what Philadelphia has to offer. It was also about making sure that employees felt empowered to anticipate and respond to guests needs. According to the Market Metrix Survey, the hotel ranked 13th with respect to employee knowledge of hotel, facilities and the surrounding area and ranked 17th with respect to employees having a 'can do attitude' (refer to Tables 2 and 3).

In reflecting upon the first six months results, Nick appreciated that his team knew no limit when it came to what they could do for the hotel's success. But in consideration of the framework that underpins Kimpton's business model and informs their culture and values

Table 2
Customer Survey Employees' knowledge of hotel, facilities and surrounding area YTD 2013

Kimpton Property	CS Score for 2013
RiverPlace	98.04
Burnham	97.77
Morrison House	97.29
Monaco-Portland	97.28
Palomar- Chicago	96.85
Vintage Park	96.80
Topaz	96.75
Marlowe	96.72
Nine Zero	96.63
Palomar- Philadelphia	96.38
Monaco- Denver	96.33
Lorien	96.16
Monaco- Philadelphia	96.00

Table 3
Customer Survey Employees' 'can-do' attitude YTD 2013

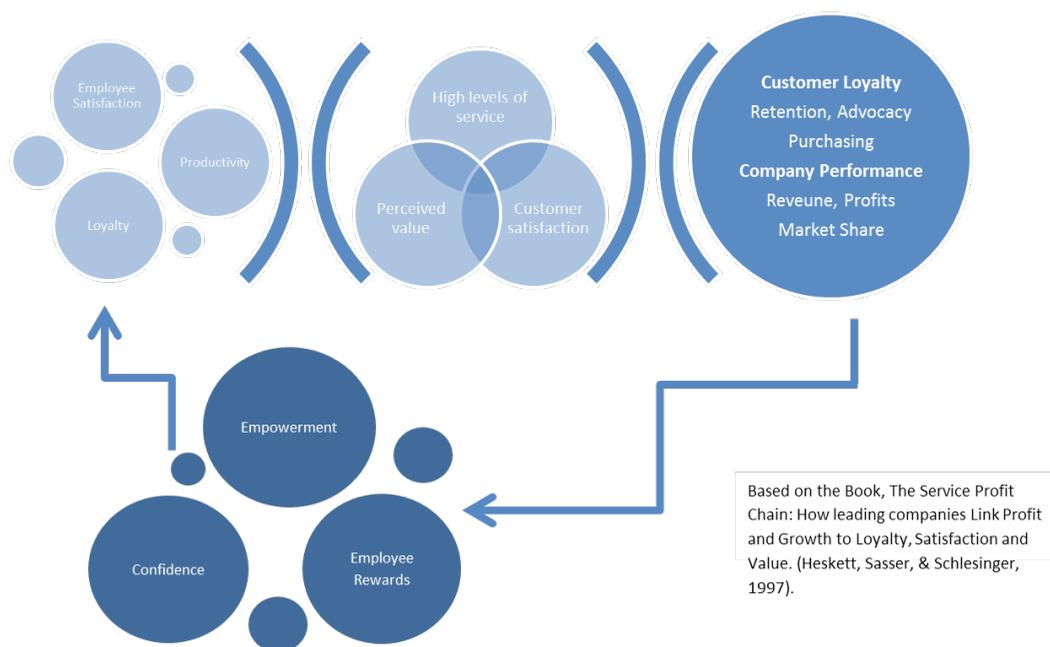
Kimpton Property	CS Score for 2013
Burnham	98.04
RiverPlace	97.45
Monaco -Portland	96.95
Morrison House	96.94
Palomar- DC	96.87
Topaz	96.59
Marlowe	96.36
Nine Zero	96.35
Alexis	96.34
Vintage Park	96.31
Palomar- Philadelphia	96.25
Palomar -Chicago	96.15
Monaco- Denver	96.04
Lumen	95.98
Madera	95.95
George	95.93
Monaco- Philadelphia	95.84

(Refer to Figure 3), he also knew that his number one priority would always be his employees. He knew that if he took care of them, they would in turn take care of the guests. In thinking about the energy they created as a result of the cohesion of the entire hotel's workforce working and learning together at the property-wide three week pre-opening training program, Nick's attention turned to what they were currently doing to keep the employees motivated and engaged with the Kimpton brand. He was particularly concerned about how long the 'newness' factor, if it hadn't already dissipated, would fuel employee behavior. Now that the 'opening party' was over and operations were very much business as usual, it would be easy for employees to get distracted by operational pressures and forget the essence of the Kimpton brand promise. They had implemented programs such as Flapjack Friday, monthly employee luncheons where employees received awards for being the employee of the month or recognized if highlighted in the Market Metrix Surveys, but he wondered if that was enough to maintain the momentum.

Since opening, voluntary employee turnover (i.e., employees leaving of their own accord for another opportunity or because they did not fit with the Kimpton culture) was 9% below Kimpton's organizational average of 29% (Great Place to Work Institute, 2013) and 18% below the US hospitality industry average (Great Place to Work Institute, 2014).. While this was another indication that Nick and his team had been successful integrating new employees into the Kimpton family by retaining 80% of their original hires, he knew the industry was susceptible to having high levels of absenteeism and turnover, which has dramatic

Figure 3

Framework informing Kimpton's culture and values



consequences for delivering the brand promise. Furthermore, they were about to enter into peak season, so the need to add new members to the Monaco Philadelphia family was fast approaching. How were they going to integrate new employees into the hotel so that the momentum they had generated didn't falter? It would be impossible to recreate the 100% focus on employee development that the three week preopening training program afforded as he now had a fully operational hotel, with customers that required service 24 hours a day, seven days a week. While he couldn't give the new hires the same experience as the pre-opening team, he still needed them to perform in the same authentic, heartfelt manner that the Kimpton brand is known for. How could he continue to energize the brand from within?

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