

Struggles of First-Time Managers: A case about interpersonal communication skills

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Introduction

This case study presents a challenging situation that a hospitality graduate, as a first-time manager in a hotel, may encounter. The Madison Hotel (TMH) is currently recruiting college students for entrance into its management training program. The hiring process begins with applying, interviewing, and considering current employees and recent graduates of nearby Mountain University. This year, TMH has four candidates who are currently employees about to graduate from college. Three of the four candidates have worked for the hotel for the past year; one in the sales department, one in the food and beverage department, and one in the rooms department. The fourth candidate, Jill Winston, worked for the hotel for three and a half years as an assistant clerk in the human resources department. Her role as assistant clerk includes prescreening job applicants for the management training program. One of the requirements of the management training program is the candidate has at least one year of hotel operational experience. This case highlights this interpersonal communication issue through Jill's experiences at TMH. Companies are willing to train new managers on operational skills, but there is an expectation that incoming managers will already possess interpersonal communication skills (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera, 2009).

Jill prescreens her co-workers for the management training program. All three of the other candidates have operational experience, are qualified for the program, and are accepted into the training program. Jill applies and is denied entrance into the management training program and her lack of operational experience is the reason given by the selection committee. Operational experience is defined as working in a department that directly contributes financially to the hotel's bottom line. This does not include human resources as nothing is sold in this area and no money is collected or made. Jill is offered a position within the reservations department as assistant reservations sales manager. She is shocked by the offer as she feels this is a role for which she is unqualified; however, her interpersonal communication skills may be all she needs to succeed in her first-time manager role.

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Literature Review

Hospitality managers have many responsibilities, such as ensuring profitability, marketing, and operations. However, interpersonal communications with employees consumes 80% of a manager's typical day (Woods & King, 2002). Conducting performance reviews, facilitating departmental meetings, and engaging in informal conversations are examples of ways managers may interact interpersonally on the job. Interpersonal communication is defined as an "exchange of information between two or more people" ("Interpersonal Communication", 2015). "A manager interpersonally communicates with guests, subordinates, peers, and superiors. In particular, a manager interpersonally communicates most often with their subordinates" (Lolli, 2013:295). For first-time managers, the relationship with subordinates and supervisors is one of the most frequently encountered problems (Pearce, 1982; Pierce & Rowell, 2006).

Managers want to succeed. However, oftentimes they find themselves in positions of leadership for which they are not prepared. Charged with such a vast array of responsibilities including working with others, it is important to recognize the "management of people is not an easy business" (Maloney & Stanford, 2011:4). Testa & Sipe (2012) developed a service-leadership competency model to identify required skills for the hospitality and tourism industry. Interview results of 110 industry managers yielded 100 behaviors in 20 competency areas that can be categorized as business savvy, people savvy, and self savvy (Testa & Sipe 2012). "Perhaps one of the most common competency areas in management and leadership research, and the first people savvy competency, is interpersonal communication" (2012:654).

Hospitality graduates with experiences primarily from internships and summer jobs will take on managerial roles right out of college. To examine the skills perceived necessary for these managerial roles, Raybould and Wilkins' (2005) surveyed hospitality managers and hospitality students to obtain their perceptions of hospitality graduate skills. While there was a significant gap in perception between the two groups surveyed, managers identified interpersonal skills as an expectation for hospitality graduates. "These results suggest that students and academics are investing time and effort in developing conceptual and analytical skills that will not, at least immediately, be valued by employers of hospitality graduates" (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005). In another study, hospitality students indicated they needed to be "good communicators" in order to be promoted

within the industry (Harkison, Poulston, & Kim, 2011).

Authors divide skills into the categories of hard skills and soft skills (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera, 2009). Hard skills are technical skills such as a manager's knowledge needed for tasks of the position. While soft skills are interpersonal skills used to carry-out those technical skills. Many companies will train new managers on the required hard and soft skills. However, many expect their future managers to have the soft skills necessary to be successful in their management role (Weber et al., 2009). In fact, training can be reduced for managers with a formal college education (Harkison, Poulston, & Kim, 2011).

Background

Jill Winston

Jill Winston fell in love with the hotel industry at a very early age. She traveled extensively with her family as her father's position in the military had them staying in a variety of hotels around the world. Jill was always fascinated when unexpected things happened during their stay; for example, her family would return to their room at the end of the day and the bed was made. At the time, she did not know that hotels had housekeepers that entered and cleaned the guestrooms while guests were away. Her fascination with the industry led to an opportunity to work one summer at The Madison Hotel while in high school. The director of human resources was impressed that Jill was earning straight A's in high school and gave her an opportunity to work under his tutelage in the human resources department. Oftentimes, people would enter the department and be greeted by Jill therefore thinking that she was a supervisor. Her professionalism, ability to interact with others, and maturity were great assets to the department.

During Jill's junior and senior years in high school, she continued to excel in her classes. She graduated 5th out of over 300 graduates. When Jill decided she would remain in the area and attend the local university with a hospitality program, she again returned and applied to The Madison Hotel. While she was prepared to work in housekeeping or in food and beverage, where most other students are employed, she secretly hoped she could return to the human resources department. She had already learned so much about the hotel industry. Joseph Stocks, Director of Human Resources, was still there and pleased to have Jill back in the department as the human resources assistant. Jill was exposed to aspects within the department that other non-managers normally would not get exposure. Joseph saw a talent in Jill and continued to hone it during the next three and half years. Joseph noticed how Jill greeted visitors to the human resources office, interacted with hotel management and employees, and handled problems in his absence. Joseph allowed Jill to sit in on sexual harassment cases, guest liability discussions, and termination disputes. She was allowed to review the paperwork and review the process as the housekeeping department sought to become unionized. Joseph also

allowed Jill to assist other departments, such as purchasing and sales, when projects and tasks came up that no one else could get to at the time. While her main focus was in the human resources department, she learned about other areas.

Overall, Jill learned how to handle confidential and sensitive matters as well as how to treat people during these sensitive times. For example, when a long-term employee was emotional after being let go, Jill assisted in gathering their belongings and ensuring they were calm enough to drive home. Oftentimes she had to explain to applicants that their pre-employment drug test prevented a job offer. The lessons she learned in human resources would help her develop her management style in the years to come.

Harrison Lodging Management Company

A father and daughter team founded Harrison Lodging Management (HLM) Company in 1986. The father is the owner and the daughter is the president of the management company. While the father, Mr. Darren Harrison, plays an active role in decision-making, the day-to-day operations are ran by his daughter, Jan Harrison. Starting with one hotel, TMH, in the late 80's, HLM grew to manage hundreds of hotels. HLM primarily manages hotel properties on the East Coast but expanded to other areas recently.

HLM has won numerous awards due to its financial success. The company has forged many partnerships within the community; as an example, TMH hosts many of the citywide conventions. The owner has a relationship with Mountain University's hospitality management program. TMH and HLM frequently recruit students and graduates who go on to leadership roles within TMH. Getting a "foot in the door" while still in college is recommended by the University's instructors and advisors; therefore, students flock to TMH hoping to work part-time throughout their academic years to later assume positions as paid interns and associates in the management training program upon graduation.

The Madison Hotel

The Madison Hotel (TMH) is the largest hotel in the area and the first property owned and managed by Harrison Lodging Management (HLM) Company. Built in the late 1980's as a full-service hotel, it has 459 guest rooms, three restaurants, an indoor pool, a lounge, a coffee shop, and an attached live theatre utilizing Ticketmaster® for the sale of tickets. TMH is well-known among guests and prospective employees alike. The award-winning property is also recognized among recruiters and college students beginning their hospitality careers as interns, management trainees, and new managers.

TMH is located across from HLM corporate offices. Because of this close proximity, HLM highlights the managers and employees of TMH either as a positive example for other properties as how to do things right or as a negative example of what not to do. TMH's location makes it a good spot as a training hotel for the company, leading to many

Figure 1

Advancement Tracks Available at The Madison Hotel



trainees throughout the United States coming to learn about hotel operations. Specifically, the management training program at TMH is of great interest to most hospitality graduates of the local university. The hotel is full-service and offers experiential opportunities in a variety of areas ranging from foodservice and sales, to accounting and front desk. The management training program is reserved for hospitality graduates who have previous hospitality operational experience.

Management Training Program

If accepted into the program, graduates select one of several advancement tracks (Figure 1) to follow that will determine which hotel departments they rotate through during the one-year program. For example, students choosing to advance their career within the rooms division would likely be placed in a front desk manager's role after completion of the management training program. Therefore, to prepare for this track, trainees rotate to each rooms division department during their management training program.

Having at least one year of operational experience is an important criterion to becoming a management trainee at TMH. During the hiring process this is an indicator to the selection committee that the candidate will likely complete the management program, stay on with their company, and assume a management position. In addition, the criterion ensures the candidate will have prior knowledge of the characteristics of the hotel industry including high turnover, customer service issues, scheduling challenges, teamwork emphasis, and rapid advancement opportunities. Previous candidates without this foundation are prone to leaving the program and the industry altogether.

The East Coast, where TMH is located, is thriving. More hotels are being built each year and the area is poised for growth. Therefore, competition for excellent candidates makes hiring a challenge for TMH and other HLM properties in the area. Making hiring decisions is very important in maintaining a competitive edge as it is the people whom guests remember. Guests remember the friendly telephone greeting they received and the professional manner in which their complaint

was resolved. TMH is engaged in multiple recruitment efforts, but it is the relationship with Mountain University's hospitality program that provides their most dedicated and qualified candidates.

Assistant Reservation Sales Manager Position at TMH

Hospitality managers, including the role of the assistant reservation sales manager, have many responsibilities from ensuring profitability to marketing and sales. The assistant leads his or her team in maximizing rates, controlling room inventory, and selling and booking reservations for both the hotel and adjacent live theatre. Because interpersonal communication can consume a majority of a manager's time, it is imperative that the assistant reservations manager have great interpersonal communication skills (Woods & King, 2002). Conducting performance reviews, holding departmental meetings, and engaging in informal conversations are examples of ways the assistant manager interacts interpersonally on the job.

Interpersonal communication refers to skills that allow two or more people to converse ("Interpersonal Communication", 2015). The assistant reservation sales manager serves as a liaison between the reservations manager and the reservationists. He or she handles customer complaints and interacts with department heads in the reservations manager's absence. For first-time managers, relationships with subordinates and supervisors is one of the most frequently encountered problems (Pearce, 1982; Pierce & Rowell, 2006). Filling the assistant reservation sales manager position is a priority for TMH as there are current challenges within the department that require immediate attention.

Explanation of Dilemma

Jill is a recent graduate with a hospitality degree. She is 22 years old and has no hospitality industry operational experience. This means she has not worked in an area of the hotel that directly contributes to the bottom line (e.g. reservations, sales, front desk, food, and beverage). Experience in an operational area includes knowing how to complete daily departmental tasks such as using a computer to check guests in and out or serving restaurant guests. In the past,

Figure 2

Front Desk Manager Rotation Schedule for Rooms Division Department



Jill worked as a human resources clerk for one summer while in high school and as a human resources assistant at TMH throughout college. Even though Jill has been working as an assistant in the human resources office for the past three years at TMH, she has been denied entry into the hotel's management training program due to lack of operational experience. Instead, the management team offered Jill the only management opening available, an assistant reservations sales manager. Jill is very hesitant about accepting the position. She is aware of the many challenges in the reservations department. These challenges include the following:

- Sales agents are known as the "Grumpy Group".
- Employee satisfaction scores are the lowest of all departments.
- The reservation sales manager is disengaged and appears not to care. However, he is highly skilled in the hard skills area of forecasting.
- Several environmental problems exist in the office such as no heat in the winter and a leaking ceiling when it rains.

Jill believes she is unprepared for this role as she is not familiar with the Property Management System, which is a computer system used to look up guestroom availability, make reservations, check guests in and out, prepare forecasting, occupancy, and various management reports. All of those technical skills she would have learned in the Madison Hotel's Management Training Program. She would have rotated to each of the rooms division departments learning how to look up guestroom availability, make reservations, check guests in and out, prepare forecasting, occupancy, and various management reports (Figure 2). In addition, Jill will be surprised on her first day to find a Ticketmaster® terminal on every desk in the reservations office. Jill has never taken a reservation or sold a package and Jill's new supervisor will be in forecasting meetings all day on her first day.

Jill seeks the advice from her supervisor of the past three years, Joseph, Director of Human Resources. She shares her concerns and asks, "How can I be in charge when I know nothing about hotel reservations? What can I bring to the table? How can I be of value as a manager in this department?"

Discussion Questions

- What are the pros and cons of Jill's lack of hotel operational experience?
- Identify potential challenges for Jill with her subordinates and

supervisor.

- Consider the current challenges of the reservations department. How will Jill's interpersonal communication skills she learned from working in human resources benefit this department?
- You are tasked with modifying the management training policies. Provide rationale for changes made.
- Should TMH make allowances for internal candidates regardless of experience type? Explain.
- What advice could Joseph give Jill to help her make a decision?
- Should Jill accept the assistant reservation sales manager position? Why or why not?

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