

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

### Case Purpose and Target Audience

This case study seeks to emphasize the importance of interpersonal skills, face-to-face communication between two or more individuals, for first-time managers in the hospitality industry. This case is suitable for a variety of college level hospitality courses such as Human Resources Management, Communication, Hotel & Lodging Management, Leadership, Introduction to Management, or any other course that prepares students to enter the workplace. The case study would also be suitable as part of a management training program. Students are to consider circumstances surrounding a recent graduates' first supervisory level job offer and their preparedness in supervising employees through self-reflection.

### Theoretical Concepts

Literature reviewed by Lolli (2013), established which interpersonal communication skills were perceived as important by hospitality leaders and whether or not college curricula prepared students to communicate effectively with employees. As a member of the accrediting body for hospitality programs, Lolli (2013) contends that most college curricula offer courses in formal communication such as professional writing and speech. However, interpersonal communication skills are rarely taught. A survey questionnaire, based on a five-point Likert scale, was mailed to 172 alumni of a four-year hospitality management program. "The results indicated that respondents were underprepared to be competent interpersonal communicators with their subordinates" (Lolli, 2013:297).

In another study, researchers determined that during a student's college career, interpersonal communication skills are developed and improved upon (Saavedra & Saavedra, 2011). When comparing first year students with students in their final year in Australia colleges, results of their Graduate Skills Assessment Test indicated a statistically significant improvement. The Graduate Skills Assessment Test is designed to "test students' critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal relations, and written communication skills. . ." (Saavedra & Saavedra, 2011:1518). These skills have been identified by university leaders and employers as the most important skills to be developed during college.

### Learning Outcomes

This case is a real world example many hospitality graduates may face as they encounter their first manager job offers. Students will consider the importance of interpersonal communication skills among other skills they learn throughout college. Through the case, the instructor will explain interpersonal communication skills, discuss why they are useful for managers, and distinguish between good and bad

interpersonal communication skills. By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain the importance of interpersonal communication skills for managers.
- Recognize good interpersonal communication interactions.
- Distinguish between good and poor interpersonal communication skills.
- Model good interpersonal skills.

### Teaching Approach

Instructors may employ a number of teaching styles and tools to engage students in this case.

Two approaches, individual or group based, are presented in this teaching note. Following the core case study discussion, students may be asked to participate in a supplemental activity in an effort to reinforce and achieve the learning outcomes.

#### *Plan A – Individual Approach (40-45 minutes)*

Distribute the case to students prior to class. Students should read and respond to the discussion questions individually prior to class. Inform students they must be able to analyze the issues presented in the case. Begin the class with a discussion on interpersonal communication. Instructors should use other supplemental resources and references to develop this introduction. Following the general introduction to interpersonal communication, present an overview and the purpose of the case study. Give students about fifteen minutes to review the case study and their individual responses. Following this short review, bring students together as a class to discuss the questions and responses. After open discussion, end with a summary of the importance of interpersonal communication skills and the connections to the case.

#### *Plan B – Group Approach (50-60 minutes)*

##### *Phase I – 25-30 minutes*

Begin class with a discussion on interpersonal communication. Instructors should use the supplemental resources and references to develop this introduction. Following the general introduction to interpersonal communication, present an overview of the purpose of a case study. Inform students that they will receive a case in which they must analyze, discuss, and then demonstrate that they have met the key learning outcomes. Divide students into groups, distribute the case study to the class, and have the groups read the case together. Give students time to review and answer the discussion questions as a group.

## Phase II – 25-30 minutes

Following group discussion, bring students together as a class to openly discuss the questions. After discussion, end Phase II with a summary of the importance of interpersonal communication skills and the connections to the case.

### Supplemental Activities for either Plan (times will vary)

These supplemental activities are designed to reinforce student learning. One or more may be used following either the individual or group approach to discussing the case.

1. *Observation* – Instructors may model good and poor interpersonal communication skills for students to observe or students may be asked to observe interactions of managers with their employees on their current job or in a hospitality setting and report back to the class their findings.
2. *Role Playing* – Students may be presented with, or asked to prepare, scenarios to reenact to show their understanding of interpersonal communication skills.
3. *Videos* – Students may be asked to view videos of real life or dramatized interactions between supervisors and employees where good and poor interpersonal communication skills are demonstrated.
4. *Videotaping* – Students take turns assuming the position of manager. Their interactions are videotaped and then played back for them to analyze their actual behavior, reflect and journal their thoughts.

### Discussion Question Answers

While there are no right or wrong answers to the case study discussion questions, it is important to elicit responses from students that are practical. Possible responses are outlined below and variation in responses is common. Be sure to encourage students to justify their responses and to journal their thinking.

1. What are the pros and cons of Jill's lack of hotel operational experience?
  - A con of Jill's lack of hotel operational experience is that she is not able to readily assist her staff. Managers need to help out when it gets busy and need to troubleshoot technical problems when they arise. This may come with time, but in the meantime may be a cause of frustration.
  - Managers with experience may be able to gain the respect of their team quicker. This may be a con for Jill. She may have to justify to her team why she is worthy of the management role.
  - A pro is that Jill has the interpersonal communication skills to establish relationships with her team as she learns from them and use this as an advantage to justify her constant

presence on the sales floor and employee workspace. Being at each employee's desk will allow her an opportunity to observe each employee's strengths and possible training deficiencies, as well as top performers.

- A pro is that Jill will be able to bring a fresh set of eyes and perspective to the training and onboarding process as she learns the operations of the department.
2. Identify potential challenges for Jill with her subordinates and supervisor.
    - May include getting subordinates to speak up, comment on the status of the department, may not willingly teach or train Jill, and subordinates may not respect a supervisor who lacks technical skills.
  3. 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?
    - Students should begin by listing the issues with the reservations department (grumpy sales agents, low employee satisfaction scores, disconnected manager, environmental problems).
    - Jill can use her interpersonal communication skills to foster employee morale, serve as a liaison to bridge the gap between the manager and associates, and influence decision makers to make efforts to improve the physical environment (e.g. leaky ceiling).
  4. You are tasked with modifying the management training policies. Provide rationale for changes made .
    - Recognizing the importance of interpersonal communication skills, students may suggest that this may be an additional qualification for entering the management training program.
  5. Should TMH make allowances for internal candidates regardless of experience type? Explain.
    - "Yes," candidates who possess strong interpersonal communication skills and have one year of non-operational experience should be considered for entrance into the management training program.
    - The candidate's immediate supervisor would be able to attest to the candidates' interpersonal communication skill level.
  6. What advice could Joseph give Jill to help her make a decision?
    - Joseph could reassure Jill that she has a lot to bring to the table. What she lacks in operational skills, she makes up for in interpersonal communication skills.
    - If there were any other managers in their company who had followed a similar path, Joseph could formally intro-

duce Jill to them.

7. Should Jill accept the assistant reservation sales manager position? Why or why not?
  - “Yes” responses may focus on Jill’s previous human resource experience.
  - “No” responses may focus on Jill’s lack of operational experience.

## Conclusion

This case study addresses the importance of interpersonal communication skills for first-time hospitality managers. Jill Winston’s situation is one that many hospitality graduates may face. The day she approached her supervisor, Joseph Stocks, about her dilemma, he responded in a way that would change her life forever. “You have exactly what you need to be successful in this new role as a first-time manager. What you lack in technical skills, you make up for in soft skills. You have good interpersonal communication skills. Now, dry your eyes and go home, get some rest, and know that you bring a lot to the table. Make getting along with your new team your goal as you learn all of the other technical skills you need. And remember, you can always come back home to Human Resources!”

In the end, Jill took the assistant reservation sales manager job and was able to excel in the role. She quickly built lasting relationships with the sales agents by enlisting their help to teach her all she needed to know about reservations. Within a year, Jill had worked to improve the physical environment and employee morale. She was asked to take on the role of front desk manager to take on new challenges that only someone with good interpersonal communication skills could handle.

## Supplemental Reading

- Abe, J. A. (2011). Positive emotions, emotional intelligence, and successful experiential learning. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51(7), 817-822. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2011.07.004.
- Chung, K. Y. (2000). Hotel management curriculum reform based on required competencies of hotel employees and career success in the hotel industry. *Tourism Management*, 21(5), 473-487. doi:10.1016/S0261-5177(99)00102-8.
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## References

- Lolli, J. C. (2013). Interpersonal communication skills and the young hospitality leader: Are they prepared? *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 32, 295-298. doi:10.1016/j.ijhm.2012.02.010.
- Saavedra, A. R., & Saavedra, J. E. (2011). Do colleges cultivate critical thinking, problem solving, writing and interpersonal skills? *Economics of Education Review*, 30(6), 1516-1526. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2011.08.006.