

## Women in Leadership at the Four Seasons

By Taylor Lea Thomas and Lisa Cain

### Introduction

"The reason for our success is no secret. It comes down to one single principle that transcends time and geography, religion and culture. It's the Golden Rule—the simple idea that if you treat people well, the way you would like to be treated, they will do the same."

– Isadore Sharp, Founder and Chairman,  
Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts

The Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts is representative of the upper echelon of the luxury hotel industry with numerous first-class properties throughout the world. Because the Four Seasons prides itself on following the 'Golden Rule,' it behooves the company to set the gold standard for diversity in senior leadership positions. Isadore Sharp's Golden Rule adage should be applicable to those who have served the hotel by providing leadership opportunities to minorities, particularly women. Astonishingly, the Four Seasons' Hotel Press Kits on its company website reveals there are only 10 female general managers or hotel managers in the entire company (. Scholars have asserted that "it is unlikely that there will ever come a time when gender in the workplace will not matter" (Brownell & Walsh, 2008, p.1). The purpose of this study is to 1) examine The Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts as a benchmark luxury property; 2) illustrate the current diversity represented at the higher ranks of the organization 3) identify barriers and facilitators to diversity in the higher ranks of this and similar organizations; 4) assess the gender gap disparity in order to break the glass ceiling and alleviate pay inequality; and 5) highlight ways for this and other luxury to increase diversity in managerial positions.

### A Brief History of the Four Seasons

The first Four Seasons hotel was founded by Isadore Sharp in 1961 in Toronto, Canada. It was never the intention for the hotel to become what the Four Seasons is now world-renowned for throughout the world—that began with the creation of Four Seasons London—but Sharp did set out to create a different kind of hotel (Four Seasons History, 2019). By the 1990s, the Four Seasons brand had solidified itself as a leader in hospitality in North America and had expanded its portfolio to include resorts, and by the 2000s, Four Seasons had properties

on every continent (Four Seasons History, 2019). "The strength of the brand had become a promise of a quality of life" and luxury (Four Seasons History, 2019). Today, the Four Seasons brand includes the Four Seasons Jet which endeavors to provide "a complete Four Seasons experience in the sky" (Four Seasons History, 2019.).

### Female Leadership in the Hotel Industry

Hotel patrons are often greeted at the front desk by women, at various service points by women, and have their rooms tended to by women. Scholars have highlighted that women comprise the majority of the workforce in the hotel industry at 55.5% (Marinakou, 2014). However, the industry is overwhelmingly managed and led by male employees. In fact, female employees are most often found working in roles in the hospitality industry that are stereotyped as 'female' including director of sales, housekeeping, and marketing (Marinakou, 2014). Additionally, hospitality scholars have shown that women are overwhelmingly selected for roles within the hotel without leadership potential. For instance, in 2004, 57% of the hospitality workforce in the US was made up of women and minorities, but many of these jobs were part-time, low-status and low paid (Brownell & Walsh, 2008). Moreover, Indeed, a 2017 report issued by the American Hospitality & Lodging Association's Women in Lodging forum demonstrated that in 2016 women held just 5% of CEO positions at U.S. hotel companies, which is the same percentage as in 2012, and that women represented 9% of U.S. hotel company presidents in 2016, one percentage point greater than the 8% representation in 2012 (Clausing, 2018).

There is a clear disparity in accessible paths to hotel leadership for women, particularly in the luxury sector (Clausing, 2018). This issue is perpetuated by the fact that the more diverse an organization is, the more it will continue to diversify, and the more homogenous it is, the more it likely it will be to stay homogeneous (Rivera, 2012). Because organizations are led primarily by men, it is difficult for female employees to find like-minded individuals with similar experiences to follow and female mentors to guide them. The paradox is, there needs to be more female leadership in order to properly mentor and facilitate more female leadership. The more female leaders there are at each hotel, the more likely the hotel brands will be to retain female employees at the higher levels, and incentivize other female employees to ascend the ranks of leadership.

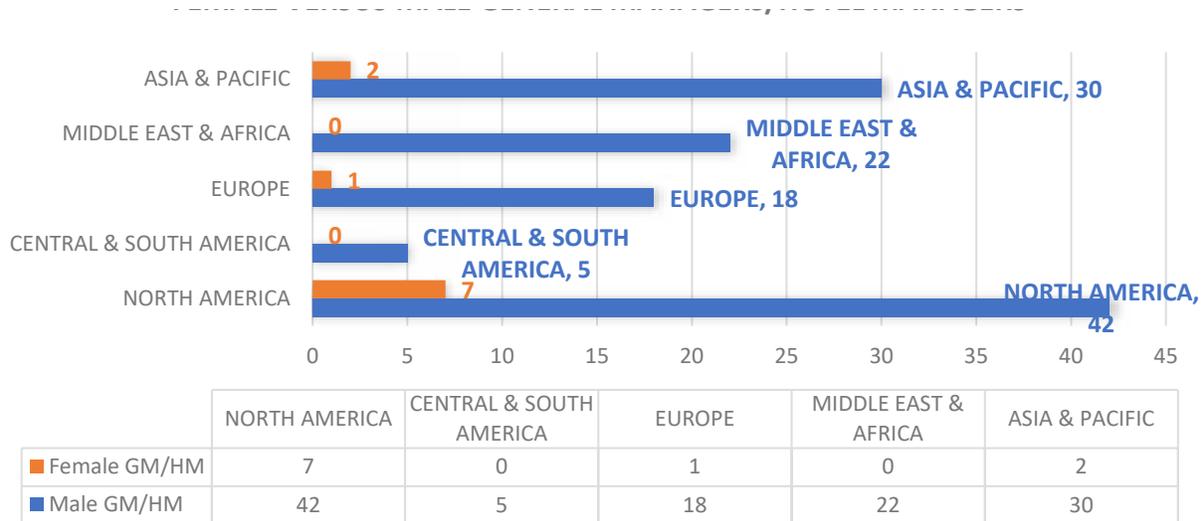
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**Figure 1**

**Four Seasons properties worldwide: Male versus female**

*(Hotel Press Kit, 2019)*



***Married to the Job***

The day-to-day operational running of a hotel is not an easy feat for any person, regardless of gender. The implication, however, in a 2012 article which examined the roles of women in hospitality is discouraging stating that “managing a hotel is not a 9-5 job and can be difficult to fit a personal life around the demands of the property and its staff—general managers especially are often referred to as being ‘married to the job’. This is hard for both sexes but particularly for women” (Taking a Look at Women Roles in Hospitality, 2012). Furthermore, researchers estimate that the economic gender gap won’t get any closer for an estimated 217 years (Harris, 2017). For men, ascension through the ranks and earning higher wages is easier due to less family obligations and data has demonstrated an association between marriage, parenthood and higher wages for men, but not for women (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

With a shift toward work-life balance for men and women, the demands are grueling. While there are many men who are married with children in leadership roles, men have an easier time juggling work demands and private home life as opposed to women (Taking a Look at Women Roles in Hospitality, 2012). This is largely due to the gender roles that have been ascribed to men and women. For instance, in U.S. culture, men have traditionally been viewed as the bread winners while women have been taken on the roles of house keepers and care takers hence the proliferation of women in housekeeping roles (Taking a Look at Women Roles in Hospitality, 2012). This, therefore, makes the position of general manager, hotel manager, or regional vice president more stereotypically suited for a man than his female counterpart. The fact that men have dominated these roles only perpetuates the imbalance because they are more likely to promote individuals who are like themselves (Rivera, 2012).

This occurrence of promoting those who are similar may also be rooted in the subconscious of many individuals, both male and female. Many thoughts and stereotypes held by individuals may be unconscious, and they have been termed implicit biases because they are not readily conscious decisions (Payne, Niemi, & Doris, 2018). This then begs the questions:

- What is an implicit bias?
- How can an implicit bias be overcome?
- What actions can industry professionals and academics take to change a male dominant culture, especially when there is an understanding that individuals are inclined to hire people like themselves?

***Gender Diversity in Leadership***

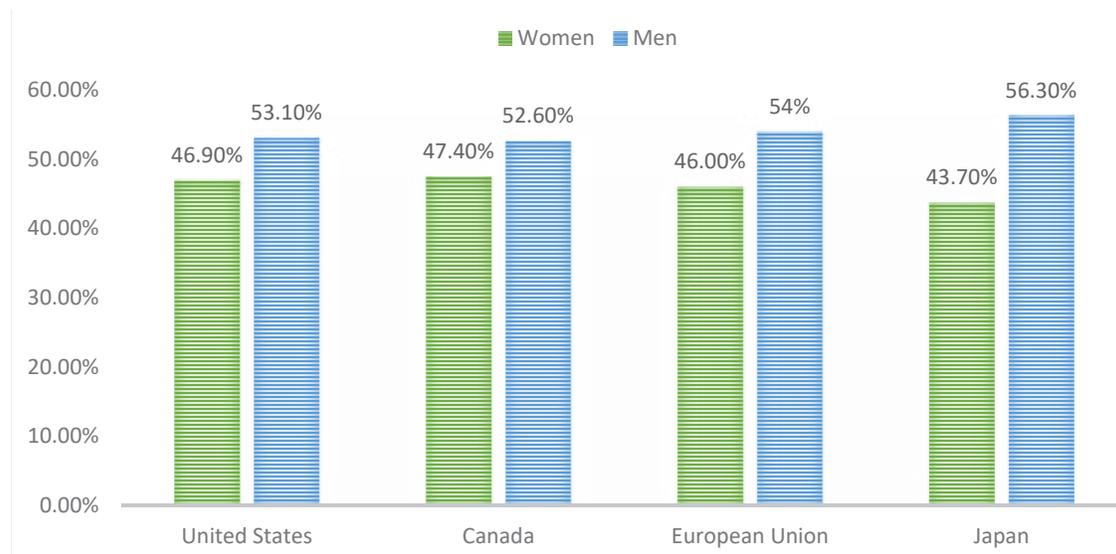
In recent years, the percentage of companies worldwide with at least one woman in a senior level management role has seen a significant increase from 66% in 2017 to 75% in 2018 though the proportion of senior roles held by women has marginally declined (Grant Thornton, 2018). In fact, research has revealed that women accounted for less than a quarter or 24% of senior leadership roles on a global level suggesting that efforts to create a culture of ‘diversity’ may be falling short from a gendered perspective (Grant Thornton, 2018). This prompts the question: Why is gender diversity in leadership important?

***The Women at the Top of the Four Seasons***

According to the Four Seasons’ Press Room Hotel Press Kits on its company, the website astonishingly reveals there are only 10 female general managers or hotel managers in the company’s vast global dominance in the luxury hotel sector (Hotel Press Kits, n.d.). Overall,

**Figure 2**

## Women in the workforce (Catalyst Research, 2018)



there are 7 in the 49 property North America market, 0 in its 5 properties in the Central & South America markets, 1 in its 19 property European market, 0 in its 22 properties across the Middle East & Africa markets, and 2 in its 32 properties across the Asia & Pacific markets.

According to Hotel Press Kits, the 10 female leaders in general manager or hotel manager roles are:

- Ilse Harley – Regional Vice President and General Manager at Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas
- Cornelia Samara – General Manager at Four Seasons Hotel's The Surf Club in Surfside, Florida
- Karen Earp – General Manager at Four Seasons Resort's The Biltmore Santa Barbara
- Meredith MacFarlane – General Manager at Four Seasons Resort and Residences in Vail, CO
- Beverly Magee – General Manager at Four Seasons Hotel Baltimore
- Katie Jacquemin – Hotel Manager at Four Seasons Hotel Denver
- Lynn Brutman – Regional Vice President and General Manager at Four Seasons Hotel London at Park Lane
- Maria Jagla – General Manager at Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora
- Esther Oh Kostecky – Hotel Manager at Four Seasons Hotel Seoul
- Yvette Thomas-Henry – Regional Vice President and General Manager at Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta

### *Profiles of Women in Leadership Roles*

#### **Ilse Harley**

*Regional Vice President and General Manager*

Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas

Ilse Harley serves as both the Regional Vice President and General Manager of the Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas. Her tenure at Four Seasons began in 1988 with her first Four Seasons job as Housekeeping Assistant Manager for Four Seasons Hotel Boston (Cole, 2018). Over the years, Harley's, Four Seasons hospitality career and rise in the company has taken her to Four Seasons Resort and Residences Anguilla, Four Seasons Resort Hualalai, Four Seasons Hotel Seattle, Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea as part of the opening team, Four Seasons Hotel New York, Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta, Four Seasons Hotel Boston, Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea, and Four Seasons Hotel Boston. Interestingly, at Four Seasons Hotel Seattle, Harley became a General Manager in 2011 being only one of five women in an executive management position within the entire Four Seasons company then (Cole, 2018). It was during her time at Four Seasons Hotel Baltimore that she was promoted to Regional Vice President which she still holds today providing guidance and support to other Four Seasons managers in Miami, St. Louis, Baltimore and Atlanta in addition to her role as a conduit to the corporate office in Toronto (Cole, 2018).

Originally from North Olmsted, Ohio, Harley earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Hotel and Restaurant Management at the University of Massachusetts (Cole, 2018). Harley is quoted as saying, "food and beverage is fun and creative, but I've always liked rooms because that's what really makes the money" as she ascended the company's rank via its rooms division (Cole, 2018). Regardless of location, Harley's

management style centers upon encouraging employees to be themselves which she also attributes to her own success from managers giving her autonomy from the start stating, "I believe very strongly that's the way to instill confidence. People make mistakes. But letting them make and then correct them is the best way for them to learn... There are hundreds of interactions at any moment at a hotel, and managers can't be the end-user in every situation... So we give employees the tools, get them comfortable and confident, and then trust them to do the right thing" (Cole, 2018). Harley's rise at Four Seasons has been the result of doing the right things.

While some professional women limit their own ambitions with self-imposed barriers such as being aware of the impact that motherhood can have on their professional prospects, Harley credits for her long-running success with Four Seasons to having "a really great family situation" wherein her husband Matt has been the primary caregiver for their son Sam (Cole, 2018). She further notes, "Matt's partnership has allowed me to be successful in a profession that operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. I am very fortunate." Harley has embraced both her professional and private lives in such a manner that it enabled her to break the glass ceiling for women leaders at Four Seasons (Cole, 2018).

#### **Maria Jagla**

*General Manager*

Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora

Maria Jagla serves as the General Manager at Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora where she's brought more than 20 years of worldwide hotel experience (Packer, 2016). Jagla's Four Seasons tenure began in 1993 with the assignment of Executive Housekeeper at Four Seasons Hotel Sydney (Packer, 2016). Jagla's hospitality career includes Four Seasons Resort Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt, Four Seasons Hotel London at Park Lane, Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea, Four Seasons Hotel Chicago, Four Seasons Hotel New York, The Pierre (formerly a Four Seasons hotel), Four Seasons Hotel Sydney where her tenure in various operational roles included the Olympic Games in 2000, Four Seasons Hotel San Francisco as Director of Rooms in the pre and post-opening period, and a former Four Seasons hotel – The Regent Sydney (Packer, 2016).

Originally from Rieshofen, Germany, Jagla received her Abitur/ Higher School Certificate and studied at the Kermess Hospitality Management School gaining experience in hotels throughout Europe (Packer, 2016). From an early age, Jagla had her sights set on working within the hospitality industry by first working in her family's small inn located in Bavaria (Packer, 2016). Jagla's worldly experience, extensive exposure and never-say-no attitude has taken her far and wide in various leadership roles (Packer, 2016). Jagla's previous expertise at Four Seasons Hotel Sydney during the 2000 Olympic Games made her an ideal addition to the London hotel team where she led hotel operations during the 2012 Olympic year (Packer, 2016).

#### **Meredith MacFarlane**

#### **Yvette Thomas-Henry**

*Regional Vice President and General Manager*

Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta

Yvette Thomas-Henry serves as the Regional Vice President and General Manager of Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta – the only AAA Five-Diamond/Forbes Five-Star address in Atlanta (Middleton, 2018). She started her hospitality career humbly, however, as a front office agent then later promoted into management training before becoming an assistant manager (Middleton, 2018).

In 2013, Thomas-Henry's accepted the role of acting General Manager upon the transfer of the hotel's longtime leader (Middleton, 2018). Rather than view her new role as a placeholder, Thomas-Henry thrived. In her new capacity, she confidently told her department heads "We can either sink or sail – and imagine how great it will be when we succeed" giving them what they needed to flourish in what she deemed was "a very challenging environment during the busiest season" (Middleton, 2018). Appreciative and accepting the challenge, Thomas-Henry's new team rose to the task graciously enabling her to be "successful during those eight months in large part because I was working with talented and dedicated staff" (Middleton, 2018).

In her dual roles now, she is admittedly not a micromanager but instead believes in "trusting people, allowing them to find their own path, and giving them what they require to do their job well" (Middleton, 2018). Recalling a pivotal career moment, the general manager at another New York luxury hotel told her, "If you want to play with the big boys, you need to wear a big boy hat" which Thomas-Henry interpreted as "you need to be able to speak up and not be afraid of getting your feelings hurt when you voice your opinions. It's a lesson that wasn't easy to learn, but it was invaluable" (Middleton, 2018).

Thomas-Henry believes this is an opportune time for women to aspire to leadership positions such as hers saying, "Women bring a special sense of style and an approach to leadership that is unique... I firmly believe this is one of the best times to be a woman in business. The value of what we bring to the table is being recognized across many industries" (Middleton, 2018). Thomas-Henry puts advancement of women in hospitality as a priority and is active in the Women in Leadership Executive Council of the American Hospitality & Lodging Association (Middleton, 2018). She continues to mentor young women on their way up the ladder knowing that she only a phone call away saying, "I tell them, 'please be prepared to be candid with me. If you don't give things to me straight, you'll miss the opportunity to grow'" (Middleton, 2018). Thomas-Henry has broken the proverbial glass ceiling and made history becoming the first female African American General Manager of any Four Seasons Hotel and the first from the U.S. Virgin Island to accomplish such a remarkable achievement (JNR Media Solutions, 2016). She is not only successful in her own right, but

also serves as champion for other women leaders to follow. (For more profiles see the teaching note).

## **The Blueprint for Female Leadership**

Due to the paucity of female general managers and leader in luxury properties, it is beneficial to identify some key attributes that are necessary for those women who wish to rise through these prestigious organizations. Different literature provides evidence for ways for women to succeed. Below is a compilation of recommendations that may serve as a blueprint for success.

### *Don't Give Up or Give In*

Despite progress made in recent years, women are still uncommon among senior leaders (International Labour Organization (ILO) - Bureau for Employers, 2015). In order to break the glass ceiling by ascending the corporate ladder within the hospitality industry, women – like those profiled in this case study – need to persevere, gaining experience on every rung. Many of the female general and hotel managers profiled worked their way up from less glamorous positions such as working at the front desk, concierge, sales, or housekeeping. These are stereotypically lower paying or part-time positions within a 24/7 work frame which can contribute to many leaving the hospitality industry based on these entry-level experiences (Doherty, Guerrier, Jamieson, Lashley, & Lockwood, 2001).

### *Remove Self-Imposed Barriers*

Women limit their own-ambitions with self-imposed barriers with some of these barriers often influencing their choice of career wherein they seek certain jobs in order to accommodate their family commitments more easily (Boone et al., 2013). Most women are aware of the impact that motherhood can have on their professional prospects with one female executive noting that “the time when women can ascend to a management position coincides with the period when many women have young children...” (Segovia-Pérez, Figueroa-Domecq, Fuentes-Moraleda, & Muñoz-Mazón, 2019, p. 188). Companies can ease the work-life balance conundrum by implementing practices that include on-site or subsidized or affiliated day care for employees with small children.

### *Seek Flexibility*

A necessary component to success is flexibility at the individual level within an organization, which is imperative in playing a much larger role in the company's overall success (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2017). All of the female leaders profiled demonstrated flexibility at both the individual level and also for the overall success of Four Seasons for they were willing to relocate to other properties needing their level of experience.

### *Be a Participative Leader*

Research shows that “(a) the greater social skills of women (vs. men) may have facilitated collaborative, democratic leadership behavior and (b) such behavior may have been especially advantageous for women because it placated subordinates and peers who might otherwise have been resistant to female leadership” (Eagly et al., 2003, p.815). The women profiled often interacted with both staff and guests at the hotel by being more visible and available to both employees and guests alike whenever needed.

### *Establish a Relationship with a Mentor*

Rather than merely seeing other accomplished women who have achieved success, it is more important to have someone who can mentor you – regardless of gender – on your own path to success (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2017). Often a mentee can feel they are not receiving adequate career support and sponsorship if there is a disconnect between a mentor and a mentee (Friday, Friday, & Green, 2004). It is therefore crucial for senior management of companies to create a “planned and thoughtful [mentorship] program directed by a committee of the company's most senior management” to accomplish this long-term goal for such a program to be successful for all involved with the intention of identifying “high-potential female candidates to mentor with a goal of having them advance within the workplace” (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2017, p. 30).

## **Management Training at the Four Seasons**

It is important to develop top female leaders in hospitality by hotel leadership making “a deep commitment to reevaluate and potentially revise current processes and structures” including “refocusing on purposeful long-term career development that provides a sightline to the top, and ultimately creates more female role models in executive-level positions” (Walsh, Fleming, & Enz, 2014, p.4). Compared to their male counterparts, a lack of proper training, development, and educational opportunities for women within the hospitality industry has further perpetuated the gap in career advancement between men and women (Burgess, 2003).

The Four Seasons offers a Manager in Training (MIT) program for those with a desire to become managers. Through its MIT program, the Four Seasons could improve its diversity thereby creating more women and minority leadership and could therefore be a pioneer leading the way for other luxury hotels. This is because Four Seasons, as a luxury hotel brand, is in a league of its own with its closest competitor, The Ritz-Carlton, having merged with Marriott with its mixed categories of budget to luxury hotels. The Four Seasons has a vast portfolio of 127 properties across North America, Central and South America, Europe, Middle East and Africa, and Asia and Pacific (see chart). With only 10 women out of 127 properties, Four Seasons is

primed to lead the charge.

Studies have shown that even “after several decades of study, and despite growing legislation addressing issues of women and work, women are still poorly represented in the senior management ranks” with one report adding further that “hospitality organizations are among the most difficult environments for women seeking career advancement and personal satisfaction” (Brownell & Walsh, 2008, p.1).

According to Four Seasons’ website, “the Manager in Training (MIT) programme at Four Seasons is designed to give participants the tools they need to accelerate their careers and succeed as future leaders. In addition to operational exposure and training, MITs will be exposed to valuable management experiences and project work, allocated a buddy and mentor, and provided with feedback throughout the program” (Manager in Training Programme, n.d., n.p.). Expansion of this program would greatly increase diversity and leadership roles for minorities, particularly disadvantaged women.

“We demonstrate our beliefs most meaningfully in the way we treat each other and by the example we set for one another.”

– Isadore Sharp

Rather than the proverbial glass ceiling, a better metaphor for what confronts women in their professional endeavors is the labyrinth conveying the idea of a complex journey toward a goal worth striving for because “passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one’s progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p.3). For women who aspire to top leadership, routes exist but are full of twists and turns, both unexpected and expected (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Women play a vital role in the hospitality industry but are not as valued as men. It is imperative that the most senior hotel leaders shift their way of thinking to a more modern adaptation of the best ways of forging female leaders. Most women in leadership positions have gotten to their roles through their own drive and sense to keep moving up the ladder. There should, however, be a mechanism, a system, in place to facilitate a better way of carving out female leadership. Many organizations say their employees are important but rarely support their statements with demonstrable evidence that shows a clear path to leadership for women. It is not impossible, but it will require organizational changes from within. As a leader in the luxury hotel market, the Four Seasons can lead the pack by example in increasing its diversity and the number of female general managers across its portfolio.

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