

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL, PERTSHIRE, SCOTLAND

Sustaining a Positive Working Environment

Introduction

This case-study sets out to examine how a positive working environment is sustained in a small rural hotel. The aim is to examine how a positive working climate was sustained among employees and how this was achieved. A number of issues face hospitality employers in rural areas in creating a positive working environment, most important of which are recruiting and retaining staff and delivering high quality customer service. Attracting and retaining staff in rural areas can be problematic as there is a limited labour market to recruit from and the rural location can make retaining staff difficult. One way of overcoming these issues is through creating a positive working environment where staff feel valued and where clear training and development is provided. By identifying employers who are able to achieve this provides a very valuable example of good practice for other employers. The remainder of this document details how one employer has managed to successfully sustain a positive working climate.

For the case study we interviewed four members of staff. All the interviews were carried out on a face-to-face basis at the hotel premises and lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour. The following table gives details of the staff interviewed.

Hotel manager Mary McDermid	Full-time, has been in post for 12 years. Lives locally.
Receptionist Carlotta	Part-time, has been in post for 18 months, works set hours. Lives locally, has other employment.
Waitress Ela	Full-time, has been in post 2 months, intends to stay long-term (for at least a year). Lives in hotel.
Barman Lee	Full-time, has been in post 2 months, intends to stay long-term (for at least a year). Lives in hotel.

In the main season the hotel has 20/22 full-time staff, in the winter season they have 6 full-time and 4 part-time staff. There are three main departments in the hotel in terms of staffing: formal dining; the bar; and housekeeping.

The Four Seasons Hotel (www.thefourseasonshotel.co.uk) is a 3 star hotel located on the banks of Loch Earn in rural Perthshire in Scotland, approximately 59 miles from Edinburgh and 55 miles from Glasgow. It is privately owned, and the owner has one other hotel in the area. It is a small hotel with twelve en-suite bedrooms, six chalets and a holiday apartment. In addition, the hotel has a formal dining room which can accommodate up to 70 guests; a bar area for less formal dining. The hotel can accommodate weddings and has a licence for civil ceremonies; it also has private function rooms and conference facilities.

Key aspects of the hotel are seen as the picturesque setting, the relaxing atmosphere, the quality food and a friendly service, as hotel manager, Mary McDermid explains:

“The hotel is food orientated and experience orientated and that is what the hotel is really about; good food, good wines, a beautiful setting” .

The hotel has a number of eccentric touches such as wellies at the front door, rubber ducks in the bathrooms, various art work displayed throughout the hotel and dog biscuits in the rooms (for those visitors who bring their dogs).

Staffing Strategy

Sustaining a positive working climate is seen by the owner and manager as key to delivering a high quality customer service and as a means of addressing the issue of staff retention. Overall, staff indicated that the hotel has a positive working environment. This has been achieved through a combination of formal and informal measures.

One of the formal measures was that the hotel had been awarded Investors in People (IiP). IiP is a national framework that helps organisations improve their performance through their people. IiP provides a framework for setting a good level of practice for the training and development of staff. For businesses it aims to improve performance and competitiveness through a planned approach to setting and communicating business objectives.

IiP has been in place for nine years in the Four Seasons Hotel, they have recently been reassessed and have it for another 3 years. The owner of the hotel, Andrew Low thought that IiP would be a good thing to do and would look good on paper for the business. Both Andrew and Mary felt that they already did a number of the things that IiP recommended as good practice and therefore would not be too difficult for them to implement. However, hotel manager Mary did state that their involvement with IiP ‘has been a huge learning curve’, and that there is a lot of paper work involved, but overall were very positive about their involvement and the process. One of the main benefits of IiP, seen by Mary, is that it provides a formal strategy for the business, setting out the roles and responsibilities for all of the staff; a detailed description of employees’ roles and responsibilities; and a comprehensive training plan. A further advantage of IiP from the perspective of the manager is that it is “staff orientated rather than management orientated” and provides a useful tool for staff instead of just being for the purposes of management. In particular, IiP is seen as important for obtaining staff feedback, enabling discussion with staff, and allowing them to contribute and make suggestions.

Other formal measures taken at the hotel include staff inductions and staff evaluations. When staff initially arrive, they receive induction packages which set out what they should expect in the first few days of work and their initial training schedule. They are then trained for all three departments (formal dining, the Tarken bar, and housekeeping). Staff tend to be placed in the department where they are best suited and happiest - “happy staff are good staff at the end of the day”. The staff evaluations are carried out when staff arrive, after one week and after one month. The evaluations tend to be kept formal.

In addition there are regular staff meetings and a staff comments book. Staff meetings are held every 6-8 weeks. The comments book is not seen as a major method for bringing up any issues by any of the staff we interviewed; only one of the staff said they had used it. Instead they all stated that they would go directly to the manager, as waitress Ela explains:

"There is always someone there to listen to any complaints. You never feel that you have to wait because Mary [the manager] is so approachable, she is who I would go to. She is responsible for all the staff. That, I think, suits most people because she is very approachable"

The comments book tends to be used for more general comments and staff noted that the comments book is addressed at staff meetings, which occur only every 6-8 weeks.

In the past an 'employee of the month' scheme was in place. This scheme was suggested by one of the staff as a means of improving customer service and staff productivity. It proved to be initially very successful with a £100 bonus offered to the winning member of staff. The 'employee of the month' was selected by a combination of feedback from the owner, the manager, the head chef and the comments card from customers. The scheme was withdrawn when there were complaints from some members of staff that the way employees were selected was unfair. The manager is keen to reintroduce this scheme as it was successful at the time.

They also have set targets that are displayed on the staff notice board that shows results for customer satisfaction and wine sales. Good customer service is seen as an important part of the business. Around 80% of the Four Seasons' income is based on repeat business or personal recommendations. Formal job titles are not used in the hotel. These are seen as counterproductive in a small hotel where members of staff are likely to have number of roles and where there is a need for a high degree of flexibility in job roles. Staff name badges are not worn either because the owner feels that name badges are too reminiscent of a 'McDonald's culture'.

A number of informal measures are also in place to create a positive working climate. Social events outside of working hours are arranged to help improve staff morale and relations. Positive interactions for staff out of working hours are seen as important. Indeed, creating a 'family atmosphere' is seen as an important element, especially as many of the staff are foreign workers. The receptionist, Carlotta, stated that there is a good working relationship between the staff with good team working. She also sees the hotel in general as having a very positive working environment. She states:

"They [staff] are made to feel very welcome straight away: they are not isolated and I feel that is very important. It would be awful to arrive somewhere like this and just be dumped in the staff block. Whereas [here] someone will straight away start showing them around the hotel and showing them all the main things and getting them their uniforms."

All the staff were very positive about the working conditions and environment at the hotel, especially when compared to poor working conditions at other hotels. All staff had received training and had regular meetings with the manager; if any of the staff had an issue they felt they could approach the manager.

Staff Retention and Recruitment

Staff retention is a key issue and creating a positive working climate is seen as one way of positively influencing this. Of the current staff, the head chef and the housekeeper have been there two years, and the receptionist has been with the hotel for 18 months. Part of the challenge relates to the rural location where there is little to do and poor public transport to the nearest towns and cities. All the staff we talked to had access to private transport and were also used to living in rural areas. Hotel manager, Mary, recounted how some staff only stay for a few days as they do not realise just how isolated the hotel is before they arrive, and subsequently find it difficult to adjust. However, for next season they already have all their key staff in place with seven staff members returning. This is put down to the positive working environment that has been created in the hotel. As Mary states:

"We try to encourage staff nights out to bring people together. If you can get them all together in a social setting it brings them together. We try making it an inclusive atmosphere between all the staff".

Staff are mainly recruited through Gumtree (<http://www.gumtree.com/>), a free classified ads website. The response rate to ads on this site, often bringing 90 responses within 24 hours. This contrasts with the job centre where they had placed an advert for 3 months and received no responses. Mary stated that they have secured many good staff through Gumtree. Both waitress Ela and barman Lee got their jobs through Gumtree. The hotel also employs a number of migrant workers: Ela is a Polish national and Lee comes from South Africa.

Conclusion

This case study set out to examine how a positive working environment is maintained in a remote rural hotel. The hotel faces a number of challenges in maintaining a positive working environment, most significant of which is the high level of staff turnover. A high staff turnover is prevalent in the hospitality sector generally, and is particularly acute in rural locations. Despite facing both these challenges, the Four Seasons Hotel has managed to sustain a positive working climate. This has been achieved through a combination of formal and informal measures. Formal measures include the hotel's involvement in Investors in People, which has provided them with a formal framework for the training and development of staff and a mechanism for including staff in the business. Less formal measures, such as social activities, and generally making staff feel welcome and included, have also played an important role, as reflected in the feedback from the staff we interviewed. However, perhaps of greatest contribution to a positive working environment is the presence of the manager. Hotel manager, Mary, makes a deliberate effort to be seen as approachable and friendly to all members of staff. This was strongly reflected in interviews with the staff who all viewed the manager as open and approachable and their main point of contact if they had any issues. The friendly atmosphere was the key to the success of the working environment at the Four Seasons Hotel.