

Research Horizons

Highlights of Recent Research by the SHTM

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Experience Drives Effective Tourism Leadership

Effective tourism leadership is developed over time and involves learning from a range of experiences and people, argue the SHTM's Karin Weber and a co-author in a recently published research article. Drawing on in-depth interviews with ten Hong Kong tourism leaders, the researchers explore how leadership skills are developed, delineate their characteristics and relay advice for aspiring leaders. Ultimately, the development of effective leadership in the tourism industry requires "giving passionate individuals the room to learn by experience".

Tourism Leadership in Hong Kong

The tourism industry is dominated by the provision of services and the creation of experiences. Yet there is little understanding of how tourism leaders develop the skills to spearhead these efforts, and insufficient attention is paid to the role of cultural environments in determining which leadership skills are necessary. The researchers set out to rectify this situation by investigating tourism leaders in Hong Kong.

With its long-established tourism industry, Hong Kong features a unique convergence of Asian and Western influences that shape thought patterns and industry practices. The city also continually attracts, educates and trains people in tourism. This, note the researchers, creates the need to determine what leadership characteristics and skills the local industry needs.

Leaders Interviewed

To gain a detailed understanding of Hong Kong's tourism leadership, the researchers interviewed ten senior figures in the industry. They asked questions covering the interviewees' perceptions of their roles as managers and

leaders, how they balanced leadership and management, how they had gained their skills, what makes an effective leader, leadership issues specific to the tourism industry and industry changes that require new leadership skills.

All of the leaders held senior positions, with three serving as managing directors, three as executive directors, two as chairpeople, one as CEO and one as general manager. They represented hotel chains and associations, travel agencies and the conference and exhibition sector. Having been involved in tourism both in Hong Kong and internationally for periods ranging from 19 to 43 years, the nine men and one woman had considerable industry experience.

Skill Development

The leaders indicated that they learned from personal experience, with exposure to a variety of jobs and a wide range of situations helping them to develop management and leadership skills. They also conceded the importance of building knowledge through books and training courses, which the researchers suggest points to the necessity of university postgraduate courses closely linking theory and practice.

Skills could also be acquired informally and indirectly when engaging with others. One interviewee observed that "I always try to listen to other people irrespective of whether they are high ranking, even minor business, minor issues, even ordinary people." Other leaders noted more formal learning, particularly from mentors, which leads the researchers to recommend that existing mentorship programmes be enhanced to more effectively develop leadership talent.

Yet there was also a suggestion from some leaders that although leadership could be learned to an extent, it was innate in those individuals who led throughout their careers.

Characteristics of Effective Leadership

The researchers identify eight leadership characteristics mentioned in the interviews: business knowledge, determination, open-mindedness, team support, the ability to admit mistakes, communication skills and a sense of humour. Business knowledge covered both being able to provide information to subordinates on a range of areas and a good understanding of the wider business environment. Determination was considered a prerequisite for leadership and open-mindedness a necessity. One interviewee commented that “leaders need to be open-minded because you have to accept all the views”, which in turn helps to build crucial support amongst subordinates.

The interviewees considered the ability to admit mistakes as an essential leadership characteristic, coupled with the willingness to stand up for subordinates who may have made their own mistakes. This and the other characteristics clearly necessitated excellent communication skills, and the interviewees stressed that leaders needed to have a sense of humour to counterbalance the serious elements of their roles.

Advice for Aspiring Leaders

When asked to give advice to aspiring leaders, the interviewees indicated that they needed a strong passion and enthusiasm for the industry. At its core, note the researchers, this determines whether there is a good fit between the individual and the industry.

The interviewees also mentioned the importance of gaining experience in as many aspects of a business as possible, including work experience before entering the industry full time. This would require much effort and hard work. As the researchers put it, “the dominant advice for those aspiring to become leaders in the tourism industry is to make an honest assessment of the personal desire to work in a demanding and challenging people/service-oriented industry”.

Knowledge and Experience the Key

An important point to note about the outlooks expressed in the interviews is that none of them had a particularly Asian

basis. The researchers suggest that this might be due to the prevalence of Western education amongst the interviewees and Hong Kong’s relatively recent return to Chinese rule. Nevertheless, a specific non-cultural conclusion can be drawn from the study. Although personality traits may come into play, “ultimately it is knowledge and experience of the tourism industry that enables people to become effective leaders”.

Points to Note

- Little is known about how tourism industry leaders develop their skills.
- Hong Kong leaders learn from personal experience, reading and training, and by engaging with others.
- Aspiring leaders must be passionate about working in the industry.
- Knowledge and experience are the two crucial elements of becoming an effective tourism leader.

Weber, Karin and Ladkin, Adele (2010). Developing effective tourism leadership. *Journal of China Tourism Research*, Vol. 6, pp. 410-426.