

Hotel Manager Leadership a Concern in Australia

The leadership styles of younger hotel managers in Australia could well be endangering the delicate balance of human relations within their organisations warn the SHTM's Dr Basak Denizci Guillet and Ruhi Yaman in a recently published article. Reporting findings from an ongoing study that is seeking to "draw parallels between these styles and the environments in which they are applied", the researchers examine how personal value systems are influencing the hotel service environment. Their results provide some cause for concern.

Leadership and Ethics

Hospitality managers, argue the researchers, have to face demands that push them away from "the generic characteristics of management". Unlike their counterparts in non-service environments, they need to manage "both staff performance and guest expectations". This juggling act is at its very best a manifestation of "transformational leadership", or a process in which a leader influences an organisation's members to change their attitudes and behaviour while building new levels of commitment to the organisation's core values and goals.

How, then, could Australian hotel managers be assessed within the ambitious scope of transformational leadership? The researchers suggest that four main ethical systems could guide these managers in their decision making. The first, utilitarianism, aligns the achievement of goals and ends with the promotion of happiness. Rule ethics, in contrast, hold that actions "can only be moral if they are done from duty".

Social contract ethics move decision making from the individual realm to that of the group, stressing that managers should recognise themselves as part of a whole that gives each of their actions a meaning. Personalistic ethics advances that position, suggesting that "individuals find their greatest meaning in their relationships to others rather than to an organisation or themselves alone".

Moral Development of Leaders

With one or a combination of these systems in place, managers usually pass through stages of moral development beginning with the self-interested quest for reward and avoidance of risk and culminating in self-aware morality whereby ethical choices are independent of the organisation for which they work. The resultant leadership styles, argue the researchers, move from a basic manipulative approach to a bureaucratic, rule-bound style, on to the efficiency of professional management and finally to transformational leadership.

Given this range of personal development, the researchers posited that older managers who had more experience in the industry would rely most on transformational leadership. They also hypothesised that female managers would be more transformative in their leadership, and that the characteristics of the organisations in which all managers worked, such as size, annual turnover and age, would influence their leadership styles.

The Australian Setting

To draw information from the broadest possible group of managers, the researchers approached members of the Australian Hotels Association Residential Division in each state and the Hotel, Motel and Accommodation Association of Australia. All ninety-one managers who responded to their survey were from three-star or higher hotels, and their occupations ranged from supervisor to managing director.

Fifty-five per cent of these respondents were women, and their ages ranged from 19 to 58. The researchers identified four distinct levels of education amongst them: secondary school, technical college, undergraduate degree holders and postgraduate degree holders. The extent of their experience also varied widely, with periods of employment ranging from one to 13 years with the current employer.

In an evocative reconfiguration of the leadership styles discussed previously, the researchers renamed manipulative leadership as “Machiavellian”, and retained the bureaucratic, professional and transformational labels to classify other forms of leadership identified amongst the respondents.

Emergence of Machiavellian Leadership Styles

When analysing their data the researchers found that the desired transformational leadership style was being practiced, but not always in its most effective form. Also evident was a combined professional/transformational style. Of even more concern, however, was the emergence of two Machiavellian styles.

The first style combined equal parts of the Machiavellian and bureaucratic approaches, and the second was mainly Machiavellian “with a touch of bureaucratic style”. This, write the researchers, “may be related to the highly automated and bureaucratic nature of the hotel industry” wherein employees are usually required to conform with stated policies and adhere to procedure manuals. The Machiavellian and bureaucratic styles were popular amongst the respondents aged between 25 and 40.

However, the use of those styles did decline with age. Hotel managers between 25 and 40 were more likely to use the combined Machiavellian/bureaucratic style and far more likely to use the Machiavellian style with a touch of bureaucratic leadership than those aged 41 or over. It should be noted at this stage that Machiavellian leaders are, in the researchers’ words, “less ethical than other leaders”.

To compound these troubling results, the researchers found that gender and the characteristics of the organisations in which the managers worked had no bearing on their leadership styles. It seems that age alone determines whether or not Australian hotel managers lead ethically.

The Problem of Youth

The researchers suggest that the tendency toward Machiavellian and hence unethical leadership amongst

young Australian hotel managers may be due to them “being less prepared to wait for promotion” than their older counterparts. This could lead to them seeing “manipulation as an acceptable tool by which to progress their career”.

Another possible factor in the predominance of unethical leadership styles amongst younger managers may simply be confidence. A lack of confidence at the beginning of a career could shift a manager towards a more autocratic style, but the researchers suggest that the relatively rapid disengagement from both Machiavellian and bureaucratic leadership with age dilutes any influential transformations of confidence.

The hospitality industry is based on voluntary exchange – between service personnel and guests, and within the group of service personnel itself. The researchers show that in Australia this easily disturbed environment is at risk from self-interested younger managers. “Current managers and other stakeholders interested in the long-term viability of their respective businesses” should take careful note, they warn.

Points to Note

- Hotel managers operate within distinct ethical, moral and leadership realms.
- The Machiavellian and bureaucratic leadership styles predominate amongst younger Australian hotel managers
- Older managers tend to use more professional and transformative styles of leadership.
- Action is needed to ensure that self-interested younger managers do not disturb the hotel service environment.

Minett, Dean, Yaman, H. Ruhi and Denizci, Basak (2009). Leadership styles and ethical decision-making in hospitality management. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 28, pp. 486-493.