

Creativity Key to Hotel Employee Motivation

Opportunities to develop creativity are crucial to hotel employee motivation, claims the SHTM's Assistant Professor Simon Wong in a recently published co-authored paper. Responding to a lack of research into the effects of employee creativity on the hospitality industry, the researchers point out that creativity can improve customer service. Although hotels have traditionally been seen as involving "operational routine work", creative employees can be important manifestations of the shift from fulfilling basic guest needs to a focus on "the wider customer experience". Yet the extent to which this could be significant in a Chinese cultural setting has not been sufficiently explored.

Creativity and Staff Motivation

Rather than focusing on how creativity and motivation are formed and operate, which has already received much attention, the researchers shift the focus to the "relationship between creativity and motivation". This, they write, allows the identification of a "creativity intersection" in which staff members should operate more effectively than before, and thus contribute to business growth at the hotels in which they are employed. "Highly creative people", note the researchers, "possess an intense commitment to their work".

Motivation propels creativity in two forms, either as intrinsic motivation that fulfils a personal sense of satisfaction or extrinsic motivation, which is oriented toward external goals or incentives. The usual assumption is that intrinsic rewards, such as achieving personal potential, are most conducive of creativity, whereas extrinsic rewards such as pay levels and the possibility of career advancement might not be as effective. Yet this is not necessarily true of all people from all backgrounds, cultures and environments, so the researchers focus on what motivates creativity in three levels of Chinese hotel staff members: managers, supervisors and operational staff.

The Setting

Using a pre-existing creativity index, the researchers conducted three pilot tests on hotel employees in Hong

Kong who were studying part-time at a local tertiary institution. In the first test they found that Chinese employees were as willing to take risks and be creative as their Western counterparts. Two subsequent tests allowed them to devise a questionnaire aimed at procuring the broadest possible response from local hotels. Mirroring the industry's makeup, around 15% of their questionnaires went to medium quality hotels, approximately 39% went to high quality hotels and just less than 46% went to luxury hotels. To ensure an industry-relevant distribution of occupations within the hotels, managers received 15% of the questionnaires, supervisors received 25% and general staff received 60%.

A total of 938 valid responses were received, with the majority coming from male respondents. Most respondents were educated to the secondary level or above, with general staff and those from luxury hotels more often replying, in line with the distribution of the questionnaires. In an indication that the responses were particularly relevant to average hotel employees, only 4.8% of the respondents had less than a year of industry experience, and 44.2% had more than 10 years of experience.

Creativity and Job Motivation in Hong Kong

Discussing their findings, the researchers note that hotel employees in Hong Kong have an overall "creative attitude", indicated by a relatively high willingness to take risks. Yet contrary to the usual assumption, this creativity was not motivated by intrinsic factors alone. The respondents were motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, with extrinsically determined "good wages" highly valued by all employees. Nevertheless, there was also an indication that if employees were exposed to more intrinsic motivators, they would take more risks "and thus be more creative in their workplace".

Although these motivators might already be available in some hotels, not all employees will have encountered them. They could include, amongst other possibilities, enhanced opportunities for advancement and personal development,

offering interesting work, showing that the hotel is loyal to all employees, offering praise for work done and helping staff members with personal problems. It is particularly noteworthy that managerial staff members most often encounter these motivators, and were found to be the most creative of the respondents. This, note the researchers, is reinforced by “their greater power and authority to exercise their creative potential”.

Toward a More Creative Workplace

Combining intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to ensure that hotels can gain the most benefit from staff creativity, the researchers suggest the development of a “macro-culture” in which education, encouragement, policies and specific training programmes spread creativity from management through to supervisors and on to general staff members. This would involve a specific commitment from senior management to change the workplace, allow more trial and error, and enhance communication to allow the exchange of ideas. Also necessary would be a noticeable effort to promote “the advantages of being creative”.

As a final suggestion, the researchers note that research into creativity in the hotel industry has yet to encompass other important areas, such as “the relationship between creativity and leadership styles, creativity and different learning styles, and creativity and organisational climate”. Any future efforts in these areas should be of great benefit to hotel management.

Points to Note:

- Creativity is a crucial determinant of intrinsic, or personally developed, staff motivation.
- Creative staff members contribute more to the business growth of hotels than do non-creative staff members.
- Hong Kong hotel staff members, especially in management, are creative.
- Hotels should devise measures to encourage more creativity in supervisors and general staff.

Wong, Simon C. K. and Ladkin, Adele (2008). Exploring the Relationship between Employee Creativity and Job-Related Motivators in the Hong Kong Hotel Industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 27, 426-437.