

Lessons from the Field

Where is your desk?

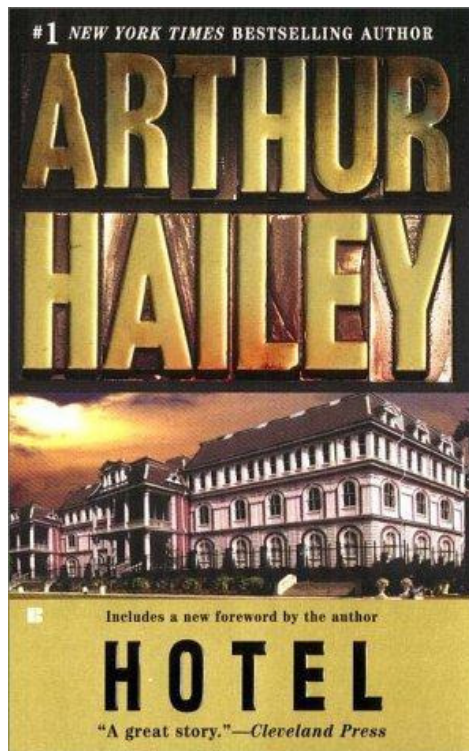
Another “High Touch” Lesson for Hospitality Managers-

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Storytelling is a marvelous way to communicate a message in a very personal way and I am introducing the message of managerial effectiveness via one of the best stories to date on the hospitality industry.

In 1965, author Arthur Hailey wrote one of his best-known novels, HOTEL . This story was deep in detail, background, theme and character development. It offers reasonably accurate insights over a 5-day period in the life of an early 1960s independent, upscale hotel in New Orleans that is facing many challenges. The book addresses a number of American civil rights issues of the period, as well as contradicting stories of staff loyalty on one hand and dishonesty on the other. It tackles a number of business issues that remain current today, as well the matter of brand expansion in today’s hotels versus operating as an independent. .



“The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say "I." And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say "I." They don't think "I." They think "we"; they think "team." They understand their job to be to make the team function. They accept responsibility and don't sidestep it, but "we" gets the credit. This is what creates trust, what enables you to get the task done. Peter Drucker

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Lessons for Hospitality Managers

Effective leaders today still deal with many of the scenarios in Hailey's HOTEL, and many more in the way of amenities, technology, transportation and training. The constant balancing act of "high touch" and "high tech" often comes down to visibility, accessibility and the ability to listen.

In the book and movie version of HOTEL, the hotel manager (or at least the manager on duty) was stationed in the lobby at an oversized desk. The first one of these I personally viewed was at the Statler-Hilton in Boston and presumably, the location was to be able to deal with situations that might arise that required special attention. The "tradition" of availability continued through the days of large full service hotels, but took a turn to the "back office" with the introduction of rooms only and smaller properties in the 1960s-1990s.

As my first hotel experience was at an older resort with many traditions, I came to appreciate both the manager and the innkeeper as host and problem solver. I personally always wanted a general manager's desk like the one in HOTEL – you may recall it was located on the mezzanine, with a large window overlooking a very busy lobby in a "grand old and distinguished" property. Well, I am still looking for that special location, but the more important notions of visibility and accessibility continue to interest me.

How do most hoteliers today deal with those issues of visibility and accessibility? Most of us do not have much of a choice in location of desk or office, but in observations and conversations with many professionals in a wide range of property types and brands, I have had the opportunity to identify a number of creative variations in manager visibility and accessibility that I wanted to share.

Mel Bettcher, a career Hyatt Manager, at one point was assigned to the Hyatt in Memphis. I recall trying to reach him one hot summer and the answer was always: *"he's not in his office, but he is on property."* When I finally reached him, in conversation he said that the air conditioning in his office was not working very well. When I asked why he did not get it repaired, he commented that while it would not cost much, he might have the temptation to spend too much time in his office if it was too comfortable and he intended to spend his time with his guests and staff.

Dave Lagarce opened the 1st Embassy Suites in Tennessee. Dave had a desk in the lobby and I recall asking him how "he ever got any work done", having so many potential interruptions. He smiled and said the lobby location forced him to be more focused. He had two staff managers with the title and responsibility of assistant general manager and each had certain paperwork assignments. Through this delegation of some important work that allowed them to learn the systems, he was now available to deal with other "people" matters.

These managers reached the conclusions that the important "work to be done" included some reports and paperwork, but that the arrangement allowed all of them to balance work loads and be attentive to the needs of both staff and guests/customers.

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Tom Peters, author of many books and programs on change and improvement, maintains that effective managers in the work place must spend **70%** of their time **OUTSIDE** of their offices. In his books, seminars and collateral material, he frequently offers examples of successful companies that do not build large corporate home office staffs that spend what seems like years creating manuals and policies, but rather spend their corporate officers' time in the field. He quotes examples from Apple Computers to Wal-Mart that have jumped leap years ahead of their competitors by availability, visibility and responsiveness to staff and customers by active listening.

Examples in our industry include companies that have “in – touch management:

1. Annual job-switch days, where senior executives assume the job, uniform and assignments of hourly staff in operating hotels for a day. The hourly staff spends a day shadowing the executives on another day, with the requirement to explain all that they face and the potential solutions to issues. Respect on both sides increases.
2. Regular (weekly or monthly) staff “talks” with a senior manager and a group of hourly staff from different departments to discuss ideas and opportunities in their hotel.
3. Regular staff meetings of the entire hotel, to share information on successes, opportunities, challenges, and trends. Two way communication jumps after the 2nd or 3rd session.
4. Newsletters for staff and guests alike that feature “people”. Look at Southwest Airlines for examples of success in a challenging industry.
5. Department or hotel-wide mini-celebrations that show appreciation for completing a preventative maintenance project ahead of schedule, or a perfect sell-out or reaching a particular goal.
6. The now recognized MBWA (Management by Walking Around) practice of being where the people, problems and profit come from – in the actual business, and not in the office.
7. Using breakfast or social hours as more than a give-away, but as a real communication.
8. Calling at least 3 in house guests and 3 guests from last week **daily** to personally thank them for their patronage and to ask for ways to make their next visit more enjoyable. The goodwill is unbelievable!
9. Semi-annual “state of the hotel” communications, which formally advise the staff how things are going. Executives share the information on each of the three shifts. The recognition and appreciation is incredible.
10. Ongoing recognition programs. Associate of the Month programs are well intentioned, but have come to mean less than previously. There are incentive and appreciation programs available for staff at all levels that pay dividends through commitment and loyalty.

Many smaller hotels have certain levels of “in touch management” because of their streamlined size and because they do not have large numbers of support staff. There are many more ideas that can be used in all sizes of hotels.

We must remember to regularly reinvent ourselves and avoid doing things the way we always have because that way is easy or it used to work. Technology continues to evolve and improve, and those improvements that remove some of the people contact make the need to retain the “high touch” of hospitality more important than ever.

Where is your desk?

What are you doing at your hotel today?

Feel free to share an idea for a column at johnjhogan@yahoo.com anytime or contact me regarding consulting, customized workshops, speaking engagements

And remember – we all need a regular dose of common sense.

Autographed copies of *LESSONS FROM THE FIELD – a COMMON SENSE APPROACH TO EFFECTIVE HOTEL SALES* are available from THE ROOMS CHRONICLE www.roomschronicle.com, www.smartbizonline.com and other industry sources.

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John Hogan, a career hotelier and educator, is a frequent speaker and seminar leader at many hospitality industry events. He is a successful senior executive with a record of accomplishment leading organizations at multiple levels. His professional experience includes over 35 years in hotel operations, food & beverage, sales & marketing, training, management development, consulting, management, including service as Senior VP of Operations.



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If you need assistance in any of these areas or simply an independent review or opinion on a hospitality challenge, contact me directly for a prompt response and very personalized attention.

As the principal in an independent training & consulting group, he served associations, management groups, convention & visitors' bureaus, academic institutions and as an expert witness. He has managed hotels with Sheraton, Hilton, Omni and independents and in his tenure at Best Western International, he created and launched a blended learning system for the world's largest hotel chain. He has conducted an estimated 3,200 workshops and classes in his career, including service as an adjunct faculty member for 20 years at three different institutions.