

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Success relies on finding passionate people: Four Seasons Hotel New York GM

January 19, 2017



Image courtesy of Four Seasons Hotel New York

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK When hiring, passion is a stronger indicator of a good fit than an applicant's experience, according to the general manager of Four Seasons Hotel New York speaking at Luxury FirstLook: Time for Luxury 2.0 on Jan. 18.

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Hospitality is a product that is intangible, relying on the service provided by staff to transform a space into an experience that justifies a luxury price point. It is up to a hotel as an employer to hire correctly and provide an environment in which talent wants to deliver in a way that goes above and beyond.

"Time has changed. Our dedication to perfecting the travel experience never will," said Mehdi Eftekari, general manager, Four Seasons Hotel New York. "You have talk about millennial, automation, we are job combining and making sure things happen.

"At the end of the day, the customer that comes through our doors has certain expectations, and that certain expectation has to be met," he said. "We'll do everything in our will and effort to exceed that, to maker sure that when a customer leaves, they leave happy, they leave content and the chances of them coming back to us is very high."

Luxury Daily produced [Luxury FirstLook 2017: Time for Luxury 2.0](#)

Talent search

Mr. Eftekari pointed out the difference in mindset between millennials and previous generations. After watching their parents' long-term loyalty to their companies be met with layoffs during the recession, millennials are less apt to commit to a single employer for a long tenure.

Because of this shift in approach to employment, it has become more difficult for hotels to find the talent they need to deliver on service. Additionally, millennials are not following the traditional path and education into a hospitality career.

When looking for the right people, Mr. Eftekari has found talent in some unexpected places. For example, after being impressed by the way a perfume counter associate approached him in a department store, he placed them in a frontline position.



Image courtesy of Four Seasons

Potential employees go through five interview steps before being hired, allowing different leadership in the hotel to gain more insights into the applicant as a person. After a highly selective process, only about one in every six applicants is given a job offer.

Even this multi-step interview is not perfect, with some who are hired choosing not to stay on.

The most important attribute of an ideal employee is a commitment to learning. In return, Four Seasons invests in training its people, helping those who are interested and who apply themselves to rise within the organization, such as the former president of the company who began as a front desk agent.

However, not every employee will seek development. Sharing his experience as general manager at Four Seasons Hotel Los Angeles Beverly Hills, CA Mr. Eftekari noted that some staff members were just biding their time, waiting for their big break in the entertainment industry.

Beyond fulfilling the roles of their jobs, Mr. Eftekari sees his staff as marketers, persuading guests to not only stay with his property again, but also convincing them to look up the Four Seasons brand in other destinations.

Expectations of staff include smiles, making eye contact, caring and exceeding guests' expectations. According to Four Seasons training, staff should be friendly but not too familiar, being available but not intrusive, getting to know guests so they can anticipate their needs.

With social media and online reviews enabling unsatisfied guests to voice their opinion to a global audience, solving any issues becomes even more important. Four Seasons empowers its staff to make decisions that will make guests walk away happy.

Rather than finding staff misusing this power, Mr. Eftekari says that his employees are actually less generous than he would be. Comparing it to a department store, he noted that a sales associate will not just bag up merchandise and hand it over to a customer.



Image courtesy of Four Seasons

Ensuring that things are running smoothly comes down to "inspecting" over "expecting." Rather than just assuming a task has been completed, Mr. Eftekari makes it his job to check up.

Another strategic move that Four Seasons has made is keeping its hotels small, making sure that it has a manageable number of rooms. The company, which currently has 101 properties, is expanding quickly, with at least six openings this year.

While Four Seasons has opened hotels in many large cities, the hotelier has also expanded into markets that are largely undeveloped, for instance Nivas, where the hotel is the main driver of the local economy. Despite concerns over finding the right talent in the remote locale, local residents who were willing to learn and represent their island stepped up.

Recruiting and retaining

Luxury brands struggle to find and recruit the top talent for positions across their companies, according to a recent study from Boston Consulting Group.

Having the right employees can have a measured impact on a brand's profits and economic growth, especially in executive and leading creative roles. Because of this luxury brands may need to rethink their existing recruiting strategy to locate the personnel necessary ([see story](#)).

For instance, online retailer Farfetch is recruiting potential employees through a social video that compares working for the brand to a room full of puppies and a swimming pool filled with pink cotton candy.

Across sectors, culling talented and dedicated employees can be challenging, but Farfetch's recruitment approach aims to underscore how enjoyable working for its company can be. Consumers are increasingly aware of a brand's corporate social responsibility, ranging from its environmental impact to its treatment of employees of all levels ([see story](#)).

Four Seasons cares for its employees with benefits such as complimentary stays, free meals, discounted fitness memberships and recognition. Beyond these, the company culture makes its general managers accessible to staff.

"Our success comes down from the golden rule," Mr. Eftekari said. "If you treat people well, people will treat you well. If you treat people kindly, they will treat you kindly. And if you talk to them the right way, they will respond the right way.

"And not only will they do that with you, they will take that culture with your customer because they will know that the hotel's success is dependent on bringing that customer in."