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## Hotel Human Resources Directors Identify Ethical Issues

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## Hotel Human Resources Directors Identify Ethical Issues

### **Abstract**

Hotel human resources directors report that the most important ethical issues they face are a lack of work ethic, drug use, and employee theft. When asked about ethical problems experienced in their own hotels. Managers' report that employees' lack of respect for each other, racial and gender conflicts, guest abuse, dishonesty, and homosexual issues are the biggest problems. The author discusses these ethical dilemmas and suggests ways they can be addressed.

# Hotel human resources directors identify ethical issues

by Betsy Stevens

*Hotel human resources directors report that the most important ethical issues they face are a lack of work ethic, drug use, and employee theft. When asked about ethical problems experienced in their own hotels, managers report that employees' lack of respect for each other, racial and gender conflicts, guest abuse, dishonesty, and homosexual issues are the biggest problems. The author discusses these ethical dilemmas and suggests ways they can be addressed.*

**A** very wealthy man arrived for a two-week stay in a luxury hotel in New York City. With him was his entourage of nine people who would be occupying seven other rooms. Upon his arrival, he sought out the general manager and informed him very directly that he did not want to be served by any African-Americans. He explained that the wait staff, housekeepers, bartenders, and any other service personnel who would have direct contact with him could not be black or African-American. The manager was shocked and

*stymied; he had been looking forward to the man's visit because it promised to be very lucrative. Yet the customer was insisting on a racial discrimination practice which was offensive and clearly violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The manager found the request troubling. Even if staff changes could be made to accommodate this customer's request, what about the ethical implications? Even if he could resolve the labor issues and legal difficulties, how would he feel about granting this request? Could he face his employees the next morning?*

This incident was one of many which surfaced following interviews with hotel human resources directors across the U.S. Directors were asked to describe hospitality ethical issues that most concerned them as professionals, identify ethical issues under discussion in their own organizations, and relate any incidents that had

occurred in their hotel within the past 12 months. The purpose was to learn what ethical issues are causing problems for human resource directors and to collect examples of these incidents.

### **Ethics is serious business**

Managing ethics is serious business for hospitality managers. Cultural diversity and changing values mean that perceptions are likely to differ in areas where the right answer is not always clear. Managers are responsible for communicating organizational ethics and providing ethical leadership, especially when events must be interpreted. The increase in published articles about hospitality ethics underscores a growing awareness and concern over a number of issues that emerged from conversations with managers.<sup>1</sup>

The interviews were conducted with human resource directors at mid to large-sized hotels (285-515 rooms) to discover firsthand their primary ethical concerns and to understand what dilemmas they faced each day; 42 interviews were conducted in 15 different states (13 cities) in the U.S. This research could not have been accomplished as effectively by mailing a survey or using more quantitative methodology since most surveys go unanswered; the informational interview was chosen as the most effective methodology. Because this researcher has both experience and training in interviewing, having worked as head of human resources for a large non-profit organization, the

directors' trust could be earned during the interview and confidentiality assured by someone who understood its importance.

Interviews, along with participant observation, are primary research tools. The interviews conducted in this study provided data about the concerns of managers and a context for their ethical situations. Communication researchers agree that methodological techniques, such as the non-directive interview, create a context where one can obtain rich data about the relationships between discourse and meaning.<sup>2</sup> Qualitative methods, such as interviews and ethnographic studies, allow researchers to focus on discovery rather than justifying existing data.<sup>3</sup> They help one come to terms with the meaning, as opposed to the frequency, of naturally occurring phenomena or events<sup>4</sup> and understanding "real world" problems. In studying communication and how ethical issues impact responses, communication researchers explore the relationships between social phenomena and the linguistic symbols used to describe them.

While interviews provide a most effective means of gathering sensitive material and are readily accepted as methodology,<sup>5</sup> the risk of interviewer influence is always present and must be acknowledged. To minimize this phenomenon, questions were posed exactly the same to all respondents and care was taken not to influence responses from interviewees either through suggestion or by

**Table 1**  
**Most frequently reported ethical issues**

Topic	Percent mentioned
1. Lack of work ethic	76
2. Recreational drug use	66
3. Theft	59
4. Mistreating others	39
5. Lying	33

providing examples. Interviewee responses were noted during and immediately following the interview to ensure an accurate record of responses.

**Interviews were in person**

Human resource directors were each asked for a 10-minute interview to discuss their perceptions of ethical issues in the hotel industry and to relate actual ethical incidents. The interviews were conducted in their offices on the hotel property. Each was assured that confidentially would be respected and no hotel names would be revealed in connection with an ethical incident, either in person or in a publication. Directors were all willing to talk and most spent more than half an hour discussing ethical issues in their organizations. They showed a high interest in the subject and 96 percent indicated they wanted to receive the results of this study. The three questions posed during the interview were as follows:

- As a human resources director in the hospitality industry, what ethical issues are

of greatest concern to you today?

- What ethical issues occurring in your own organization concern you the most?
- Can you relate an incident with ethical implications which happened in your own organization within the last 12 months?

The first question was intended to identify the global issues that generally concern human resource directors. Question two was designed to find out the kinds of ethical issues hotels are struggling to address, and question three sought to collect specific stories or incidents.

**Directors identify issues**

Human resources directors reported that work ethic issues caused significant ethical problems. They complained that their employees lacked a strong work ethic and that this work ethic, more than any other issue, was their greatest concern. Table 1 lists their most frequently reported

ethical issues. As a number of directors identified several issues, responses are grouped topically and reported by the percentage of people who mentioned the topic.

Directors reported that employees, frequently young ones in their early 20s, would accept a full-time job, then keep it only long enough to pay for a trip or buy a car. A number of young people, according to their managers, saw their job not as the start of a career or a responsibility, but only as a means to purchase a desired object. Directors also reported they had problems with tardiness and time clock abuse. Employees arriving late had others punch them in, so it appeared they had arrived on time.

Cultural factors appeared to have played a strong role in tardiness. The majority of temporal problems (and subsequent time clock abuse) occurred in cultural groups that were not native to the U.S. Time is conceived of differently in Mexico and South American countries. A person is often not considered "late" who shows up 20 to 30 minutes after the appointed time.

Researchers agree that perception of time is culturally derived.<sup>6</sup> Anthropologist Edward Hall coined the terms "monochronic" and "polychronic" to explain how some cultures handle one task at a time, according to a schedule, while others (polychronic) are not as concerned with sticking to a schedule as they are to completing a task.<sup>7</sup> Hence, people from polychronic cultures, such as

Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, or Columbia, often pay little attention to the clock. Directors reported time problems with their Hispanic employees, especially natives of Mexico and South America. While the time clock abuse is a different matter (theft of company time), not arriving to work on time appears to be a cultural problem that can be solved by communicating expectations clearly.

### **Motivation is problem**

Managers also thought their employees were poorly motivated. They said that staff members did not put enough effort into working nor see their job as a path to a better future. In part, this is understandable. Low wages and dead-end jobs, admittedly central features of the hospitality industry, have challenged managers' ability to maintain a stable and motivated work force.<sup>8</sup> Absenteeism, turnover, and the inability to fill full-time jobs due to low unemployment rates have caused some headaches for human resource directors. While hourly workers generally need the most supervision and training, first line supervisors are often scarce or have language barriers.

Motivating a minimally paid work force presents one of the greatest challenges for hospitality managers. When higher wages are not economically possible, other ways must be found. Having just returned from three months in Tomsk, Russia, after teaching as a Fulbright scholar, the author

witnessed the lack of work ethic in unrewarded workers. The failure of communism as a viable economic system was most apparent in Tomsk, where little has changed in the last 40 years. Electric wiring still runs up the outside of walls and the plumbing is antiquated. Mud paths and plank sidewalks are common, and ancient rickety trolleys move people around town. Progress seems to have stopped in Tomsk, the result of an economic system totally lacking in rewards for the worker. Along one of the main streets was an ugly brick wall where concrete had been slapped haphazardly between bricks. Quality did not matter; as long as the wall was completed, workers were paid. One Russian said, "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us."

#### **Drugs issues are significant**

Recreational drug use and the controversy over drug testing was the next most significant ethical issue. Managers were concerned about drug-impaired employees, and worried about both performance and safety. One manager said he was disadvantaged because the competitor hotels used drug testing for new hires and his organization did not. "We get the people who can't apply to the other hotels," he stated. Other managers, while acknowledging drug problems, expressed trepidation about drug testing at work and concern over privacy issues.

Theft was the third most frequently mentioned ethical problem and directors reported that

the small thefts were most troublesome. One said the employees used airborne express envelopes for personal use and another said the staff often took items home, such as shampoo, soap, and the small three-inch bottles of Ketchup left behind on room service trays. He thought employees rationalized the Ketchup bottle theft by telling themselves that a customer had already paid for the item.

Research shows inside theft in the hospitality industry is commonplace and costly.<sup>9</sup> While estimates of employee theft are speculative and vary tremendously, one study shows that 44 percent of restaurant workers steal from their employer and another shows that part-time workers who steal take an average of \$415, while full-time employees who are dishonest steal a bit less.<sup>10</sup> Another director said there were problems with the new IRS regulations over tipping. Servers must report money given to other workers, such as those who bus the tables. Employees were used to falsifying their tip income and some refused to sign a form saying they understood the new IRS regulations.

#### **Hostility surfaces**

Mistreating others involved spreading malicious gossip about fellow employees, addressing them rudely, and treating them with hostility; 39 percent of respondents felt that the work climate had changed from cooperation to stepping on other people. One director put it succinctly, saying, "Instead of

**Table 2**  
**Problems experienced by directors**

Topic	Percent mentioned
1. Lack of respect for each other	81
2. Racial and gender conflict	77
3. Guests abusing staff	60
4. Dishonest behavior	51
5. Homosexual issues	44

'doing unto others,' people are doing each other in." Lying was also a significant issue as 33 percent of directors indicated that it was a problem. Lying to supervisors about work performed, using sick days, and violating policies were given as examples. Directors complained that lying was commonplace and workers seemed to lack a conscience about prevarication.

In answering the second question about ethical issues in their own organizations, human resource directors identified employees' lack of respect for each other as their greatest concern, followed by racial conflicts, guests abusing staff members, dishonesty, and homosexual issues. Table 2 highlights problems directors experienced in their own hotels.

#### **Employees lack civility**

The most troubling finding in this study was the directors' observations that their employees did not respect each other as individuals. They spoke of employees treating each other with considerable disrespect, which included quarreling, sniping, and name-calling. Rifts were frequent and

often required intervention from the human resources office. Basic civility seemed to be lacking in a number of organizations, especially among hourly employees. This raises some important questions. Are there features in hotels, as organizations, that contribute to this problem? Is the tension created by the fast-paced, people-intensive industry more than some people can handle? Has the spirit of cooperation been lost and, if so, how can it be regained? Open hostility is anathema for the hospitality industry as it rubs against core values.

The answer is that hotels can claim no singularly unique position that might cause employees undue stress. Certainly pressure to serve well and please others exists in our profession, but other occupations, such as nuclear engineering, air traffic control and medicine, carry greater responsibilities and more pressure due to life-threatening consequences. Lack of civility in the industry may be rooted in a number of causes. Ethnic diversity with language barriers undoubtedly causes tension and the inevitable partitioning, as minorities stick



close to their ethnic groups where they feel most at ease. Also, the pressure of part-time employment, temporary hours, and few benefits may affect this group. Many hourly workers in the hospitality industry lack higher education and likely experience a harder life than the general middle class. While this does not excuse uncivil behavior, it may help explain some of the pressures placed on this group and their seemingly intemperate actions.

### **Technology influences manners**

In his book, *Civility*, Stephen Carter addresses its decline, noting that three out of four people think civility has decayed in the last decade<sup>11</sup> Manners are dying, he says, in part because technological change has made them less necessary. Americans spend much time alone, working on computers, driving cars, or working in a cubicle, and depend less on interacting with other people. Feelings of solitude, he argues, cause us to be less polite. This decline in civility is a concern for the hospitality industry, for its demise affronts the very nature of our business. Kindness and respect for others lie at the core of hospitality.

Following closely behind a lack of respect, but certainly related, were problems of racial and gender conflict. Directors reported a number of incidents of racial tension in the workplace. One property had difficulties when the housekeeping and restaurant hourly staff perceived (correctly) that management was uniformly white and they were black. Directors also told

of employees disagreeing with one another over an issue, then labeling the dissenter a racist. Directors felt this was sometimes a ploy, a default to an *ad hominum* argument, the logical fallacy where the person is attacked instead of the issue. Racist allegations, of course, are troublesome to managers, as each must be investigated to see if the accusation has merit. Frivolous claims waste everyone's time and divert attention away from true acts of racism which, according to directors, continue to occur at work. Also, blacks persevere in believing discrimination is common in the workplace (81 percent) and 76 percent think that blacks with equal training and experience are not paid comparably to whites.<sup>12</sup> Managers must approach discrimination as an ethical issue and remain sensitive to the different minority perceptions.

Homosexual issues also caused ethical problems in the workplace. A waiter at an upscale hotel told his supervisor he was "not comfortable" serving at a banquet for 200 gay men. The supervisor excused him because another was willing to take his place, but stressed that if a replacement had not been available, the employee would have been required to work his shift. An important question is raised here. Is it ethical to allow an employee who is "not comfortable" to avoid serving a group of people? Would it, for example, be ethical to allow a white server to opt out of an African-American banquet because of "discomfort"? Managers must give serious consideration to

these questions and choose their responses carefully.

Another director reported that two gay males were kissing at the front desk while their registration was being processed. A family with two small children was directly behind them, waiting to check in. When their turn came, the parents complained to the front desk manager about the display of affection and said he should have asked the gay couple to refrain from kissing in the lobby. The manager was uncertain about his role in this situation.

Another hotel reported problems when two males asked for one room. If the desk clerk gave them a room with one bed, heterosexual men returned to the front desk outraged; gay couples were similarly offended when given a room with two beds. Each expected the registration clerk to know what they wanted and clerks were reluctant to ask if they wanted one bed or two, equating that question to "Are you gay?" Managers solved the problem by training the front desk staff to present room options to guests using gender-neutral language.

#### **Guests abuse staff**

Guests continue to abuse staff in various ways and directors said the topic came up frequently in executive meetings. Issues ranged from irate angry guests verbally abusing staff to more serious incidents, such as guests ordering room service and answering the door naked. A number of directors said both female and male staff

members had been propositioned. Exhibitionism appeared to be a common problem in a number of hotels, which is not surprising, given the nature of exhibitionism and the availability of a wider audience in the hotel setting. Most hotels advise room service staff to leave trays at the door and not enter a room if the guest is undressed.

Ethical situations like those identified in this study require some very creative solutions. Passive/aggressive behavior and sabotage occur in environments where workers "pretend to work" and employers cannot or will not pay them an adequate wage. Creating opportunity paths, career ladders, and training opportunities can motivate workers when higher wages are not possible. Managers need to make certain they have systems in place where hard-working, motivated employees are both identified and rewarded. Workers will respond to a viable reward system. They also need to know that others are not getting away with minimal effort while they are working hard. Effective supervision is the key here.

Respect and acknowledgment from a supervisor for work well done are valued by most employees. They are unlikely to sabotage or engage in passive/aggressive behavior if they respect their supervisor. Good communication can create this atmosphere. People who communicate effectively come to know and understand each other. Managers must initiate

communication and create an environment where employees feel comfortable participating in upward communication. The motivation they receive from having someone listen to them is both rewarding and gratifying.

Culturally different values, such as how time is structured, can also be resolved with effective communication. Some foreign-born employees react very negatively when managers fail to show sufficient interest in their family and social life. Managers in many countries spend time socializing with employees and asking about their family life. When a manager is too busy or does not recognize the importance, staff members may interpret it as a lack of caring. Opening up dialogue about cultural differences and seeking to understand these differences can make a tremendous difference.

#### **Ethics should be discussed**

Discussing ethics with employees is an important culture-building activity. Most managers do not talk to employees enough about ethics. Research shows that hospitality employees have very few discussions with their managers about ethics and organizational values.<sup>13</sup> Managers need to engage employees in frequent conversations about ethical standards, including why theft hurts everyone, and what it means to be a member of the organization. Not only will employees have a better sense of the company's ethical values, but they will

also feel more affiliated with the organization.

#### **Dialogue can help**

Racial and gender conflicts can be prevented by inviting open dialogue about differences. One hotel encouraged communication by getting employees to produce a radio program that was broadcast into the cafeteria. Not only did employees have fun producing the program, but they created a talk show format where ethical issues and values were discussed. Difficult issues were brought into the open and aired publicly.

Theft must be dealt with swiftly and directly. Theft is *not* a gray, ethical area, and managers facing incidents of stealing must not act weakly or vacillate. The manager who found his employees using airborne express envelopes for personal use should treat that episode as a theft and punish the offenders.

Carter says that civility is the sum of sacrifices people make to live together. He says that having good manners is a moral issue and that treatment of others reflects our morality. As managers strive to reduce friction in an increasingly diverse America, good manners and civility represent the apotheosis of success. Civil dialogue is important to show respect for fellow citizens and "regard them as equals before the law and before God."<sup>14</sup> Managers are challenged today not to merely mind the day-to-day business, but to model civil behavior and create cultures where civility can thrive. How

individuals are treated determines the quality of interactions in organizations. Managers who are skilled at creating a moral and just work environment are far more valuable than those who simply watch the bottom line.

This study has identified some of the key ethical issues that are plaguing hotel managers today. It is by no means an exhaustive study and has limitations both in sample size and in the selection of those interviewed, since this variable was not randomized. Nevertheless, these interviews revealed some of the key ethical issues in hotel management today which merit careful study. They have provided an interesting look at important problems which managers need to address proactively with open discussions, ethical programs, and a broad view of cultural diversity. Solutions to these problems will come through increasing dialogue with employees, working to understand multiple interpretations of reality, and promoting civility in the workplace.

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