

In my opinion...

Skill development key to managerial success

by Craig C. Lundberg

The professional success of future hospitality graduates will require that they have gone beyond the acquisition of contemporary industry knowledge and training in current best practices. Increasingly, relevant hospitality education will emphasize skill development. Managerial thinking and renewal skills will be especially useful in an industry which is constantly changing.

It is widely acknowledged that the world is becoming ever more complex and global—and that change is the only real constant. What seems to be true for the world is especially so for the hospitality industry. Collegiate hospitality education must adapt to these evolving conditions in ways that enable graduates to not only succeed in their careers but to manage their organizations in dynamic circumstances.

Hospitality educators are often aware of the need to revitalize their institution's mission and strategies as well as to make changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and program

priorities. The common approach is to episodically survey stakeholders for input into the instructional program. Employers and alumni, and sometimes even current students, polled quite naturally tend to respond in terms of their current concerns. Institutions which rely on such input and introduce programmatic changes often catch up to the industry, but soon find themselves falling behind again, especially if the focus of hospitality instruction is primarily upon factual knowledge and occupational and/or functional practices.

Managerial skills needed

Higher education hospitality programs must develop in their graduates more than up-to-date knowledge and practices; they need to strongly augment contemporary knowledge and practice with managerial and renewal skill sets. This emphasis on skills will enable hospitality graduates and their organizations to more likely succeed.

Managerial skills will be the crux of career and organizational success based upon the following beliefs: knowledge is becoming obsolete faster and faster; knowledge does not automatically translate into skilled practice; and training (how to do specific, routinized activities correctly) tends to drive out the thinking that skilled managerial practice requires. Thus, experiences that enhance the thinking necessary for skilled managerial practice should become the centerpieces of education for hospitality managers. A practitioner-useful skill set would enable hospitality manager success.

Thresholds required

To be hired to do managerial work at home and abroad, hospitality graduates need the following four types of threshold competencies to be minimally competitive:

- **Language proficiency:** To be a hospitality manager, a person will need to speak and write English well. In addition, he or she will need to have fluency in a language other than English, probably in one of the other major languages, e.g., French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, Chinese. Actually, any other language will do because the ability to speak a foreign language also produces the ability to think like someone else—a skill useful in a multicultural, ever more diverse industry.
- **Cross-cultural experience:** Similarly, spending some time in another culture will enable a hospitality graduate to think and

act differently as well as appreciate the basis for cognitive and behavioral differences. This experience need not necessarily be overseas since there are distinctive sub-cultures in one's home country as well as cultural differences across home country social classes. These experiences should be of sufficient length, however, to test a student's willingness to persevere and to appropriately adapt.

- **Academic exposure:** The graduate requires a general, balanced hospitality education as the nexus of his or her collegiate experience. Equally important, the graduate needs to be generally well-rounded and well-grounded in both his or her domestic country and internationally, e.g., through studying history, geography, government, literature, social sciences, area studies, and international affairs.
- **Workplace skills:** There are three quite separable, needed types of workplace-related skill sets. One is self-management skills, the basic attributes of an employable person, e.g., being civil, being on time, working diligently, being neat, being helpful, proactively clarifying assignments, and the like. Second, there are the technical skills, sometimes called vocational skills, associated with specific technologies, tasks, and occupations within the industry, a major component is the acquisition of the technical language and

mental categories with which we think about classes of hospitality work. Third, business function skills and those that a person needs to do work in the several business functions, e.g., read financial reports, do a performance appraisal, conduct a customer survey, etc. These skills, and their associated techniques, are similar in outline across a range of hospitality organizations, although the way they are done may vary considerably across firms.

These four types of threshold qualifications usually enable hospitality graduates to get in the door of hospitality employers, but do not necessarily enable effective performance of managerial responsibilities.

Skills are foundation

Broadly speaking, the work of hospitality managers encompasses three general activities: monitor, collect, and analyze information; devise and disseminate policy and associated operational rules; and initiate actions and intervene. Significantly, managers do these three things in a context, i.e., not in the abstract or just conceptually, but with reference to situationally concrete places, particular persons, specific resources, and known goals. While technical and functional skills support the enactment of these general managerial activities, short and long-term managerial/organizational success most likely is based upon the foundation of a strong managerial skill set.

What are appropriate manage-

rial skills? While numerous lists have been suggested, they typically are labeled rather generally and seldom described concretely. A categorization of managerial skills is functionally noted in Table 1, i.e., what the skill does, along with examples of specific activities.

This suggestive managerial skill set, like the listing of threshold qualifications, must, of course, be fused with relevant knowledge on the one hand and appropriate attitudes and motivations and ambition and industry commitment on the other. Managerial skills are acquired experientially through jobs, internships, behavioral simulations, etc., and vicariously, through cases, shadowing managers, etc.

Practice is key

Experiences encourage the reflection necessary to improve skilled practice; therefore, it is not difficult to understand why many hospitality graduates have difficulty in gaining managerial positions of real responsibility. Too many have knowledge, but they cannot translate it into practice. Some graduates have focused too much on how-to-do-it technical skills. Others are over specialized within one business function. Still others have some managerial skills, but not a balanced repertoire, and some cannot apply their skill set to non-routinized or unfamiliar circumstances.

While acquiring professional success-enabling hospitality skill sets can occur in a variety of ways, a balanced, hands-on, reflective set

Table 1
A categorization of managerial skills

| Managerial skill categories | What these skills do | Examples of skills activities |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Finding out | Uncovering salient facts within a specific context; asking the right questions and being able to understand the answers | Needs analysis; rapid assessment; literature and database search; survey design; interviewing |
| Analyzing and learning | Figuring out what the facts mean within the context; figuring out what results and outcomes teach; recognizing their assumptions and precepts | Data analysis, statistics; summarizing; checking for accuracy and validity; redesign |
| Communicating | Timely sharing with others what is learned; persuasion | Reports; briefings; presentations; teaching and training |
| Planning and designing | Knowing how to get things done within the context; keeping things moving smoothly; anticipating consequences | Proposal writing; budgeting; project and program design; procedures design; rule designation |
| Managing | Being able to organize appropriately for a context; sustaining action toward established goals; initiating change | Working with others; building effective relationships; facilitation; delegation and supervision; negotiation and conflict management |
| Assessing | Measuring accomplishment; determining what results mean | Outcome evaluation; troubleshooting; calibrating contingencies |
| Documenting | Writing up experiences suitable for different audiences | Reports; briefings; media drafts |

of key competencies might look like the following:

- **Thinking more clearly:** All hospitality professionals, and especially managers, will need to think more clearly in at least three ways, first, to be more semantically careful, i.e., knowing that words are not the things they refer to, that words vary in their abstractiveness, that idea work may have direct, inferred, and assumed bases, etc.; second, to be as fact-minded as possible, especially being able to differentiate symptoms from more basic issues and problems; and, third, to be able to see how patterned behaviors are the manifestations of attitudes, beliefs, and values.
- **Counting to one, quickly:** Since all practitioners have access to information and gather data, they need to have prowess with a repertoire of rapid assessment and analytic techniques as well as habits of learning from their own and others' experiences.
- **Reading outside the box:** In an industry of constant flux and adaptation, hospitality practitioners need to be able to learn outside their own jobs, business functions, and organizations. They will have to be both "quick studies" as well as "deep appreciators." Being able to borrow and adjust ideas and practices is minimal; being a proactive and continuous learner is more desirable.
- **Communication with self and others:** All sorts of hospitality practitioners, but especially managers, need to be able to speak and write clearly, briefly, and effectively for a variety of audiences both within and outside their organizations and industry. A fundamental competency is to listen to what is both stated and unstated—all the while staying in touch with one's own beliefs and emotions.
- **Working collaboratively:** All practitioners relate to and work with a diverse set of others in their organizations and with persons from other firms, fields, and cultures. They have to exhibit both followership and leadership as well as influence peers, counterparts, superiors, and subordinates. Being able to join, collaboratively work with, and lead both temporary and ongoing work teams is more and more how business affairs will get accomplished in the future.
- **Designing and utilizing projects:** Hospitality practitioners need to know how all kinds of projects are put together and run, and what makes for success under a variety of circumstances. Being able to contribute to many projects simultaneously will be a plus.
- **Learning in real organizations:** While it has been long acknowledged that understanding from the inside how hospitality organizations actually operate, more and more such experience has

become the basis for not only ongoing practitioner development but for experimenting with new organizational forms and functions, such as learning organizations, appropriate contracting out, and high-involvement high performance systems.

- **Facilitating and consulting:** More and more hospitality practitioners need to be able to shape and guide their work forces through persuasive involvement rather than simple authority. Being influential in anticipating and shaping changes outside of their own sphere of authority is becoming increasingly expected. Facilitating skills and consulting skills in service to associates of all kinds will more often blend together.
- **Negotiating:** “Brokering” skills are today essential for all hospitality practitioners in an era of resource shortages, exogenous constraints, and complex organizational missions. Conflict management competencies are especially functional for hospitality organizations that embrace a variety of tasks, sub and occupational cultures, and diverse employees.
- **Strategizing change:** The ability to monitor and anticipate the shifting interests of a variety of organizational stakeholders and appropriately realign environmental relations will increasingly become critical for the hospitality industry. Designing and implementing tactical changes in

accordance with evolving and transformational strategies thus becomes an increasingly significant competency.

Guidance extended

In the future, hospitality graduates will need career-oriented advice throughout their education, even beyond that which they currently receive. Course-related exposure to hospitality executives and professional development seminars or courses are two ways to do this; mentoring or actively networking are others. Whatever the approach taken, career guidance will helpfully include the following:

- **Developing a personal vision:** Graduates who intend to be managers need to be encouraged and assisted in thinking about what kinds of practitioners they want to be.
- **Networking and resume development:** At the same time, hospitality programs should involve graduates in the types of activities which will build their résumés, and help them establish and build professional networks beyond simply getting their first job.
- **Job search skills:** Locating job opportunities beyond a program’s placement assistance, interviewing, and negotiating offers are all basic job search skills which should be reviewed and supported by programs.

To conduct hospitality instruction for professional success will probably mean changing the curriculum, pedagogies, and cultures of programs and schools in significant ways. While program and institutional specifics may and probably should vary, several themes in combination seem to deserve attention: education emphasized over training; skill acquisition emphasized over knowledge; and managerial competencies emphasized over initial jobs. The meta-theme, of course, is learning how to continue learning.

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