

Journey to Excellence: Creating Standards for Your Hotel Employees

By Stephen Hall, Founder, Brandworks Distribution LLC

The definition of excellence is "consistently meeting right standards." The definition contains the inseparable union of quality and ethics. Aristotle suggests that there are three legs on the stool of excellence. They are ETHOS, LOGOS and PATHOS. Ethos refers to standards and logos refers to "right" standards. Pathos refers to the passion which we must have to ensure consistency. In the previous issue we discussed ethics. In this issue we will discuss the ways in which standards are created. As we begin however one point is absolutely crucial to our discussion.



The Standards Must be in Writing

Traditionally hoteliers have been reluctant to put standards in writing but there are four reasons why it is absolutely essential.

- Written standards minimize ambiguity. When we have to put items in written form we tend to express more care in providing a clear and understandable meaning.
- One of the biggest obstacles to consistently meet standards is that of turnover. Traditionally turnover has been extremely high in the hospitality industry which means that training is a major element in consistency. Written standards ensure that all employees are taught the same level of standards we demand.
- Standards must undergo periodic fine-tuning. As excellence inculcates our organization we will be consistently raising our standards to new levels. In written form standards are easily disseminated and reviewable.
- When a standard is not met re: what was intended versus what was executed the error must be absolutely clear. This is particularly helpful when dealing with unions.

Putting standards in writing is easily accomplished with today's popular word processing programs. It is done department by department. Let us now move on to the formation standards.

How to Set Standards

The first step in the process is to establish what we call the "E (for excellence) team. The team is chaired by an individual selected who has the interest, political acumen and time for the position. Avoid at all costs the tendency to select someone on a "make work" basis that is, has the time but lacks the motivation necessary to succeed in the role. Once the E team concept has been approved, staff the committee with three or four department heads. A committee of 4 to 5 members is totally sufficient. The committee will meet for one hour each week. Rigidly enforce the one hour for two reasons. First, you will avoid an informal discussion group because in one hour the team must focus on the project and not superfluous conversation. Second, you will have more dedicated members if they know the investment is only one hour per week at a given time and with a given agenda. If all the work for one meeting is not completed the meeting is over in 60 minutes precisely, and the work is to be continued at the next meeting.

The committee selects a department and begins the process. Job titles for the department are identified in descending order of authority. Be aware that you will invariably find people doing the same job but with different job titles. You will also find people doing the same job at different levels of compensation with no valid reason for the difference. This is a time to clear up these discrepancies. Once a job titles have been designated pick out one and invite the individual or individuals holding that job title to participate in the development of standards. For example let us take the Food and Beverage Department, Main Dining Room, waiter or waitress. We first list the test for our position. Avoid the tendency to be too narrow in your definitions of tasks. Each job title will have perhaps a maximum of eight tasks suggested as follows:

Food and Beverage

Main Dining Room

Waiter/Waitress

1. Report for work
2. Attend briefing
3. Prepare station
4. Greet guests and take order
5. Serve guests
6. close station
7. check out

We are now ready to create standards. As an example of the approach taken the following thoughts are set forth:

One requirement that should be a standard is that of protecting the health of guests and employees. We don't want employees on duty with any form of communicable disease such as a cold or flu. The standard might well read "Employees with any form of sickness will not be permitted to make contact with guests or fellow employees. If you are unable to work you must call-in six hours before your reporting time and notify management." The standard would go under "report for work".

Another frequently heard complaint. Is that of the waiter, upon serving the food, asking the guests "who had a club sandwich?" The standard under "Greet guests and take order" might well be: "Start with the eldest lady in the party and take the orders proceeding counterclockwise around the table" Another example might be the featuring of wine in which case the standard under "Greet guests and take order, when the orders have been taken ask the guests if they would like to see our award-winning wine list?"

I feel certain you now have the concept of creating standards. Virtually every task will have one or more standard. The job is completed when you have created tasks and standards for every job title from top management on down.

You now have a listing of all your standards which is invaluable in the training of new employees and the periodic fine-tuning of your standards. They are also very helpful in resolving grievances. Keep in mind that standards, properly created, will be simple, clear, concise attainable and measurable. "Attainable" is very important. For example it is nice to set a standard that "breakfast orders will be delivered to the

guest room in 20 minutes" but if this proves to be impossible it does nothing more than put pressure on employees and on the expectations on the guests. In this case the standard must be revised to be more realistic. The last point, measurable, is also very important.

The standard that cannot be measured is not a viable standard. Standards are measured by the individual in charge of a particular job title. In some cases it is difficult to measure standards. For example the bellman has a standard of explaining the features of the guestroom to the incoming guest however there is no one there to measure compliance other than the guest. An in room survey form or a question upon checkout will serve to measure the standard. Also in many instances the standard is far too complex to be listed under the tasks. For example employees must be familiar with the fire emergency procedures. In this case a standard for every employee must be: "read and be familiar with the fire protection and emergency handbook". The same would be true for the employees benefits handbook.

In terms of the amenities set up in the guest room bathroom, a reference to a drawing will be more helpful than trying to describe the procedure.

One example of the effective use of standards occurred in the authors experience when a multilingual Finnish student began service of an intern in a prominent Boston hotel. Upon completion of the first days work at the front desk the student was clearly frustrated because she was asked numerous questions for which she had no answers. "Where is the nearest subway?" "How do I get to the museum?" "Can the concierge secure tickets for the opera?" The standard is obvious. "Before going on duty all front desk employees as well as all guest contract employees must be familiar with the frequently asked questions manuscript." The standard improves both guest and employee satisfaction.

Once the tasks have been created for all job titles and the relevant standards have been put in place You are ready to move to phase 2 of the process. The excellence committee does not disband but continues to meet weekly for one hour but with a different focus. Start with the premise that whenever a standard is not met it means an error has occurred and errors are expensive and must be eliminated. Is the job of the excellence committee to identify the errors and either see that the standard is met in the future or revised the standard so it can be met. Is also the job of the excellence committee to ensure that any and all problems occurring in the hospitality process are identified and corrected. This brings us to an important point.

Many hotels entertain the concept of suggestion boxes, respecting their employees to solve problems for them. This is a misguided process. Employees are outstanding in identifying problems but often fail in providing solutions. It can truly be said that management in particular, and the excellence committee, can resolve problems that are brought to their attention. The problem is that management does not always see the problems. One reason for this is that employees are often reticent to having their name associated with a problem. The task is to encourage employees to identify what the problems are without fear of retribution. We propose that suggestion boxes be replaced with " Journey to Excellence" boxes. Employees are encouraged to suggest ways in which the property can do a better job serving the guests. Problems are collected by the excellence committee and, where feasible, the standard is constructed to solve the problem. I can suggest one classic example of how this works.

In a prominent hotel in Bermuda an anonymous employee suggested that management take a look at Tuesday which employees referred to as supply day. Upon investigation it was discovered on Tuesdays employees would go by the supply room and take home soap, towels, toilet tissue, napkins and other supplies that they needed. This was a massive expense happening under the radar of management but once known was immediately corrected. In another example in a prominent Baltimore hotel, the dumbwaiter from the dining room to the dishwashing room would periodically misbehave and send a tray full of dishes crashing to the bottom. Employees were reluctant to report the problem for fear of being held responsible. Once the problem was identified by an anonymous employee it was immediately solved by management. It has been said that the foundation of excellence is to err and err. but less and less and less.

The excellence committee also serve another very important function. Situations arise wherein a solution appears impossible. Take for example sexual harassment which unfortunately is not so uncommon in the hospitality industry. Often the victim has no place to turn especially if the perpetrator has status in the hierarchy. An anonymous note to the excellence committee can often solve the problem. The author knows firsthand of one experience to make the point. Vanessa, an attractive new employee in the accounting department of a prominent London hotel was given a very nice promotion by the chief financial officer who then began soliciting special favors. Vanessa rested his requests. It seems that the general manager had his own special arrangement with his secretary and therefore was not a viable place to complain. The personnel manager held the CFO in very high regard making him a less desirable place to complain. Vanessa eventually quit the hotel. If the problem had been brought to the attention of a

discrete committee for excellence the problem might have been resolved in a way to preserve the job of both the CFO and Vanessa.

The Next Steps

The program is now ready to take to the employees but this should not be done just yet. In the near future the science of diffusion will be discussed in detail and will prove most valuable in the successful implementation of the program. The science of diffusion will also prove to be the very valuable in a number of areas of the hotel particularly sales and marketing.

Addendum:

Over the past thirty-five years, my father and I pursued nearly identical career paths. We attended the Hotel School at Cornell University where we remained active alumni, we enjoyed successful careers at The Sheraton Corporation, and we ran a number of small businesses. Our careers took divergent paths in two areas; my father earned his Masters of Divinity from Harvard University late in his career and he pursued his scholarly passion of educating the hospitality industry on the role of ethics, excellence, and quality. I did not attend divinity school, but through a close relationship with my father, became a practitioner of excellence, ethics, and quality. I admire my father's passion, his intellect, his energy, and his desire to make a difference in the hospitality industry through his writings, teachings, and books on excellence, ethics, and quality. Later in his life, we collaborated on an ethics initiative by conceiving and funding the Journey to Excellence at Cornell University, which includes the Stephen S. J. Hall annual ethics case study competition. I applaud HotelExecutive.com for having the vision to add my father to their editorial board where he contributed articles on excellence, ethics, and quality. Unfortunately, on July 30th at age 81, we lost my father. He passed peacefully in the arms of his wife of 58 years. Although we decided to publish this article posthumously, his most recent and final article, I take great comfort in believing that in some way, through his commitment to excellence, ethics, and quality, he touched some number of us and we found a way to make the hospitality industry a little better as a result. - Larry Hall