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The view from the top

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND GUEST INTERACTION HAVE BEEN KEY ELEMENTS OF THE SUCCESS OF THE **DORCHESTER COLLECTION** UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF ITS CEO **CHRIS COWDRAY**. TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE IDEAS AND VALUES BEHIND HIS WINNING MANAGEMENT STYLE, **DR. GENE FERENCE**, PRESIDENT OF **FERENCE LEADERSHIP & STRATEGY AND CENTER FOR SURVEY RESEARCH** SAT WITH CHRIS ON BEHALF OF THE *HOTEL YEARBOOK* AND TALKED ABOUT THE ROLE OF A LEADER IN HOSPITALITY – AND WHAT WE MIGHT EXPECT IN 2013.



Chris Cowdray and Gene Ference

GENE FERENCE: Chris, what do you think 2013 will bring to the world of hospitality?

CHRIS COWDRAY: From an economics viewpoint, I see a more stable year worldwide. At the same time, there will be political uncertainty affecting the hospitality markets: a new president in China, re-election in the United States, continued conflicts in the Middle East and challenges in Europe. But in the big picture, I see the world economy being strengthened.

FERENCE: What current trends are you paying attention to?

COWDRAY: The luxury travel market looks strong, positive and

more robust today than in the recent past. Along with individual leisure travelers and business guests, we will see more and more families traveling together. This means we need to have an array of products and services to meet all age expectations.

We continue to look very closely at the increasing role social media are playing. This phenomenon has gained real momentum, especially with younger generations. All of our Dorchester Collection properties have cutting-edge media technologies, such as high-speed Internet with significant download capability. We make it a priority to ensure these services are continuously updated, user friendly and are of the highest quality.

The view from the top cont.

In 2013, there will be changes in fee structures for internet services. Some guests think that because they are able to obtain free Internet at a Starbucks, they should be able to obtain this facility complimentary in a luxury hotel. In up-scale properties, this service presents a very different situation, because customers want a different kind of capacity: superior high speed with the capability of downloading large files rather than simple links that only connect to basics. Accordingly, we invest very heavily in capabilities ranging from downloading large files in guestrooms to providing extra connectivity in conference areas. These are continuing big investments for a hotel, regardless if they may or may not be deciding factors for guests or groups staying with us. For now, standard capabilities and basic Internet service will continue to be complimentary; however, when guests need to download a lot of data, additional fees will be expected.

As an organizational trend, I see the amount and duration of internal meetings being examined. Is the issue that employees are attending too many meetings, or should management be running better meetings? Successful companies will be examining both of these aspects more closely in the year to come.

FERENCE: What keeps you awake at night?

COWDRAY: Nothing! You have to take a view that this is a business. If you act ethically, focus on what the vision is for the company, and do the best you can for the organization, you will have your share of successes. Keep in mind that things will not always go the way you expect, but the sun will rise tomorrow and the world will continue to spin. If you start taking all things at heart, your thoughts lose focus. What I want for our company is to fulfill our vision and deliver our brand promise to our guests and employees.

FERENCE: As a CEO, is there a message you would send today to other hotel industry executives?

COWDRAY: We must anticipate what each guest needs upon arrival. The real experience revolves around the purpose of their

trip. The goal is to make their physical accommodations and service interactions more personal rather than just standard. We need to customize responses to guest needs beginning at the first point of contact. There is a lot of psychology involved in how well relationships are developed between staff members and guests.

Unfortunately, service has become very standardized – impersonal and rote. Our employees are constantly moving towards being more interactive and personable with guests, while at the same time not being an irritant to them. For example, many hotel *interactions end with “Is there anything else I can do for you?”*

Example: When booking a morning wake-up call: *Mr. Smith, is there anything else I can do for you?*

When placing a room service order: *Mr. Smith, is there anything else I can do for you?*

... And so it goes throughout the day.

In our efforts to achieve service consistency, scripted responses can be irritating, with the guest ultimately shutting down the relationship. In today's service world, all employees need to engage their own personality in guest interactions and disengage from rote responses.

The people side of the business has become more challenging today than ever before, with employee engagement, guest demand, union issues, local laws and difficulties in finding talented people. Executives need to remember that the art of delivering ultimate service is *keeping it simple*. Because the pressures of successfully running a hotel are significantly more complex today, it is easy to get trapped in an office.

FERENCE: Any thoughts on the so-called war for talent? Is it real?

COWDRAY: Yes. One of the biggest challenges in the years

The view from the top cont.

to come will be addressing the huge shortage of candidates demonstrating the attitude of wanting to serve. Not only will the challenge of finding talent prevail in this industry, it is going to be the single biggest challenge of all luxury service organizations worldwide. We can train people to perform a task, but the real difference is in their attitude. Having a can-do-attitude and making every request happen is key to success.

FERENCE: Looking back on your tenure as CEO, what are your most gratifying moments?

COWDRAY: When I took over the company, we were five hotels essentially all operated very individually. Today, we have a company where all employees are absolutely focused on the Dorchester Collection as one entity. We have evolved from being a group to becoming a collection of hotels which all offer the same high levels of quality products, personal services and memorable guest experiences. Moreover, all employees are proud to be members of our team.

We accomplished this quantum shift because we earned our employees' respect and showed them the advantages of membership in the Dorchester Collection. In our last employee feedback survey, we achieved 90% employee satisfaction and engagement score. The power of this survey shows us how we have gained employee trust. This is very crucial. Survey results for us are not just being generated for statistical purposes. They are a blueprint of our culture, and we believe and act on the feedback.

What guests value the most in the luxury segment can be simply summed up in terms of engagement, and to these ends it is gratifying to see how we continue to excel in managing guest interactions in delivering on our brand promise.

Our culture now is very strong in all hotels. Our values are embedded and reinforced daily, and developing leaders will be our biggest differentiator against our competitors. Last year we invested an average of 12 days of training per employee, and 15 days of training per management staff member. In 2013 we will raise the bar higher.

FERENCE: The Dorchester Collection is one of the most unique hotel companies in the world. What has been your greatest lesson learned as CEO?

COWDRAY: My biggest learning curve regards operating multinationally. All countries have their different complexities where local laws and leadership styles create differing cultures. These situations have modified my personal leadership style. It takes more time to gain people's commitment to vision, and I need to apply different skills in order to influence them, gain support and make sure they feel a part of our valued team.

FERENCE: Can you share an experience you find particularly challenging?

COWDRAY: Some people complicate things so much they create organizational silos. I embrace the challenge of eliminating as many of these barriers as I can. For example, too many e-mails or copies of e-mails create problems, and people start protecting their own areas. E-mails create silos because people are messaging rather than going to other people's offices or picking up the phone. This behavior complicates the message. We need to return to the basics – walking to other offices, being on the floor with restaurant managers, identifying problems between departments – and not waiting for the whole chain-of-command to become involved.

FERENCE: Where do you see the Dorchester Collection one year from now?

We are actively looking to expand the company through third-party agreements as well as acquire hotels. The challenge at the moment is finding the right properties that will fit into our portfolio. The ones we have targeted are the most difficult, because they are trophy hotels and owners are unwilling to release them. At the same time, we will not damage our brand by putting a flag on a property that does not compliment us. Above all, we want to be true to the Dorchester Collection brand. ■

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