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9B18M072

The Zurna Lubb Hotel, Lazistan

Jim Kayalar wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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“What a terrible experience that hotel stay was,” said Paul Irvine as he reflected on the previous week. Irvine, a management consultant from New Jersey, was glad to be putting behind him a conflict with the Zurna Lubb Hotel, a luxury hotel where he had been staying the past week. What should have been a straightforward experience at the Zurna Lubb Hotel in Lazistan on the Black Sea coast had turned into a fracas on social media between Irvine and the hotel’s management, who had taken it upon themselves to retaliate against the unsatisfied guest.

Irvine had just resolved a three-day squabble with the head of Lubbock Hotels Group (LHG) for Europe, the parent company of the Zurna Lubb Hotel, over how to resolve the matter. The altercation had started after Irvine posted a negative review of his hotel stay on a travel review site. Irvine was still bewildered about how things had gotten so out of hand.

Lazistan Country Data

Lazistan was a former Soviet Republic with a total area of 5,000 square kilometres (approximately 1,930 square miles) nestled on the Black Sea coast, a region otherwise known as the Caucasus, and bordered by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, and Georgia. Lazistan had a population of approximately 500,000, with 250,000 in the capital Zurna City.

Lazistan had a rich history; it had seen a confluence of civilizations including the Persians, Arabs, Turks, and Mongols compete for influence in the small territory before it was absorbed into the Russian Empire in the 19th century and subsequently forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union. Lazistan gained its independence along with all other Central and Eastern European Soviet countries when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.

A period of instability had ensued post-independence, similar to what other former Soviet Bloc countries had experienced, before the institutions of democracy were instilled in the country. Democratic reform had brought forth economic development and prosperity, and foreign direct investment subsequently followed. The country’s main aspiration was to join the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Lazistan’s gross domestic product per capita had reached the US$10,000 mark in 2017.

Lazistan Economy

Lazistan, which was mostly mountainous and forested, grew tea, citrus fruits, and tobacco, and raised livestock on a small scale. The country’s small- to mid-scale light industry consisted of tea and tobacco processing, and fruit and fish canning. Zurna City had a major port that processed all of the country’s imports and exports.

Lazistan had long been a vacation destination for citizens of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union due to its relatively warm and mild summer weather, its beaches, and its exotic culinary and wine culture. Zurna City had a stock of dozens of larger hotel properties dating back to the Soviet era, many of which were now shuttered or dilapidated due to ownership issues or because they were too costly to upkeep and operate owing to design and build quality issues. Lazi entrepreneurs had initially repurposed their homes into smaller hotels and bed and breakfast properties, creating a small-scale hospitality industry with perfect competition conditions.

Larger local investments in the tourism industry had come at a later stage, in mid-sized beach resort hotels. Foreign direct investment had entered Lazistan after a period of political and economic stability, with four- and five-star city and beach hotel properties with casinos. The target market for the Lazistan hospitality industry was predominately foreign tourists; ironically, most were from former Soviet Union countries and Russia. Irvine had witnessed how service staff grudgingly served and sometimes mistreated Russian tourists particularly. Hotel casinos mainly attracted customers from neighbouring countries.

Zurna City’s high season was relatively short, starting in June and ending in mid-September. High season had close to 100 per cent occupancy and low season had 30 to 40 per cent occupancy. Most small and mid-sized hotels closed after September. The larger facilities stayed open and targeted the MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and events) trade during low season.

The Zurna Lubb Hotel

Irvine had researched the start-up background of the Zurna Lubb Hotel and learned that the hotel was part of LHG, a large global hotel group with a presence in over 100 countries and thousands of hotel properties. LHG had entered Lazistan with the acquisition of a large 20-storey building in Zurna City. The building had been constructed by a large regional construction company who had sold the building to LHG at the lock-up stage, when the building was basically a finished exterior with an empty, un-finished interior.

From his research, Irvine learned that LHG had assigned a junior night manager from one of its international properties to oversee the starting up of the business, including finishing the construction and furnishing the property according to LHG standards. He thought, “Branded hotels are usually less risk-prone, and enter into newly opened or developing markets relatively quickly. They present an interesting paradigm, as they try to blend their Western quality standards and management culture with the realities of the country they invest in, with its respective local culture and quality standards.”

The Zurna Lubb Hotel Experience

Irvine had journeyed to Zurna City by car—in itself a challenge, because travelling by car was quite demanding due to the hazardous road conditions. In the city, from a distance, the large high-rise building had made a positive first impression on Irvine, though he questioned the sense in constructing high-rise buildings so close to the Black Sea shoreline, given that the region was prone to earthquakes. Finding the hotel’s car park had been a bit of an issue—the guest car park signage had been wrongly placed in front of an unmarked garage entrance, which turned out to be the service delivery entrance. Irvine had parked the car in an open parking lot after waiting 20 minutes for a parking space, and then made his way to the front desk to ask where he was to park. The front desk clerk told him to exit the hotel property and drive around the block to an unmarked entrance, which was where he found the hotel’s underground parking.

Irvine had followed the clerk’s instructions and driven to the unmarked entrance to the underground guest parking, and parked his car. The parking facility consisted of several underground parking floors, each with a parking capacity of several hundred cars, although Irvine had noticed not more than two dozen cars with local plates parked at any given time during his stay. He had seen an elevator sign inside the car park, so after parking his car and unloading his luggage, Irvine proceeded to the reception. Unfortunately, the elevator led not to the reception but to the staff changing rooms. He had then walked around the car park in order to find the guest elevators, which he happened upon by chance, because they, too, were unmarked. The only indication that these were the guest elevators was a sign absolving the hotel of any liability in case of a car break-in.

Irvine’s initial impression of the Zurna Lubb Hotel was negative. The misplaced parking signage was highly inconvenient and unprofessional, and on top of that, the car park was dirty. Cigarette butts, water bottles, and vomit littered the parking spaces. Admittedly, car parks were not the cleanest places anyway, but one expected more from a hotel belonging to LHG. In the car park Irvine had thought, “What a great place to catch up on your second-hand cigarette smoke.” The employee smoking lounge, an open area consisting of a couple of benches, was located inside the car park and lacked any kind of ventilation. As a result, the whole car park was congested with cigarette smoke. Getting to and from the hotel car park during his stay would continue to be confusing for Irvine, because the hotel elevators—despite being clearly marked as car-park accessible—went to the underground parking floors where access doors either were locked or led to staff rooms. He had to re-route inside the hotel several times to find elevators that actually granted access to the car park.

The check-in process had taken about 30 minutes, because there were at least a couple hundred foreign guests—undoubtedly conference attendees—staying at the hotel, and some waiting to check in. The front desk staff was quite proficient, but obviously overwhelmed. “Perhaps scheduling more front office staff to work that day would have improved service delivery,” Irvine later thought.

The initial impression Irvine had gotten from the Zurna Lubb Hotel was, “We built it and they will come.” Lazistan was no different from many other former Soviet Union countries where the arrival of Western brands in fast food, luxury consumer goods, or other industries was heralded as a great success of democratic progress and as proof that the Soviet era was over. Unfortunately, Western brand standards and Western management practices seemed to have been replaced in Lazistan by the “good enough” logic Irvine had come across in many other developing countries.

The Room Experience

Irvine’s hotel room was well laid out, as per LHG hotel quality standards, and the bathroom was furnished with top-of-the-line Turkish marble and with porcelain fittings from Germany. Irvine had realized that despite the hotel having been open for nearly a year, it was still under construction, with ongoing construction throughout the day and on weekends, both inside the hotel building and in the garden area. There was no indication of a “soft opening,” and hotel prices were similar to what one would pay at a top European resort.

Throughout his stay, Irvine had to listen resignedly to loud music coming from the roof bar/café until well past midnight and from the pool area, which stayed open until the early hours of the morning. “Hotel management seems to prioritize income from selling food and beverages at all hours, rather than the sleep quality of guests,” Irvine had thought. “Guests that cannot sleep will not come back and the hotel will become a one-time destination in the long run. Don’t they realize they are encouraging customer attrition?”

There was also a constant loud hissing coming from the bathroom walls. “Must be the water pipes,” Irvine had thought, and he kept the bathroom door closed at all times. He had wondered, however, if fire safety requirements were actually being met, given the low water pressure on the higher floors. Safety remained a concern for him, because he doubted if the Zurna City fire department had the equipment and training to combat fires in a multi-storey building.

Irvine had soon also discovered that the air conditioning in the room did not work and was just blowing hot air. The room often became extremely warm, and he had had to resort to opening the windows, which had proven to be another irritation. Unfortunately, as he was to experience during the remainder of his stay, his room had food smells coming from the rooftop Executive Lounge and from the kitchen of the Roof Top Cafe & Restaurant during breakfast, lunch, and dinner hours. “It’s either the heat or the smell of food cooking. Couldn’t they invest in appropriate ventilation?” Irvine had thought.

The interesting thing was that although the air conditioning did not work in the rooms or in the Executive Lounge, it worked perfectly in the common areas and hallways and in the hotel lobby. “Was this a design flaw, a technical problem, or saving on cooling costs?” Irvine had wondered. Cooling off on the balcony was unpractical, because there were no seating arrangements and carrying the heavy office chair back and forth was arduous. Irvine had tried but failed to change his room, as the hotel was fully booked.

Housekeeping

The Zurna Lubb Hotel’s housekeeping was the worst Irvine had ever experienced in a hotel. He reflected,

Inexperienced hospitality industry players believe that the location of a hotel, building quality, and room furnishings and fixtures are of utmost importance in a hotel. Location is important, as well as building quality and standard of room furnishings and fixtures, and that’s why larger hotel groups have hotel furnishing standard catalogues for every part of the hotel, but the hospitality industry was and remains a service business, with human resources making or breaking a guest’s hotel experience.

Upon returning to his room in the late afternoon one day, Irvine had found a housekeeper cleaning his room. Some hotels chose to process new rooms (unoccupied rooms ready for sale that day) first thing in the morning, and to service occupied rooms in the afternoon, because servicing these rooms took less time. Irvine had politely asked the housekeeper when she would be finished and was told it would be five minutes. Irvine waited in the lobby for 15 minutes before returning to the room, in the meantime hearing her talk on her mobile phone. When Irvine returned to the room and again politely requested her to finish the room, the housekeeper had become surly; she started yelling at Irvine in Lazian and then slammed the door shut and left. Irvine had thought, “I wonder who trains housekeeping staff, as this housekeeper was more like a fish hawker than a housekeeper at a luxury hotel. She had a bad attitude, bad manners, and was unprofessional.”

Irvine had complained to the front desk, but to no avail. The truth was that there was no housekeeping standard. Cleaning standards were poor, and several times during his stay, Irvine had returned to a room that was dirtier after being “cleaned.” Replenishment of room supplies was constantly an issue—something was always missing. “It only takes a supervisor to check rooms and ensure cleaning standards are met. Maybe there was no supervisor, or maybe they just didn’t do their jobs, or maybe they do not have the proper stocks, or staff help themselves to the room amenities at the expense of guests,” Irvine thought.

One morning at 9:00, there had been a big commotion in the hallway and in the room next door. Housekeeping employees were hollering at each other in the hallway. Four pushcarts were lined up and housekeepers were smoking on the balcony of the next room. Irvine had wondered if this was normal practice or if they were trying to be particularly obnoxious to upset him.

The “highlight” of his guest experience at the Zurna Lubb Hotel had come one afternoon when Irvine discovered that someone had used his toilet and left it dirty and soiled. He had concluded that the hotel staff must have been lashing out at him—extracting revenge on the paying guest that had dared to ask for what he had paid for. Irvine wondered, “Was the present day Zurna Lubb Hotel no different from Soviet times?”

Lazi service culture, having been shaped for decades by Soviet work culture and ethics, was not amicable to Western service industry standards. During his countless visits to the Soviet Union, Irvine had experienced Soviet work culture as a general unwillingness to do any extra work, because extra work did not pay. Soviet employees would rather work less and receive the same pay. Also, employees in certain positions would leverage their position and situational power to refuse service outright, or else they would provide bad service with the expectation of getting paid extra on the side for performing their duties at the expected standard.

Shopping Experience

Adjacent to the hotel were a number of shops selling luxury branded items. The shops were accessible from the outside of the building, and Irvine had spent some time window shopping. He had been very motivated to purchase a gift for his wife. Although the luxury goods were the same ones available in many parts of the world, the prices were extremely high—Irvine could buy the same products at half the price in many European airports or even back home. His Lazi business counterparts had warned him that there were two different prices in Lazistan: one for the locals, and a two- or three-times inflated price for tourists and foreign expatriates. Irvine had observed that the shops were mostly void of any customers.

Dining Experience

Irvine had attempted to dine at the Zurna Lubb Hotel restaurant, widely advertised as the best Lazi Restaurant in Zurna City. Unfortunately, the restaurant was basically inaccessible during lunch hours; employees were cleaning and vacuuming the restaurant at 2:00 p.m. The outside seating facilities were wet and grimy from rain, and no attempt had been made by staff to clean up. Irvine had thought, “Who wants to sit in a noisy restaurant with employees horsing around and hollering at each other across the restaurant?” The staff had made him feel unwelcome. “If you feel unwelcome you take your business somewhere else” he had concluded and gone and eaten at a nearby local eatery. It had seemed to him that the employees ensured that the restaurant stayed empty—thereby ensuring they had to work less. “Where are the supervisors and managers, who could intervene and improve the guest experience and the operational bottom line?” Irvine had wondered. Irvine had noticed that the hotel restaurant looked mostly empty at nights, too.

The Executive Lounge was only slightly better. Employee hollering and horsing around continued there, along with loud vacuum cleaning. Guests were made to feel unwelcome by staff. The food quality was mediocre at best, and food was not replenished even if guests requested it to be. “Why bother dining at the Zurna Lubb Hotel if you could have a much better and cheaper dining experience right across the street?” Irvine had thought.

Irvine’s Zurna Lubb Hotel experience made him think of the many Soviet hotels he had stayed in before. Many of those hotels looked grandiose on the outside, because a lot of money had been invested in their appearance. Despite their external appearance, however, they were poorly run and managed. Management would largely consist of political appointees with little hospitality industry knowledge or experience, and the operation would usually be run by blue collar workers with good standing and connections in the Communist Party. These employees would work as little as possible, discouraging guests from staying or ever returning—fewer guests meant less work, and more work did not mean more pay. Therefore, there was no incentive to work more or better. Appropriating hotel supplies for themselves and trading these on the black market had been a significant side income for hotel employees in the Soviet era. Irvine had experienced first-hand how privatized hotels in Eastern Europe and Central Asia grappled with this legacy and paradigm.

Irvine had witnessed operational inefficiencies owing to the performance of employees (with the exception of the front desk staff) that could lead to revenue and profit loss. The staff was poorly trained, unable to communicate in English, and had a bad service attitude toward foreign guests. “Not the best value proposition in a service-oriented industry,” Irvine had thought. Despite the hotel having been open for business for one year, it felt as if the business was still dealing with start-up challenges (see Exhibit 1).

Irvine reflected on the management challenges faced by LHG in opening a Western-style hotel in a developing country: appointing junior Western managers in such a country-specific setting with the aim to instill Western standards did not always work. The principal job description of running a hotel remained the same regardless of location (see Exhibit 2). Hiring local managers to fill management posts was also difficult, because the country lacked trained and skilled human resources. Local staff members were paid according to local standards and usually were unhappy to do the same job as their Western counterparts at much less pay. Irvine wondered, “How many post-Soviet generations would be needed to build a Western-standard hospitality industry in Lazistan?”

The outcome of attempting organizational design, as such, at a hotel in a former Soviet Union country or in a developing country, as LHG had done, was the creation of a confrontation between local staff and foreign staff, which was further augmented by conflict between Lazi staff versus rich, foreign hotel guests. The foreign managers tried to improve service standards and increase profitability, and the more the local staff resisted improving and ensured bad service, the more the foreign managers pressured local staff to improve. Start-up managers, regardless of industry, were under pressure to deliver both business results and customer satisfaction. Seasoned managers prioritized which results to deliver, and when (see Exhibit 3).

Furthermore, although Russian was the *lingua franca* across the Soviet Union, the younger post-Soviet Lazi generation primarily spoke only Lazi—very few spoke English, because the English language was not taught at most Lazi schools. Older Lazis who had lived, studied, and worked during the Soviet era still spoke fluent Russian.

Irvine recalled having detected hardly any management presence during most of his stay. He had inquired a couple of times as to the name and nationality of the general manager, but to no avail. Most of the staff had never met him; they knew he was a foreigner but did not know his name. Irvine had wondered, “How is the manager supposed to bring out the best in employees, as per a general manager’s mandate, and deliver a superior value proposition that satisfies existing guests and helps build new customers if the general manager is unknown to staff?” He had also noticed that employees seemed to get uncomfortable and nervous at the mention of the hotel’s general manager. Based on Irvine’s experience, this was usually a sign that the general manager was not liked or respected by hotel staff. As an organization progressed through different life cycle stages and changing performance targets, it became necessary to correlate the management/leadership requirements of the organization (see Exhibit 4).

Irvine believed that the Internet had changed how global brands were perceived and needed to operate. A bad guest experience at even a far-flung destination damaged the overall brand value, because social media connected existing customers and potential new customers globally. The old mantra “Go global, think local” in the hospitality industry seemed to have lost its meaning, because all business was now a global business.

Irvine had checked out of the Zurna Lubb Hotel without any issues, other than having to wait for over 30 minutes as many dozens of other guests checked out. Once again, the front desk staff was overtaxed by the sheer number of guests. Upset with his bad experience, Irvine, upon returning home, wrote a candid and unbiased review of his experience and posted it on a travel review site. LHG had sent him an automated customer review form, which he also duly filled out. Vowing to never return to the Zurna Lubb Hotel and thinking this was the end of the transaction, Irvine returned to his everyday work life—and then he received a troublesome email from his director.

Irvine’s director, who oversaw dozens of countries and close to 1,000 employees, had forwarded Irvine an email he had received from the general manager of the Zurna Lubb Hotel, in which Irvine was accused of lying, misrepresenting, and unfairly attacking the general manager of the hotel. Furthermore, the general manager demanded that Irvine be ordered to remove his review, apologize, and receive severe and public punishment—or else, he threatened, Irvine and his organization would face the full consequences of the powerful wrath of LHG.

Irvine felt empathy for the Zurna Lubb Hotel general manager. It was probably not his fault that he was put in a situation that made him lash out at negative guest reviews. The most likely explanation for the general manager’s poor behaviour was the circumstances he had to deal with. A straightforward problem identification method would have helped the general manager address the root causes of the problem, rather than challenge the symptoms of it (see Exhibit 5).

Despite feeling empathy for the general manager, Irvine was flabbergasted at the email and the attack on his person, and at the attempt to discredit him and have him punished. “Modern management practices saw unhappy customers as a great source of self-assessment and learning. The customer was not always right, but unhappy customers and their complaints were a great way of assessing the firm’s value proposition. That a Western manager would lash out like this at guests was unheard of,” Irvine thought.

Irvine reached out to LHG through different means, and after a three-day ordeal working through several time zones, Irvine succeeded in having the general manager of the Zurna Lubb Hotel retract his email and apologize for lashing out. Irvine had tried to impress upon the LHG senior manager that junior hotel employees and managers would and did lash out at guests, but that it was the role of senior management to curtail such behaviour. Unfortunately, in this instance the most senior staff representing the organization had chosen to lash out.

Irvine recognized countless issues that needed to be addressed in this situation. “Whose fault was it that the Zurna Lubb Hotel failed to deliver on its brand promise?” he wondered. “Managers need to see beyond the symptoms and understand the root causes so that they can best be addressed to improve both the customer experience and the bottom line.”

Exhibit 1: Hotel Life Cycle

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Planning**  **Stage** | **Construction/Acquisition Stage** | **Pre-operational**  **Stage** | **Operational**  **Stage** |
| * Conceptualization * Feasibility study * Financing | * Architecture design * Interior design * Engineering design * Procurement * Construction * Furnishing | * Staff recruitment * Staff training * Soft opening | * Formal opening * Commence budgeted profit operation * Business development * Maintain, refurbish, and update property |

Source: Created by the author.

Exhibit 2: Job Description summary

Hotel Night Manager Job Description

The night manager (NM) is responsible for hotel operations for the night shift.

The NM assists/oversees/supervises front office operations and conducts night audits.

The NM ensures hotel safety and security.

The NM supervises maintenance staff and all other night-shift staff. (The night shift usually entails standard operating procedures with little interaction with customers and service delivery.)

The NM ensures that employees maintain professional and high-quality service delivery.

The NM may take on front office duties in the absence of the front office manager.

The NM deals with problems, complaints, and disturbances during the night shift.

Requirements

Previous front office experience in a supervisory/management capacity

College degree preferred

Proficiency in front office reservation systems

Experience with Microsoft Office suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint)

Hotel General Manager Job Description

The general manager (GM) is responsible for all aspects of hotel operations.

The GM manages all departments and their respective managers.

The GM maximizes return on investment by meeting or exceeding revenue and profitability targets while maintaining highest customer satisfaction standards, commensurate with hotel quality standards.

The GM ensures compliance with hotel standard operating procedures, policies, and service standards.

The GM formulates and fulfills the hotel budget (operational, capital, marketing, and sales) by function and department.

The GM develops the business (revenue and profits) through innovative income-generating methods.

The GM targets organizational efficiency improvements and formulates cost-cutting procedures.

The GM assists in handling guest complaints and supervises service delivery failure recovery.

The GM designs and implements human resource development programs.

The GM is a brand ambassador.

Exhibit 2 (continued)

Requirements

15 to 20 years of experience in the hospitality industry

5 to 10 years of experience as general manager (international experience is a plus)

Master’s degree in hospitality management or an MBA

Proficiency in front office reservation systems

Experience with Microsoft Office suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint)

Source: Created by the author.

Exhibit 3: Business Dashboard

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Start-Up** | **Development** | **Take-Off** | **Success** | **Maturity** |
| Cash Flow |  |  |  |  |  |
| Financing |  |  |  |  |  |
| Activity |  |  |  |  |  |
| Product/Service on Sale |  |  |  |  |  |
| Customers |  |  |  |  |  |
| Number of Employees |  |  |  |  |  |
| Number of Vendors |  |  |  |  |  |
| Communication |  |  |  |  |  |
| Decision-Making |  |  |  |  |  |
| Existing Management Style |  |  |  |  |  |
| Ideal Management Style |  |  |  |  |  |

Source: Created by the author.

Exhibit 4: The Six Leadership Styles

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Commanding** | **Visionary** | **Affiliate** | **Democratic** | **Pacesetting** | **Coaching** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| The leader’s *modus operandi* | Demands immediate compliance | Mobilizes people towards a vision | Creates harmony and builds emotional bonds | Forges consensus through participation | Sets high standards for performance | Develops people for the future |
| The style in a phrase | “Do as I say.” | “Come with me.” | “People come first.” | “What do you think?” | “Do at my pace.” | “Try this.” |
| Underlying emotional Intelligence competencies | Drive to achieve, initiative, self-control | Self-confidence, empathy, change catalyst | Empathy, building relationships, communication | Collaboration, team leadership, communication | Conscientious, drive to achieve, initiative | Developing others, empathy, self-awareness |
| When the style works best | In a crisis, to kick start a turnaround, or with problem employees | When changes require a new vision, or when a clear direction is needed | To heal rifts in a team or to motivate people during stressful circumstances | To build buy-in or consensus, or to get input from valuable employees | To get quick results from a highly motivated and competent team | To help employees improve performance or develop long-term strengths |

Source: Adapted from Daniel Goleman, “Leadership that Gets Results,” *Harvard Business Review*, March–April 2000, 82–83. Available from Ivey Publishing, product no. R00204.

Exhibit 5: Summary Root Cause Analysis

Define the problem.

Collect data.

Identify potential causal factors using the “Five Whys” questioning technique.

Develop solutions.

Implement solutions.

Control and correct deviations.

Source: Created by the author.